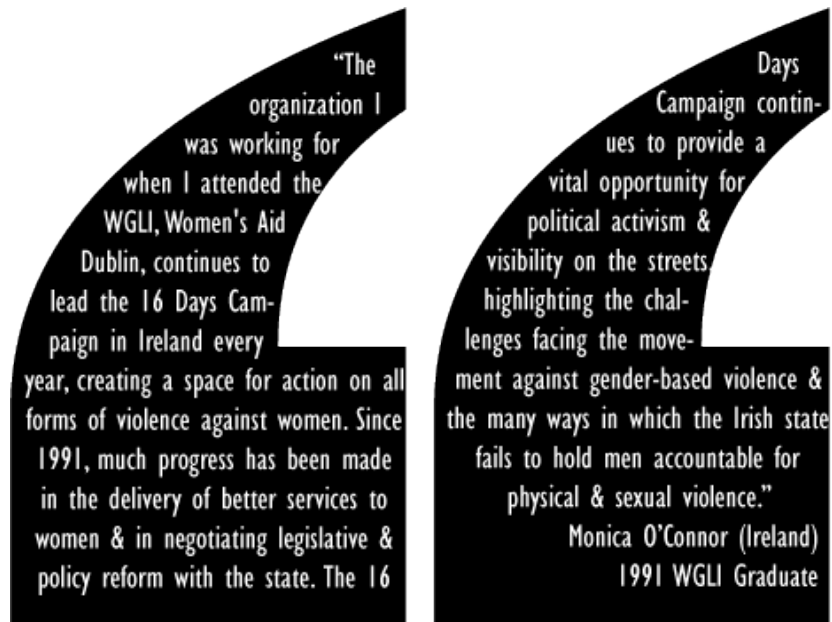


Activist Origins of the 16 Days Campaign



In 1991, the Center for Women’s Global Leadership convened the first Women’s Global Leadership Institute (WGLI). The 23 participants came from different countries in all of the world’s regions and were drawn from a variety of fields - lawyers, policymakers, teachers, health care workers, researchers, journalists, and activists. These women were local civil society leaders with at least two years of experience in women’s organizing who were also interested in building the global women’s human rights movement. During the WGLI, participants discussed different aspects of gender-based violence and human rights, learning from one another’s experiences and consequently developing strategies to increase international awareness of the systemic nature of violence against women and to expose this violence as a violation of women’s human rights. While violence against women takes different forms according to its cultural context, the problem exists everywhere and working on the issue offers unique opportunities to build bridges across cultures, to learn from both similarities and differences, and to link strategies globally.



As one strategy to build awareness about gender-based violence and facilitate networking among women leaders working in this

area, the WGLI participants established the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence Campaign, choosing to symbolically link November 25th (International Day Against Violence Against Women) and December 10th (International Human Rights Day). International Day Against Violence Against Women was first declared in 1981 by the first Feminist Encuentro for Latin America and the Caribbean to commemorate the violent assassination of the Mirabal sisters on that date in 1960 by the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. As a result of extensive organizing by women's rights organizations, the United Nations General Assembly [officially designated](#) November 25th as International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women [A/RES/54/134] in 1999. Serving as coordinator of international campaigns with CWGL from 1990 to 1995, Niamh Reilly played a key role with responsibility for launching and establishing the 16 Days as an annual campaign during this time.

A major component of the first 16 Days Campaign in 1991 was the launch of a worldwide petition drive aimed at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights that was held in Vienna in 1993. The petition called upon the Preparatory Committee of the conference to comprehensively address women's human rights at every level of its proceedings and to recognize gender-based violence as a human rights issue. In a time prior to the widespread use of email or the Internet, the petition was circulated to 124 countries and translated into 23 languages. The tremendous efforts of a small number of student interns working at the CWGL in the early 1990s were vital to its successful take-off, especially Linda Posluszny, Raahi Reddy, Andrea Romani-Pitanguy and Tamara Xavier. The petition drive proved so popular that its central coordinator, the Center for Women's Global Leadership, continued to gather signatures calling for actions to implement the Vienna commitments to women's human rights, and to carry these forward to subsequent UN conferences, especially the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing in 1995. Between 1993 and 1995, Amnesty International formally backed the petition and distributed it worldwide. In addition, it attracted a corporate sponsor, The Body Shop, which distributed the petition throughout its stores. As a result, the number of signatures gathered exceeded one million by the time of the FWCW in September 1995 (from Reilly, N. (2009). *Women's Human Rights: Seeking Gender Justice in a Globalizing Age*. London: Polity Press, p. 171). The 16 Days Campaign had become a vehicle for increasing people's awareness of the UN human rights system, and the spread of the petition had the synergistic effect of creating international consciousness about the 16 Days Campaign. While it was unlikely that any of the first WGLI graduates could have foreseen the incredible success of the campaign as a mobilizing tool, thanks to their initial efforts and the commitment of so many other activists over the years, more than 5,167 organizations in 187 countries have organized around the 16 Days Campaign, and the issue of gender-based violence has garnered a significant amount of international attention.

