

# Silent No More, We're Hanging Out Our Dirty Laundry: The South Africa Clothesline Project

by Lora Bex Lempert and Synnov Skorge

*Mom's spirit was killed long before Dad executed her.*

*Ndoda Ndini Ungeva Kanjani Inguwe lo Udlewenguliweyo  
(How would you men feel if you were raped?)*

*MisDaad moet hok Geslaan Word. (Violence must be stopped.)*

*He raped me. Nobody can take that pain out of my heart and soul.*

These messages and hundreds of other messages were written, and drawn on the 'canvas' of ordinary t-shirts and hung on South Africa's inaugural Clothesline on 26 November 2001 on Robben Island, the site of Nelson Mandela's long imprisonment and now a national historical site and museum.

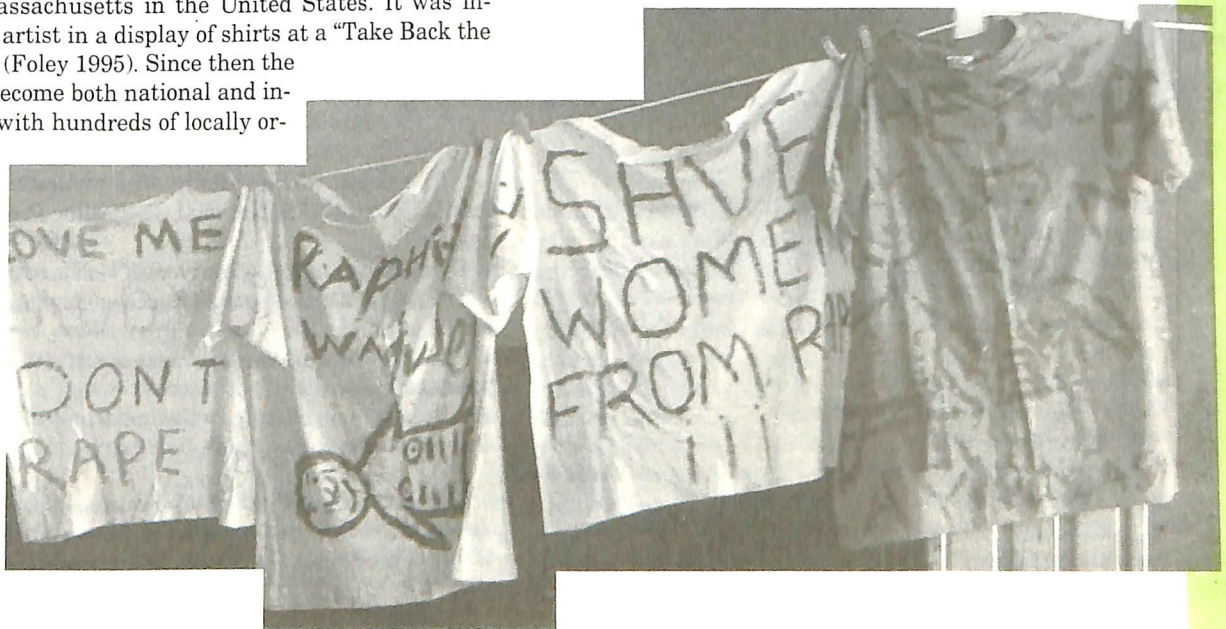
The Clothesline Project is a public display of individually created t-shirts that illustrate, with words, colours or symbols, women's personal stories of their experiences of violence (Foley 1995). Each T-shirt honours, respects, and recognises one woman's courage in facing experience(s) of violence—rape, incest, abuse, harassment, murder, intimidation, and/or torture—in a medium that provides public exposure while guaranteeing distance and safety.

The original Clothesline Project began in 1990 in Hyannis, Massachusetts in the United States. It was inspired by an artist in a display of shirts at a "Take Back the Night Rally" (Foley 1995). Since then the project has become both national and international, with hundreds of locally or-

ganised projects in the United States and other nations displaying thousands of t-shirts (U.S. National Clothesline Project flyer, undated).

The U.S. Clothesline was built around a double metaphor: "Doing the laundry has always been considered women's work, and in the days of close-knit neighbourhoods, women often exchanged information over backyard fences while hanging their clothes out to dry. The concept [of the Clothesline Project] was simple—let each woman tell her own story, in her own unique way, and hang it out for all to see. It was and is a way of airing society's dirty laundry." (Carol Chichetto, U.S. National Clothesline Project flyer October 1994).

The South Africa Clothesline debut on Robben Island provided the backdrop for the launch of the Justice for





Women campaign. Sponsored by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, and the National Network on Violence Against Women, the Justice for Women campaign is a public appeal to President Mbeki for the pardon or sentence reduction of abused women who have killed their husbands. Following the Justice for Women launch, the Clothesline also marked multiple events in the 16 Days of Activism, an annual international event (25 November-10 December) intended to create a worldwide movement that raises awareness of gender-based violence as a human rights issue and calls for the elimination of such violence.

