



# Never Too Young to Change the World

Two South African teenagers do battle with traffickers

**M**POLETSANG RADINGWANE AND MPHONG PELEMA WERE TWO AVERAGE SOUTH African teenage girls—and they brought down a trafficking ring.

When they were only 17, they found themselves running a campaign against sex trafficking and labor trafficking in Galeshewe, a predominantly Black community in Kimberley, in central South Africa. “It’s a campaign that came at the right time at the right moment,” Radingwane says of their efforts.

In the three years between April 2016 and March 2019, 4,512 women were reported missing in South Africa. The country is a human trafficking hot spot, where the survivor rescue rate remains a sobering 1 percent. Trafficking disproportionately affects Black women nationwide. Women made up 78 percent of those abducted in 2018. Of women reported missing, 80 percent were Africans. Some 70 percent of the victims are abducted for forced labor; the remainder are forced into sexual exploitation (though these cases are often underreported). An estimated 155,000 people live in slavery in South Africa today.

“These traffickers usually attack these communities. They can see you’re desper-

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◀ Mpoletsang Radingwane (top) and Mpho Pelema (below) led a campaign against human trafficking in Galeshewe (far left), where they grew up.

ate. They know that whatever they promise you, you'll go for it because you think this might be the ticket out of poverty," Radingwane explains. Galeshewe, where she's from, was one of many townships designated for Black South Africans during apartheid. The apartheid government fell in 1994, but Black communities remain isolated by an extreme wealth gap, and South Africa is regularly labeled one of the most unequal countries in the world.

When the teens started their campaign, the community around their school was experiencing a lot of trafficking and attempted trafficking, Radingwane says, adding, "We had heard of trafficking around the community, which means that we, as learners, were not safe." She and Pelema were inspired to join the Youth Ambassadors program through the Justice Desk, a youth-led nonprofit based in Cape Town. The program helps students design and lead human rights campaigns. Jessica Dewhurst, the organization's founder and CEO, defines its goal as "empowering the everyday person to realize their role in changing this world for the better." The Youth Ambassadors project currently runs in nearly 50 schools and enlists youth ambassadors across south-central Africa.

"We have incredible young people recognizing they have the power to lead their own change, but also to support those around them to do the same," says Kayla Brittan, chief operating officer at the Justice Desk. In South Africa and elsewhere, youth ambassadors have lobbied for the abolishment

of the national tampon tax and to end child marriages. In Zambia, they've trained parents to understand the importance of girls' education and have worked to abolish corporal punishment by petitioning schools. To combat trafficking, Radingwane and Pelema spoke at school assemblies, spread information on social media and organized a march in Galeshewe to educate people on what to do when they or someone they know is at risk for sex or labor trafficking.

Then, in the middle of their campaign, traffickers tried to kidnap a young girl from Radingwane and Pelema's high school.

"It was a car, a blue [Volkswagen] Polo, with two guys inside attempting to traffic the girl," Radingwane recalls. "But because of us being aware of what we'd been taught, we were there at the right time to save her. ... It was an eye-opener for everyone ... and that specific learner knew what to do to protect herself, as well as other learners protecting her."

Dewhurst adds proudly, "These two young, incredible ladies just wrote down what human trafficking was. They put a little SIM card into an old, broken phone, and walked to every shack and every door and said, 'We want to tell you what human trafficking is, and if you see anything suspicious, just message this number.' They got a whole bunch of messages saying, 'Girls are going missing all the time, and we just don't know where they're going.' Because people had no idea what human trafficking was, they never put those pieces together." When the same traffickers tried to abduct another student at the same school, the community was ready. Undercover police were waiting to arrest the men.

"Three human traffickers have

now been arrested, thanks to two 17-year-old girls," Dewhurst says, "because these girls were able to empower their own community." Radingwane adds that the arrests "sent a strong message to those thinking of doing the same thing. After the arrest, the incidence of trafficking in the community was dead, as if this thing never existed. We really know we left a footprint behind."

Radingwane is now studying law at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Her dream is to advocate for children like her, who grew up without parents. Of the justice system, she notes, "When you don't have money, you don't have a say. It's one of the reasons why I know I may be able to change the next orphan child's life. So I'm going on this journey, and I'm not going to back down." She started the Born to Prosper Organization to collect clothing, sanitary pads and school supplies for orphans with HIV/AIDS in Galeshewe.

Pelema is studying civil engineering at the Durban University of Technology. "For me, being involved in justice made me passionate about everything," she says. Her current focus is helping young people who struggle with their mental health. Both young women are still involved with the Justice Desk as volunteers.

"I would definitely advise girls to join groups and get to know what's happening around them," Pelema urges. "Make a difference by starting small, being aware, being safe, and taking care of your woman's health and mental health."

Radingwane adds, "You're never too young to make a difference!" And Brittan beams, "How many times do people say that a 17-year-old girl can't change the world?"

—MEGAN GIESKE