

The deadly cost of breaking the silence: a tribute to Lorna Mlosana¹

Margie Orford



The struggle to roll out treatment to the millions of HIV-positive South Africans continues. Equally disturbing are the incidents in which women are beaten or murdered for being brave and responsible enough to disclose their status.

On 13 December 2003, a group of young Khayelitsha women were in the mood for a party. Lorna Mlosana and her friends Nomfundo Dubula and Nomava Mangisa were all 20-something volunteers and HIV activists with the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). They were keen to carry on the festivities after the organisation – led by the charismatic Nobel Peace Prize nominee Zackie Achmat – wound up its end-of-year party. The women planned to go to the beach, but when it began to rain, Lorna and Nomava decided to hang out at the shebeen near Lorna's home instead.

Lorna, who was openly HIV-positive and healthy thanks to anti-retrovirals, never returned home. That night, she was killed by a vicious cocktail of misogyny, violence and fear.

Orphaned as a baby, she had come to Cape Town from the Transkei in 2000. She dreamt of becoming a lawyer, but these ambitions were shattered when she fell pregnant and a test revealed that she was HIV-positive. Now she was dead.

What happened that night? Reports are conflicting, but at some stage during the evening Lorna left the shebeen. "Maybe she was on her way home," says her sister, Nonkuhuleko Sotshononda, "maybe she went to the toilet? I don't know. But she was cornered by eight men and she was gang-raped." Lorna, whom friends describe as "gentle", endured the ghastly attack. Afterwards she said to them: "I am HIV positive. How could you do this to me?"

Nonkuhuleko thinks the men became enraged when they thought they had been infected with the virus and vented their anger on her sister. "The rapists asked Nomava if what Lorna said was true and then they began to beat her". When Nomava tried to intervene, one of the men grabbed her head and bashed it repeatedly against the bonnet of a car. "They wanted to kill both of them,"

says Nonkuhuleko. “An ambulance arrived – that is what saved Nomava – but it was too late for Lorna. She died on the way to the hospital.”

The TAC has shaken the world of HIV/Aids activism since its launch in 1998. Its campaigns for greater access to treatment, and crusades against the view that HIV/Aids is a “death sentence” with the uncompromising *action directe* tactics of 20th-century revolutionaries. But this can be very dangerous at times, especially when those activists are young women.

Lorna’s fate was appalling, the violence she endured extreme. But is it unusual? Marta Darder, a Spanish doctor with Médecins Sans Frontiers, who worked with Lorna (and gave treatment support at MSF) in Khayelitsha and knew her well, had this to say: “Sadly, I cannot say that Lorna’s death is unique or exceptional. It was not just a reaction to her HIV status but also to her vulnerability as a woman. It’s very, very hard to be a woman here. Gang rape is an everyday event.”



One-third of the rape cases reported to the police in the Western Cape are committed by more than one perpetrator. About eight per cent of rapes end in murder. “Our experience at Rape Crisis is that gang rape does not typically result in murder, although we are painfully aware of cases like Lorna’s,” says Sam Waterhouse, Advocacy Co-ordinator for Rape Crisis. “Rape and especially gang rape is an extreme expression of male sexual entitlement over women and is used to control women either directly or indirectly. The threat of gang rape is sent out to other women in the community, strengthening the control of the rapists over all the women in the community. Gang rape is used to punish a woman for not conforming to the expectations placed on her.”

Lorna did not conform, nor was she silenced by her brutal experience of gang rape. She spoke out challengingly and disclosed her HIV status – only to be murdered in a public place in a densely populated area.

Those close to Lorna do not believe that poverty, frustration or sexism were the prime factors that led to her death. Her friend and fellow TAC activist, Nomfundo Dubula, believes that Lorna was murdered for one reason and one reason only – her HIV status. “We believe that Lorna was discriminated against. If she hadn’t told them about her positive status, then maybe they would have just injured her,” Nomfundo told me in the weeks after the incident. Her fears are backed by recent studies that show that HIV-positive women are nearly three times more likely than HIV-negative women to experience violence at the hands of their current partner.

When Lorna’s family heard what had happened, they were appalled by

the ring of silence that was drawn around the assault – nobody at the busy shebeen was willing to admit that they had witnessed anything. Outraged, her brother phoned the TAC, and they took up her case by organising a march to the shebeen. Three men were eventually arrested and refused bail.

“We were very shocked that no one helped Lorna,” says Nonkuhuleko (Lorna’s sister). “They knew! The people in the shebeen and the neighbours knew what was happening, but they did nothing. Why? No one wants to witness what happened. There are individuals who support these rapists, these criminals.” She alleges that Nomava Mangisa, who survived the assault and was a witness to Lorna’s murder, was intimidated and threatened by community members in an effort to silence her.

“I fetched Nomava from the hospital when she had recovered enough from her very serious head injuries,” says Dr Marta Darder. “She was still in a terrible state of shock. She alleged then that a woman who worked in the shebeen had said that Lorna should be beaten more strongly because she had HIV – that she deserved it because she had HIV. Other people said that one of the attackers had been her boyfriend. It’s hard to say exactly what happened, but must a woman be murdered for having HIV?” Nomava Mangisa never recovered. She died a few months after the assault (her family has not disclosed the cause of death).

