



Funeka Soldaat (r) of Triangle Project, Cape Town, sharing a joke with Prudence Mabele of Johannesburg and Elizabeth Khaxas (l) of Sister Namibia at the Gay and Lesbian Awareness Week held in Windhoek in 2000. Funeka recently survived a hate attack in Khayelitsha, where she does outreach to lesbian women.



Campaign to stop violence against lesbian women in South Africa

Despite a model constitution that guarantees the equality and human dignity of sexual minorities, the reality faced by black lesbian women in South Africa is one of rape, sexual assault, assault and verbal abuse perpetrated by members of their own communities who regard alternative sexual orientations as 'un-African'.

According to media reports featured on the Behind the Mask website (see page 43), an increasing number of black lesbian women are reporting such violations to organisations fighting hate crimes in Johannesburg and Cape Town townships.

"Most of the lesbians in the community where I stay (Khayelitsha) have been raped, and there are a lot of lesbians in the townships," reports Funeka Soldaat, a lesbian outreach worker with Triangle Project in Cape Town. She herself was stabbed eleven times by a group of men while walking with a friend they presumed was her girlfriend. Out of fear of being at-

tacked again, Soldaat now avoids walking in public with her partner.

Kekeletso Khena was raped three times before she turned 19. With all three incidents it was so-called 'corrective rape'. "I was raped because I was a butch child (acting like a boy). I was 13 years old the first time it happened. My mother walked into the room soon afterwards and said to me 'this is what happens to girls like you.' I left the township because I refuse to feel threatened on a daily basis," she says. "It boils down to the fact that you as a woman have a role to be a wife, mother and subordinate to your husband. If you're a lesbian you are not fulfilling these roles. We need to get rid of the belief that being a lesbian is unnatural and that it is a white thing, or un-African," Khena stresses.

In response to this situation, the campaign "The Rose has Thorns" was launched earlier this year in South Africa to raise awareness and combat the growing violence against lesbian

women in the townships. Leaders of the campaign are members of Behind the Mask and The Forum for the Empowerment of Women.

"The Rose has Thorns" Campaign addresses hate crimes directed at lesbians in townships through workshops and empowerment programmes. Pamphlets are distributed that advise lesbians on ways to prevent themselves from being seriously injured during attacks, and self-defense classes are run. Workshops are also hosted for the broader community to discuss issues faced by lesbians and how the community can help fight prejudice.

The campaign is being undertaken in partnership with all the major gay and lesbian community structures around the country, and also has the active support of mainstream human rights, gender equity and women's organisations including the Commission for Gender Equality. Speaking to *Sister Namibia* after the launch of the campaign, commissioner Sheila Meintjies said that she was shocked to learn about the reality of hate crimes and that the Commission needed to do much more to promote and protect the human rights of lesbian women.

The Rose has Thorns campaign has four objectives:

- Immediate enactment of anti-hate crimes legislation - at present, many acts that could be defined as hate crime fall outside the ambit of the criminal law, and so are not punishable, such as verbal abuse;
- Better service from the police for lesbian victims of hate-motivated violence and abuse;
- Increased sensitivity of mainstream service providers working in the area of violence against women to the particular issues of lesbian women who become victims of rape and other acts of violence simply because of their sexual orientation, and improved ability to provide support and assistance to these women; and
- Making zero tolerance of all forms of gender-based violence a national imperative. ♀