

I AM WOMAN

As we celebrate National Women's Day on August 9, meet three everyday heroines whose stories challenge the world's patronising perspective of Africa's women as meek, mild and voiceless.

By KIM CHALONER
Photographs by PIPPA HETHERINGTON

THE NON-VICTIM

SIXOLILE MBALO, SOUTH AFRICA

It's not every woman who finds herself surrounded by violent men at the Western Cape's maximum-security prisons – willingly and voluntarily. And Sixolile Mbalo isn't just surrounded by them. She's standing up to address them. With her head held high, she recounts her searing testimony – of being raped and left for dead as a young girl in a deserted Eastern Cape school, her nearly lifeless body stuffed down an overflowing pit latrine.

Sixolile was 13 years old at the time of the 2001 attack. Over a decade passed before she decided, courageously, to put her story on record. It was South African author and journalist Antjie Krog who led Sixolile through the process of exploring her thoughts, memories and feelings around her poverty-stricken childhood and early adulthood, and “the event” that brought life as she knew it to a standstill. This big, almost overwhelming story is laid bare in a small yet impactful book, *Dear Bullet*.

In it, Sixolile writes to the bullet that remains, to this day, lodged in her neck; the demonic piece of metal with which her perpetrator (she seldom calls him by name) tried to snuff out her life. She lives with it embedded in her flesh, because doctors have warned that the intricate procedure required to remove it could leave her paralysed. “This bullet, I've learnt to accept it,” she says. “It's part of my life, part of my body.”

Sixolile was raised by her grandmother in the Eastern Cape. Her mother chose to live and work in Cape Town, but would arrive from time to time on the family doorstep to deliver yet another infant for *Makhulu* (Grandmother) to raise. Sixolile's father never acknowledged her.

Unlike many young women who suffer similar abuse, she managed to resist the downward spiral of drug addiction and prostitution. “I didn't let myself go there,” she says. “I know what I want.”

You wouldn't be surprised if that's to help other women who have suffered at the hands of dangerous men. But, in



“This bullet, I've learnt to accept it. It's part of my life, part of my body”

fact, it's been the opposite.

Every few weeks, Sixolile ventures into Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison, Helderstroom Medium near Caledon or any of the other corrective facilities around the province. Why? Because she believes it's her calling to confront male perpetrators of murder, assault and sexual violence to assist them in finding forgiveness and healing for the deeds they have committed.

It was at the suggestion of the National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Reintegration of Offenders (NICRO) – who counselled Sixolile for years after her attack – that she entered prison for the first time to tell her story. Her talk formed part of the Restorative Justice Programme carried out annually in prisons across the country by the Prison Care and Support Network, under the auspices of the Catholic Church. It is with them that Sixolile still visits prisons, to try help rehabilitate criminals before their release back into society.

Beating the odds as she did gave her the strength to stand up and talk to the inmates. “At first I was, like,

‘I can't do this!’ And I was angry. But as I started doing it, I saw that although they committed crimes, there is a person behind each criminal.”

But what about the criminal who attacked Sixolile so viciously? “I decided to go to prison to see my perpetrator and confront him, ask him some questions – why did you choose me; what did I do to you? – but I didn't get the answers that I wanted,” she says. “I decided to forgive him, because I wanted to move on. It's part of healing.”

Today, the prisoners write her letters and poems, tell their stories and ask for her help in writing their own books one day. She is determined never to push anyone away. She remembers an inmate at Worcester Correctional Services who bowed his head as he approached her, his eyes wet with tears, his voice quivering as he spoke. “I'm sorry, so sorry. Forgive me,” he pleaded, recognising his own victim in Sixolile's eyes.

In South Africa – where an average of 43 people are murdered every day, and where reported sexual crimes totalled a staggering 667 803 between 2004 and 2013, according to Crime Statistics SA – Sixolile and the volunteers have a lot of work to do.

“I'm so glad that I can change people's lives by telling my story,” she says. “I want everyone in the world to read [it], not only every woman who has been raped or abused, but every woman who is going through a tough time.”

Sixolile yearns to create a documentary about her life, taking the viewer to the place where her story began, to the court case and her eventual move to Cape Town. She also wants to write a sequel about what her life looks like now, after a broken man tried – and failed – to take it all away.



WIN! WIN! WIN!

Jonathan Ball Publishers are giving away **two copies** of Sixolile's book, *Dear Bullet*. To enter, SMS “**BULLET**”, followed by **YOUR NAME**, to **33600** by August 15. We will notify winners by telephone.



THE BREADWINNER

DOLORES GODEFFROY, SWAZILAND

Dolores Godeffroy's throaty laugh could only belong to a woman who is authentic to the core. A woman who cannot accept the fact that Africa is starving while it exports all her country's agricultural produce.