### Inaugurating the South Africa Clothesline Project

Within a few weeks, news headlines in urban areas chronicled the scope of violence against South African women. A Groote Schuur Hospital medical academic an-

surrounding gender inequality and the social privileges that sustain men's violence, the messages were obviously not getting through to those with the power of enforcement and prevention.

During informal discussions with local NGOs, Lora Lempert raised and introduced the U.S. Clothesline concept. In the U.S., the Clothesline is used as a public consciousness-raising tool aimed at exposing the general public to the realities of violence against women (U.S. National Clothesline Project flyer October 1994; Foley 1995). By dismissing sensationalised media constructions and by using the forms and features of women's lives, the Clothesline presents *women's experiences* of violence from *women's perspectives*. The combined use of the project to generate awareness while simultaneously giving women, whose lives are/were directly impacted by violence, a venue to speak out won immediate appeal. The response of shelter providers and residents in the Western Cape to the Clothesline was instant and enthusiastic. Ideas percolated about how to employ the concept effectively—how to alter and adapt it to suit the situations and circumstances of women's lives in South Africa's many social, political, geographical and other contexts.

The ethical issue, both symbolic and material, of using new t-shirts for display, in a country where some women and their children do not have t-shirts, was a fundamental concern. Symbolic concerns were ameliorated by the recognition that t-shirt messages had been central to the struggle against apartheid and remain central to ongoing movements for social justice. In fact, the Clothesline's use of t-shirts was in keeping with historical precedent. Material concerns were remedied by decisions to offer women the opportunity to use their own shirts to create their messages and then to exchange them for new shirts.



June Hennemen, the coordinator from the Western Cape Network on Violence against Women

nounced that the yearly incidence of rape in South Africa now exceeds that of tuberculosis; the rape of schoolgirls by teachers, peers and gangs was documented by both the Human Rights Watch and an Eastern Cape provincial investigating committee; a report by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation argued that violence against women and HIV/AIDS may be converging in new and lethal ways—even as Jackie Selebi, National Police Commissioner, pronounced the Domestic Violence Act to protect women “unimplementable.” While there has been ample evidence of women's victimisation—child rape, schoolgirl assault, sexual harassment, wife battering, abuse of older women—and a long history of feminist interpretation and activism

The South African Clothesline replicated the aims of the U.S. project (U.S. National Clothesline Project flyer, undated):

- To bear witness to the survivors of violence against women;
- To help with the healing process for victims and their families/friends;
- To educate and raise awareness of the extent of the problem; and
- To provide a nationwide network of support and encouragement.

The colour coding, which represents the spectrum of abuse, was adapted from U.S. suggestions (U.S. National Clothesline Project flyer, undated) to reflect the particular



experiences and circumstances of South African women. It was decided that the South Africa Clothesline Project would suggest, but not require, use of these colour codes:

- White - women who are/have been in abusive relationships;
- Red - women who have been raped;
- Green - women raped, killed, tortured, or harassed during the struggle;
- Blue - providers who work in the field of violence against women;
- Yellow - relatives of women who were killed or attempted to be killed by men known to them (husbands, fathers, brothers, and so on);
- Pink - child victims of incest/sexual abuse; and
- Orange - women violated because of sexual orientation or those experiencing abuse in a same-sex relationship.

Once these decisions were made, the Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children and the Western Cape Network on Violence Against Women collaborated on a funding request submitted to the U.S. Consulate Cape Town for support of the launch of the project. By this point, the Clothesline concept had grown to include the National Network cluster of Western Cape, Northern Cape, and Eastern Cape Provincial Networks. It was clear that the launch of the project needed co-ordination and collaboration.

The funding requested and received from the U.S. Consulate Cape Town was stretched to include a Project Manager in each of the three provinces. June Henkeman took the lead in the Western Cape, Alice Queen Letiane in the Northern Cape, and Ntombo Dyantjie in the Eastern Cape. Each project manager contacted the network's member organisations in their respective areas to invite participation. The response from a broad spectrum of individuals and organisations was spontaneous and overwhelming. Women from a variety of service venues—NICRO (National Institute for the Criminal Rehabilitation of Offenders), elementary and secondary schools, Women on Farms, academic programs, shelters, rape crisis one-stop centres—participated. By the 26 November launch, almost 700 individual T-shirts had been created.

### Creating the Shirts

The Clothesline Project is an honouring of survivors and fatalities of violence against women. In making a shirt, a woman gives public recognition to her experiences and speaks what may have previously been unspeakable. The shirts provide a means to subvert the silences imposed on women. Consequently, opportunities for design and creation require a supportive and nurturing environment.

In their messages, women, and/or their families, friends and colleagues can empower themselves as survivors of the abuse and violence they or their loved ones experienced.