“The initial rallying call of the 16 Days Campaign, ‘Women’s Rights are Human Rights,’ resonated all over the Pacific. In Fiji this call has created a more vibrant human rights environment. December 10th had never been marked in a big way; it was a domain of the UN. But since 1991 with the 16 Days publicity on this day, all human rights groups, including trade unions, HIV/AIDS groups, disabilities rights groups, and sexual minorities, participate and carry out activities. I can safely say that this campaign has spearheaded the movement for democracy, rule of law and human rights in Fiji and parts of the Pacific.”

Shamima Ali (Fiji)
1991 WGLI Graduate

The growth of the anti-violence against women movement provides one of the best illustrations of how local activism can translate into global action. The signatures that activists collected at the local level during the early years of the 16 Days Campaign helped to change the trajectory of the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights and subsequent discussions about women and human rights. Non-governmental organizations also played a significant role in the establishment of a UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Its Causes and Consequences. In 2006, the UN Secretary-General (SG) consulted with civil society representatives to help develop an in-depth study on violence against women. The SG’s multi-year, global campaign, “UNiTE to End Violence Against Women,” and other UN agencies’ initiatives on VAW were a follow-up to this study.

“In 1991... policy-makers regarded this work as an obscure non-priority that would divert resources from the ‘really important’ issues. The 16 Days Campaign did an extraordinary job in educating the public & governments on the importance of VAW, & its relevance to human rights, development and health. Almost two decades later, it is very impressive to see how VAW has been mainstreamed into public opinion, with the help of the 16 Days Campaign. Laws changed, public policies were created & expanded, & new fields of knowledge were developed.”

Simone G. Diniz
(Brazil)
1991 WGLI Graduate

CWGL would like to honor the commitment and dedicated activism of local and international women’s rights advocates and organizations, which has transformed global opinion on issues of violence against women and has increased pressure on governments to follow through on their commitments to securing and protecting women’s rights. The 16 Days Campaign is a good illustration of UN/civil society partnerships, as UN bodies have taken up 16 Days activities. CWGL hopes that groups and individuals will continue to utilize the 16 Days Campaign as an opportunity

to work together in solidarity and draw upon this period of heightened international attention to gain support for their local efforts.

1991 Women's Global Leadership Institute Participants: Shamima Ali (Fiji Islands) ▪ Ana Carcedo (Costa Rica) ▪ Gina Cedemanos (Peru) ▪ Jana Chrzova (Czechoslovakia) ▪ Roberta Clarke (Trinidad & Tobago) ▪ Simone Grilo Diniz (Brazil) ▪ Woo-Seoup Han (Korea) ▪ Lori Heise (USA) ▪ Magally Huggins (Venezuela) ▪ Hina Jilani (Pakistan) ▪ Ebon Kram (Sweden) ▪ Pat Mahmoud (Nigeria) ▪ Rana Nashashibi (Palestine) ▪ Monica O'Connor (Ireland) ▪ Lata P.M. (India) ▪ Annette Pypops (Canada) ▪ Qiyamah A. Rahman (USA) ▪ Nilda Rimonte (USA) ▪ Syarifah Sabaroedin (Indonesia) ▪ Felicia Sakala (Zambia) ▪ Marsha Sfeir (Canada) ▪ Siriporn Skrobanek (Thailand) ▪ Everjoice Win (Zimbabwe); **CWGL Participants:** Rosa Briceño ▪ Lourdes Bueno ▪ Charlotte Bunch ▪ Roxanna Carrillo ▪ Susana Fried ▪ Niamh Reilly ▪ Susan Roche ▪ Hei Soo Shin.

Source <http://16dayscwgl.rutgers.edu/about/activist-origins-of-the-campaign>