



MMS Bulletin #147

Gender-Based Violence: Organisations for International Cooperation must take Responsibility

Interview with Vivian Onano, youth advocate from Kenya

Change starts from the moment we start talking about it!

By Carine Weiss

In her speech at the Medicus Mundi Switzerland's conference on gender-based violence (GBV) Vivian Onano stated that gender-based violence is endemic across the world – it is a crisis which has to be addressed urgently. Some evidence: in South Africa, where Onano currently lives, one in four women is sexually abused by an intimate partner during their lifetime; every six hours a woman is killed by a current or former intimate partner; 110 rapes occur per day in the country. In other words, a woman is raped every 15 minutes.

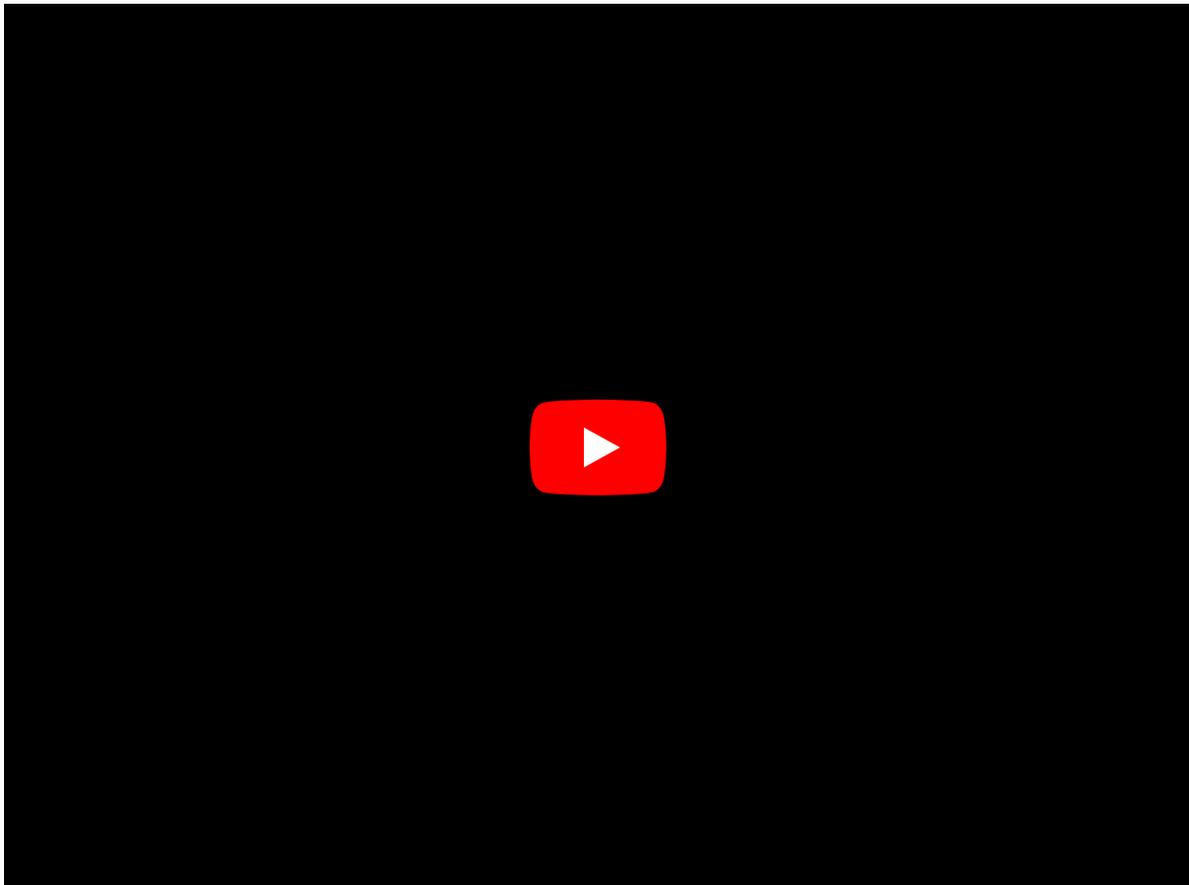


Vivian Onano at the MMS/aidsfocus.ch conference 2018. Photos: Daniel Rihs / © Network Medicus Mundi Schweiz

Carine Weiss: As a youth advocate, what role can young people play to prevent and minimise GBV?

Vivian Onano: Yes, as I said, it is a crisis and it is impeding development because women form more than half of the population and they cannot actively participate in the development of their communities if they feel they are in danger in their everyday lives; if they feel their rights are not being protected; if they feel they don't have a voice; and if they feel that they are not well equipped to be able to participate in the social and economic development of their community.

You can watch the full interview here



The statistics show that gender-based violence has a female face, and that we are normalising it - and that shouldn't be the case. As young people, it is our role to hold our leaders to account about the kind of policies we have in place, about the kind of legal and juridical system that we have in order to address gender-based violence. These are the questions, which we need to ask ourselves. As young people we also need to advocate for non-violence.