Using the familiarity of ordinary t-shirts, contributors were free to engage in expansive production. Their messages broke barriers of form, politics, artistic skill, customs, and literacy. Truths were spoken on the fronts, backs, and sleeves of the shirts.

Each shirt is part of the whole clothesline, and no shirt hangs alone. Creation was also part of a collaborative, coordinated process sponsored by a non-government organisation (NGO), an academic programme, a Gender Equity Unit, a crisis centre, a community-based organisation, or a similar group. While individual women might have chosen to work on their t-shirt messages/designs on their own, the shirts were not produced in isolation.

Designing the means and forms of the sharing of their experiences provided women with the opportunity to address past or present pain and to look to the future (Ostrowski 1994; Foley 1995). For many it was a cathartic experience:

*It was a pleasure to write all over the t-shirt. It really felt good.*

*When I did the workshop [to create t-shirts], the women said it was very therapeutic—an opportunity to put down what they were feeling.*

Rene van Staden, NICRO Women's Support Centre

*Creating a t-shirt for public display can also be interpreted as a courageous act of empowerment:*

*It felt so good, the message just burst out, it wasn't prepared.*

*I wrote everything that was on my heart and it felt good afterwards.*

*I wrote exactly how I was feeling—everything.*

Making a shirt can also be a very painful but healing experience.

*It brought out a lot of memories, which was disturbing.*

*My very immediate feeling was that it was finally out there. There are a lot of women who walk with things and there's a sense of relief when it's out there.*

The Clothesline Project is more than a simple visual representation of the magnitude of male violence. The shirts also provide a way to create community. In viewing a clothesline, a woman recognises that someone else knows what I know and understands what I understand (Ostrowski 1994). As one contributor noted:



*I see it as encouragement. The courage to do it the first time. It can be done. It is really about putting it out there. Once somebody has put it out there—hundreds will have the courage to come. It's motivating. There's strength in numbers.*

The South Africa Clothesline offered service providers (blue shirts) opportunities to speak their experiences as well:

*It was nice to know that someone would read my message and feelings. It was an advertisement for others, an eye-opener and a way of helping someone to know that they are not alone in an abusive relationship. There are others like her.*

Since the original display, the Western Cape Clothesline has been hung in multiple venues in South Africa—on the street, at Peninsula Technikon, at the University of the Western Cape, at the Impumelelo Awards presentation, at a Khayelitsha prayer service for female victims of violence, and more. Of her experience with the on-the-street Clothesline in Cape Town, Rene van Staden, NICRO Women's Support Centre, said: "The display itself was very powerful—the images really reflect the impact of violence and abuse. It was very effective—the general public stopped and it generated discussion. People were commenting on the shirts and the issues. It was something different—'What is a washing line doing in the middle of town?' Many people stopped, also a lot of men, and it's not often that men stop and discuss this issue."

The Northern Cape Network was presented with the Northern Cape Parliamentary Award for the Most Informative Display in 2001 for their Clothesline, which was hung in the Provincial Parliament Building in Kimberley, South Africa.

### The Audience

Seeing the display often has a profound effect on the viewer (Ostrowski 1994; Foley 1995). Viewing the Clothesline is both an emotional and a visceral experience. We observed at the launch in Robben Island that messages created on something familiar and that moves with the wind is much more effective and alive than text on paper stuck to a wall. The on-site comment by female viewer on Robben Island was typical: "What I find most striking is the honesty and the directness and the individuality of the messages. It really hits me, the pain women and children experience through violence, and I've worked in this area for over a decade. Umpteen T-shirts around rape, but they all say something different."

We also saw that the form and variety of the messages encouraged discussion and conversation about the issues, as well as onlookers' about these. We overheard time and

again, "This gives me goosebumps," and the ubiquitous "Shame."

"It was a good awareness strategy. The messages were horrific. I felt a lot of sadness while reading them. For the audience to see the shirts and to come close and interact—that is a very powerful awareness strategy," said Debbie van Stade of the Department of Social Services in Western Cape.

### The Future of the Clothesline Project

It was the intent of everyone connected with the initiation of the South Africa Clothesline Project that it would not be a one-off event. The Clothesline was meant to be a continuous project within which women make public statements detailing their experiences of male violence. The Clothesline is meant to be hung at any and all public venues—libraries, court houses, musical venues, national holiday events, public roadways, prayer services, universities and so on—not just women's events. The limits of Clothesline use are the limits of South African women's imaginations.

Our hope is that the Clothesline will be replicated in every province in the country. And that someday the project will become obsolete, when there are no longer any stories of men's violence against the girls and women of South Africa, or the world. ♪

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*Synnou Skorge is the Director of the Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children in Athlone, Cape Town. She has worked for nine years as a social worker and manager in shelters for abused women and their children. She recently completed a manual on how to open and 'grow' shelters in South Africa.*

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