Lorna is not the first South African woman to be murdered upon disclosing her HIV status. In 1998, Gugu Dlamini was knifed to death by a group of neighbours three weeks after disclosing that she was HIV-positive. In August 2000, a high-school teacher shot his wife, Mpho Motlaung, and placed a note on her body that said “HIV positive”. He then shot her parents before killing himself.

But Nathan Geffen of the TAC feels that South Africa has come a long way nonetheless in the destigmatisation of HIV/Aids. “People have become very open about living with HIV since the opening of TAC branches. Lorna, it should be remembered, was murdered by notorious thugs at a shebeen.”

It has been suggested that in shebeens in urban South African townships, there is a tacit acceptance that women who are raped or physically attacked in that environment are not entitled to receive aid from others. Some also believe that women who accept drinks from men owe them sexual favours. The boundaries of where violence against women ends and discrimination against those with HIV/Aids begins become very blurred in a context where women’s power to negotiate their own freedom of movement, their own pleasure, their right to bodily integrity, is so profoundly compromised.



Nomfundo believes that the way to break the cycle of violence against women like Lorna is to get men to take action. “We need men who have HIV to speak out. By speaking out they would show that it is not just a woman’s problem. Women get tested when they are pregnant – that is when many are diagnosed – so HIV is associated with women. Men think that it is women who carry the disease, because women are always the first to know. Men don’t test because they see it as a woman’s problem and they only seek treatment when they are very sick,” she says.

Nathan Geffen agrees that more needs to be done about the way in which HIV/Aids affects women socially and economically. “If we had more time, we could pay more attention to this, and also to the links between violence against women and HIV. Unfortunately our energy is being sapped by an irrational debate spearheaded by the Minister of Health and the President of South Africa,” he says.



So how do we make sure that what happened to Lorna Mlofana never happens again? “All rape must be condemned by our society and by the criminal justice system,” says Sam Waterhouse of Rape Crisis. “We need to ensure that perpetrators take responsibility for their actions – something that happens extremely rarely – and the existing climate of tolerance towards many forms of rape must be addressed. There are many people who believe that women are liable for their own rapes. The criminal justice system must respond effectively to violent rape perpetrated by strangers and gang rapes. Emphasis must be placed on the identification of the suspects, early arrest and detailed investigation. Bail should be denied. Community participation would make investigation easier and would put perpetrators behind bars. In all our communities, we need to openly discuss sexuality, issues of choice, self-respect and mutual respect with children if the cycle is to be broken.”

Lorna’s absence is a continuous source of pain to her family and friends. The most effective way of honouring her would be to make sure that she did not die for nothing. “My nephew, Lorna’s son, asks us so often: ‘Where is my mum? When is she coming home?’ I want her to be honoured. She was so kind to everybody,” says her sister. “I want 13 December to be a special day, a public day that commemorates her life and honours her death.”

Lorna’s case came up several times at the Khayelitsha Magistrate’s Court. In October 2004, it was referred to the High Court in Cape Town. Three of the

alleged eight perpetrators were arrested. But two were granted bail and remain at large. Lorna's family was not even informed about the hearing. According to Dr Marta Darder, the perpetrators had every expectation that the case would simply "go away".

It was only after lawyers were retained by TAC that Lorna Mlofana's family were informed so that they could be present at the bail hearings. The TAC campaigned relentlessly for two years to keep Lorna's case in the public eye. Their work paid off. "The successful prosecution of Lorna's attackers came about due to the efforts of Prosecutor Badenhorst, Khayelitsha Police Commander Jacobs, Inspector Nash and Inspector Sass," says Mandla Majola, TAC co-ordinator at Khayelitsha. Ncedile Ntumbukane (20) was found guilty of murder and rape. Vuyelwa Dlova, the female shebeen patron who allegedly said to the dying Lorna, "You bitch, you are spreading Aids," was found guilty of attempted murder.

It won't bring them back to life, but this time some form of justice was done for Lorna, for Nomava, and for the other victims of gender-based violence.

Nevertheless, hate crimes against HIV-positive women continue. Shortly after the verdict, it was reported that another TAC member, Nandipha Matyeke, was raped and murdered in Harare, Khayelitsha, outside Cape Town. She was only 18 years old, and in grade 10 at Luxolo High School

Mandla Majola explains why Lorna will never be forgotten: "We commemorate Lorna Mlofana's death every year and are working to put her vision into practice. Her dream was to work with educare centres to educate teachers about HIV/Aids. Lorna believed that many children who are HIV-positive are discriminated against and she wished to put a stop to this. We work with a large number of educare centres now. We have also established the Lorna Mlofana Support Group. It works with rape survivors, especially children, and people who are HIV positive. Through this group and in other ways, TAC has taken up the issue of abuse of women in Khayelitsha. We have a group called Positive Women. They tackle domestic violence by working with the police and MSF to confront cases of domestic violence and educate people about the services available to rape survivors and children who are abused. Police figures show that the incidence of rape is slowly coming down."



If you would like to contribute or participate, you can contact Mandla Majola, TAC Co-ordinator at Khayelitsha on 021 364 5489 or 072 424 7181.

Footnotes

- 1 This piece appeared in a slightly different form in the Southern African edition of the magazine *Marie Claire*. *Feminist Africa* is grateful to the author and to Kate Wilson, the editor of *Marie Claire*, for permission to reprint.



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