

# Fighting domestic violence... 'One bracelet at a time'

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**M**ANILA—What do Hollywood stars Reese Witherspoon, Selma Hayek and Lauren Conrad, supermodels Adriana Sklenarikova Karembeu and Daniela Pestova, and local actress Ruffa Gutierrez, have in common?

The answer, of course, is Avon. They are all—in a global or national capacity—ambassadors for Avon, particularly the company's *Speak Out Against Domestic Violence* program launched globally in 2004, and in the Philippines just last month.

Witherspoon is the current Avon global ambassador, speaking eloquently and staying "on message" during the past week, when, as part of Avon's celebration of International Women's Day on March 8, she took part in a press conference and as a keynote speaker in the "Global Forum for Women and Justice" held in Washington, D.C.

Clad in a dark blue dress with a single accessory—the silver "Women's Empowerment Necklace" that Avon is selling, with the proceeds earmarked to support efforts worldwide to bring an end to all forms of violence against women—Witherspoon spoke of her involvement in the campaign and of her happiness at how pieces of jewelry, the necklace and an "empowerment bracelet" that Avon launched last year, had managed to raise millions for NGOs around the world while raising the public profile of the issue.

**Advocacy**

Hayek, on the other hand, was Avon's first brand ambassador to raise the possibility of the company's adding the cause of domestic violence to its longstanding advocacy and support for breast cancer efforts.

Conrad, on the other hand, is the

services of local NGOs, while other groups are invited to submit proposals for funding.

**Lesser-known**

In the Czech Republic and Slovenia, a survey showed that 46 percent of women in the region had been subjected to "mental violence," and yet most respondents believed domestic violence only consisted of physical abuse and that non-physical forms of violence were somehow "softer" or "less devastating" to survivors.

It was for these reasons that Avon decided to launch a campaign anchored on this "hidden threat," under the slogan "Not only bruises make you a victim."

Print ads show the faces of Daniela and Adriana, who are instantly recognizable in Central and Eastern Europe, and serve to draw public attention to the public service ads.

Avon and Czech Republic NGO partner Acorus, at a press conference late last year, revealed that Acorus' domestic violence hotline received more than five times the average number of calls before the campaign, and 3.5 times the number of visits to their crisis centers.

The results are both heartening and frightening. They show how powerful a compelling public awareness and education campaign can be, not just in raising awareness of the issue, but also in spurring survivors to action.

But unless there are enough resources



AVON chairman and CEO Andrea Jung and Avon global ambassador Reese Witherspoon

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AVON Philippines brand communications manager Ada Cruz, the author, Avon chairman and CEO Andrea Jung, and Avon Asia Pacific regional communications manager Louie Migne

"ambassador" for *m.powerment*, a line of clothing, jewelry and beauty products aimed at a younger demographic than that typically reached by Avon. Dubbed the "younger Carrie Bradshaw" (Sarah Jessica Parker's fashionista character in *Sex and the City*), Conrad focuses on dating abuse and violence for the *m.powerment* market by designing the *Have a Heart* necklace and promoting the *m.powerment* peach lip color, all to raise funds for the cause.

The two supermodels Adriana and Daniela, who hail from Slovakia and the Czech Republic respectively, have lent their easily recognizable faces and their mystique to help promote awareness of the "other" forms of domestic violence, encapsulated in the slogan "Not only bruises make you a victim."

As one of the hosts of the forum that marked the campaign's local launch, Gutierrez lent a note of credibility as she, together with one survivor of domestic violence who also happens to be an Avon sales representative, spoke of what abuse means on the personal, private level.

**Woman-to-woman**

Witherspoon spoke glowingly of the "woman-to-woman" network that lies at the heart of Avon's business, with nearly six million women worldwide, its sales representatives, who are uniquely suited to promoting awareness of and access to services that abused women could use as a lifeline.

Without saying a word, as Avon chair and CEO Andrea Jung outlined in an interview, an "Avon lady" could reach out to a woman needing help just by handing her a brochure that contains information she needs. And just by selling the "empowerment necklace" or "empowerment bracelet," which was launched in other places but not here, women could "change the world one bracelet at a time," said Witherspoon.

The same "empowerment necklace," a small pendant with the "infinity" symbol hanging from a thin silver chain, goes on sale this month in the Philippines for just a little over a hundred pesos each. Proceeds of local sales will provide funding support for hotline

on the ground—enough hotlines, referral centers, shelters and counseling centers, as well as a responsive police, judicial and social welfare system—then the campaign runs the risk of merely increasing the frustration, if not the risk, for the women reaching out for help.

**The local front**

On the local front, NGOs working in the field of domestic violence have been around for decades. In fact, the Women's Crisis Center (WCC), on whose board of trustees I sit, celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

But these NGOs are barely hanging on, bedeviled by funding shortfalls which have resulted, in turn, to a shortage of hotline counselors, shelter staff and trainers.

The WCC, for instance, which has been housed for many years in the East Avenue Medical Center, is facing the threat of eviction. Which is unfortunate since East Avenue is an ideal catchment area as this is where most emergency cases in Quezon City and environs are brought, with possible cases of domestic violence or sexual abuse referred immediately to the WCC.

Gutierrez may make for an ideal spokesperson or symbol—one who backs her advocacy with personal experience and commitment to the issue.

NGO representatives present at the *Advancing Advocacy* sessions hosted by Avon did raise some concerns regarding the employment of "celebrity power" for such a serious and life-threatening issue.

But then, we do live in the age of celebrity, and corporations like Avon have long recognized their power, not just to attract attention but even to change behavior (particularly consumer behavior and brand loyalty).

NGOs would do well to get on the bandwagon despite the risks. They might not have the money to pay celebrities' appearances or endorsement fees, but this is a two-way road. Celebrities generally like their names and faces attached to worthwhile causes, and it is the NGOs' good intentions and good works that they could leverage in the battle for the hearts and minds (and wallets) of the public. ■

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