In addition, we need open spaces so that we can start talking about what is happening in society. Change starts from the moment we start talking about it. From the moment we create open spaces for people to actually open up about their experiences in society, that's when we realise there is a need, and it is the first step towards meeting that need.

For me, if we want to address gender-based violence, we need to look into the policies and laws on the ground and see if it is possible for the juridical and legal system to bring every perpetrator to justice, regardless of their social background, financial status or affiliations.

Carine Weiss: It is incredible that we are in the 21st century and yet there is still so much taboo about GBV. Why is it so difficult to talk about and to create the security for women to speak out?

Vivian Onano: Talking about taboo, in April I was travelling with Water Aid as their global youth ambassador and we went to Mali and Burkina Faso. We were talking in schools about menstrual hygiene – which is still a taboo topic. If that is a taboo, how can you expect girls to talk about rape? How can they talk about rape if they cannot talk about biological processes? There is still a lot to do when it comes to having the right policies on the ground and the right kind of information. We need to create open spaces.

Carine Weiss: At the conference it became evident that GBV is deeply rooted in society, in social norms and culture. Why is that, and how can behavioural change take place if a society accepts violence against women?

Vivian Onano: The reason it becomes a norm is because of the discrimination and stigmatisation around it.

If I come to you, Carine, and say “I was raped”, the first thing you are going to ask me is, “How did it happen? What did you do?” I become the one who is in the wrong and yet I am the victim and my rights have been violated. Everyone will be talking about me and labelling me.

This stigmatisation and discrimination takes on economic, social and political dimensions which make it really hard for us to talk about it. And that's why it becomes a norm. We are normalising it, and we should not. It is because of these obstacles. We haven't actually looked deeply into how to remove all these obstacles.

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Despite that, we have many more civil society organisations adding their voices to the cause. UN Women has been at the forefront when it comes to addressing GBV with their 16 days of action for non-violence against women. South Africa has also started the campaign of 365 days

of non-violence against women, basically a whole year. But this is not enough. We need to make tangible investments against GBV to show that we are really committed to ending violence against women.

Carine Weiss: How can we make a difference? Here we had the #MeToo movement which lifted the taboo. In your speech you said that the #MeToo movement has not reached Africa. How come, when so many Africans have access to Twitter, Facebook and Instagram?

Vivian Onano: I am very grateful for the #MeToo movement and #TimesUp because they are sparking conversations that have not existed before. But these movements are more focused on white women and not a lot of black women have started to speak out. We have had some women coming forward with their stories, but not many. I think it is because of the fear around stigmatisation and discrimination, the fear of being trolled. We also don't have the same cushioning or privileges that white women have to support them in coming out with their story. There are a lot of threats on the ground. For someone who does not have the economic means to be able to come out and talk about a political leader or top business leader who took advantage of them, it is difficult. What will happen if I speak out? What will happen to my family? Will they be kidnapped, killed? Or will I be killed ...? The fear is still there. We don't have enough security and we have no legal support. I am hopeful that something will change. I am hopeful that it is a matter of time. I have my hopes.

Once we have the structures and systems in place, things will shift for the better.

Carine Weiss: Thank you very much for this very interesting talk. Would you like to have a final word?

Vivian Onano: Yes, I would like to thank you and your organisation for the work you are doing around eradicating GBV and providing a platform for expats and activists to share their work and collaborate. Because power and strength is in the numbers – unless we work together, we will still be talking about the same issues 30 years down the line. So, for me, collaboration and partnership are very important when it comes to issues that I am very passionate about like eradicating GBV. Let's continue having the dialogue, opening up spaces and engaging with political leaders because, at the end of the day, they are the ones who have the power to change laws and policies. So let's keep holding them to account and let's keep on making noises to bring about change. It is only a matter of time. And it will definitely happen. I am hopeful.



Vivian Onano is a global youth advocate who is recognized as an emerging woman leader with the courage to lead change on the African continent. She has a strong commitment to education, women economic empowerment, and leadership. Vivian has a deep interest in re-defining Africa's growth and development, and creating an inclusive world where women and youth can play an important role. She is a graduate of Carthage College. She serves as a global youth ambassador at Water Aid, Youth Advisor to UN Women and a Women Deliver Young Leader. New African Woman Magazine featured her in 2016 as one of the **"30 under 30: Faces Changing Africa Now"** and Forbes Woman Africa

profiled her as **“One to Watch”**. Vivian is a recipient of the 2017 New African Woman on the Rise Award and 2016 MTV “Africa Re-Imagined” Award. In 2015 she was honored with Mrs. Obama’s “Let Girls Learn” award by MORE Magazine for her advocacy work around girls education. Vivian is a respected speaker who often speaks on global education, gender equality, youth empowerment, and international development. She has presented at the United Nations General Assembly, Women Deliver Global Conference, and the Clinton Global Initiative, among others. (Twitter: @vivianonano) Email

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