The “Shining the Feminism Light Bright” social media campaign culminated in an illuminating conversation with Sisonke Msimang, a writer and intellectual who shared personal anecdotes and experiences from her journey as an African feminist with all the campaign participants. See the full chat below:

GBVN: Hello everyone! Welcome to our conversation with @Sisonkemsimang, with whom we will be discussing her personal perspective on what it means to be an African feminist. How are you today, Sisonke? #FeministSparks

SM: I’m great thanks! Excited.

GBVN: So are we! Our first question is this: When did you start describing yourself as a feminist? Was there an event that triggered your politics? #FeministSparks

SM: I grew up with a lot of powerful independent women around me. Political women who were freedom fighters. Outspoken and brazen and difficult women. So I have always called myself a feminist. #FeministSparks. It was. Fun and feminist and sometimes not so fun. #FeministSparks so...

GBVN: That sounds like a wonderful and inspiring childhood, Sisonke. So can you tell us what feminisms mean to you, personally? #FeministSparks

SM: Feminism to me means strength, expression and freedom. To believe in feminist principles is to believe in freedom. Even if you don’t call yourself a feminist, who cares? If you believe in the ideas then you believe in freedom. And I guess to me that means freedom as a woman, as a sexual being, as a black person. Freedom as a person who may or may not be able to use my body in normative ways, etc... feminist freedom has space for all that #FeministSparks

GBVN: That’s powerful, especially for those who might not feel comfortable with labels; the key is to believe in and practice the positive ideals feminism represents. Our next question is, what’s the best thing about being a feminist? #FeministSparks

SM: Agreed! The labels can be distracting. Although of course I understand why people sometimes want to insist on using the word feminism. It’s clear.. But to answer your question... The best thing about being a feminist is having a community of like minded women to think and
act and struggle and celebrate with. And knowing how to call out patriarchy without self doubt creeping in. #FeministSparks

GBVN: We agree; community is so important when resisting oppressive systems and norms. Even though we’ve recognised that some people might not want to identify as feminists, we think they can be convinced. So can you tell us why everyone should be a feminist?

SM: Mainly we should all be feminist because Chimamanda told us to and #Beyoncé agrees. But also as Africans feminism is a crucial lens of analysis if we want freedom. Especially economic freedom. We can never hope to have dignity and genuine equality if we don’t understand how women’s oppression makes communities poorer and less able to fulfil their human potential. #FeministSparks

GBVN: This is so true. None of us are free until all of us are free; as long as #GenderHierarchies continue to dehumanise us, we should all be feminists. And this brings us to a question about creating a feminist future: How can we raise feminist children? #FeministSparks

SM: Yhuuuu, if I knew how to raise feminist kids I’d be the happiest woman in the world! I really don’t know. I’m stumbling through it. But I will say this.. I am still on my parenting journey. It’s important to teach kids about justice - between individuals and groups. Across time and today. If you help them to have this framework I think the feminist instinct is implanted.

GBVN: Yes, at its core feminism is absolutely about justice across time and today. Can you share with us some of the work that African feminists have done and are doing to help women and girls secure justice by fighting to #EndVAW?

SM: So many ways.. let me count! There are organisations like @awdf01 which raise money and support feminist organising to end violence #FeministSparks
There are amazing organisations like @HOLAAfrica which is all about sex and power and pleasure and do is necessarily a powerful tool in anti violence work. #FeministSparks
Then there are badass women like @MuholiZanele who has been fighting for lesbians to be seen and respected and for the murders to stop. #FeministSparks
And our mothers like Mama @G_MachelTrust working to end child marriage and sisters like @monaeltahawy who campaign against patriarchy everywhere. #FeministSparks. I could go on forever…

GBVN: You really could, we know! We are inspired every day by the numerous African feminists working to create justice in our communities, many of whom we don’t hear much about. But tell us, where can people who know nothing about feminism go to if they want to learn? #FeministSparks

SM: Start by googling feminism. I’m not kidding! So many hits the internet is your friend. #FeministSparks. You can also find more out about feminism by taking to your grandmother,
aunties and sisters and friends. Feminists are everywhere. And if you don’t know one, you’ll know someone who knows one! #FeministSparks

GBVN: Yes! We are everywhere, so if you want to know more about feminism, talk to us. Unfortunately we’re at our last question, we’ve learned so much from you. But before you go: What are your thoughts on what everyone can do to #EndVAW so women stop saying #MeToo?

SM: Everyone can do their part to end violence against women by having difficult conversations with men that challenge them, raise the costs of their nonsense by insisting on accountability & rewarding diverse displays of non-aggressive behaviour & punishing toxic masculinity. The End.

Questions from other campaign participants:

Nancy Abwola: I agree community is key and necessary! But don't you think there is a danger of only preaching to ourselves. For feminism to 'catch fire' we need more new converts. How can we do that if we keep to our own community?

SM: Yes!!! Actually that’s a big part of why sometimes I don’t come in talking about feminism this and that. Sometimes I prefer to do feminism by stealth. Lead with the idea rather than the label. Then you preach to the unconverted. And actually sometimes you discover you don’t need to preach. Just talk and listen. Some of my most important feminist insight have been gleaned listening to women who don’t call themselves feminist.

GBVN: Thank you so much for your insightful question Nancy. It's important not to get sucked into an echo chamber.

NA: My biggest struggle as a mother, is distinguishing when I should let my daughters 'choice' reign such as wanting a 'barbie themed birthday, having her hair done a particular way', when I know its being influenced by society! Where do you make these choices?

SM: Oh good question. I try not to worry about the ones that are too obvious. I focus on the small moments. I’ll give you an example. So today my son went to a friend’s house. The father of the friend is getting married soon. The parents divorced. So I say oh who is his wife is she nice? My son says, 'he’s marrying a boy. That was silly of you to think it can only be a girl'. I was very proud of him. And I didn’t make a fuss and say wow! You’re right. Blah blah. I think a feminist son should be able to see the world like this without it being a big deal.
The campaign succeeded in engaging both established, fledgling and even non-African feminists in a conversation about their beliefs and their commitment to making the continent better and safer for women. It was a timely reminder to keep the feminist light shining in the darkness of pervasive patriarchy.