Outside her restaurant, eDladleni (Siswati for "in the kitchen"), near Mbabane, a rooster crows. It's almost lunchtime. Dolores stands at the door casting a watchful eye over everything as she greets – usually by name – arriving guests. They're here for her sumptuous signature dishes, such as fresh-baked mielie bread with lashings of melted butter, or strips of chicken paired with *tinluba* beans (a Swazi staple), marula nut paste, *emakhowe* (mushrooms) and *umbidro* (spinach). All straight from the source and utterly delicious; every ingredient seasonal, homegrown and organic.

Dolores can't recall when she first discovered her passion for food. But from an early age, she can remember being aware of the strong tendency in Swazi culture for the man to get the choice morsels, before the woman and children. "It's a power thing," she says.

If you slaughter and cook a chicken, she explains, the man will get the Parson's nose, the drumstick and the gizzards. "I interviewed this Swazi guy some years ago. I said, 'Mr Mashoeshoe, I don't have a man in my house. What am I going to do with the gizzards?' He said, 'Don't worry,

madam, you just keep them and when we come we will eat them!' He said it so innocently; he didn't see anything wrong with it! I thought it was brilliant."

Dolores built eDladleni on her own plot of land in 2002. There, she teaches locals about good-practice farming methods, encouraging them to grow local produce that thrives in the region,

"I don't want to be empowered by someone from Washington or London. I have the power – show me!"

and to resist the modern appetite for fast food. "Poison," Dolores explains, "to both body and mind. Good food made by the good earth feeds the soul."

At first, no one thought the restaurant would work. "I was literally the architect and the building contractor," she says. "Unfortunately, I've been against the tide with my thoughts as a woman. If I keep bothering about the opinions of others, I'll never get anything done."

Dolores rejects the idea of foreign-run NGOs descending upon Africa to rescue and enlighten. "For goodness sake," she says, "the African woman has

the power. I don't want to be empowered by someone from Washington or London. I have the power – show me!"

The entrepreneurial upstart is also outspoken about her disdain for the commercialisation of food by global corporations, which export the healthful harvests for profit, leaving her countrymen and women hungry.

"Food is political," Dolores says with a sigh, "and Swazi food has been robbed of its dignity."

Take amaranthus, several species of which were formerly classed as a weed. But, according to research by the University of KwaZulu-Natal, this variety is more viable than any genetically modified (GM) crops when it comes to feeding a hungry nation. Plus, Dolores says, it's iron-rich and it cooks in only seven minutes.

"What I'm trying to do is inform the owners of the food about its nutritional value," she adds. "It's about changing the mindset of the rural people."

Dolores has also created a series of cookbooks, which communicate her philosophy to a wider audience. And this coming October, she's hoping to return to Terra Madre, a major slow food conference in Torino, Italy, where small farmers from all over the world swap ideas about producing quality food in a responsible, sustainable way.

"Food is about love," she concludes. "You have to season it with love – that's the final, main ingredient. Put in as much as possible!"

When Yemi Adamolekun was about 10 years old, she went on a road trip with her mother and her two younger brothers. At one stage, they found themselves stuck behind an overladen truck, inching slowly forwards. Traffic built up behind them and drivers began to complain. Not giving it a second thought, Yemi's mother jumped out and signaled to the truck driver to pull over so that the traffic could pass. And, to Yemi's surprise, he did.

The memory makes Yemi smile even today, decades later, because her mother wasn't an official marshal – or a man. "The lesson for me is that leadership is not about position or titles," she says. "It's about doing what you think is right or what will serve the greater good. That day I thought my mom was very cool!"

Sadly, Yemi's mother passed away when her daughter was still on the cusp of womanhood. This is the biggest, most singular barrier Yemi has faced: "I didn't have the opportunity of her support, her guidance, her counsel... she lived a life of service and I miss her greatly."

From a young age, Yemi's parents instilled in their daughter a firm belief in herself and her capabilities, and the courage to stand up and ask questions. "Debates and discussions were an active part of my childhood," she says. "As a young girl, my father encouraged me to speak my mind and he nurtured my independent spirit. He was always very vocal about the sub-standard performance of government. I know I got that from him."

Yemi's personal and professional aim is to increase the conversation around governance and accountability, and to encourage Nigerians to ask questions and demand answers. That's why she became the executive director of Enough is Enough Nigeria, a group of individuals and youth-led organisations that uses advocacy and activism to mould young people into responsible citizens.

Yemi was born and bred in Nigeria, but she spent her high-school years in the USA and completed her

THE LEADER

YEMI ADAMOLEKUN, NIGERIA



"Most of the stories out of Africa are of gloom and doom, but women are doing so many exciting things – building lives, communities and businesses"

postgraduate studies in the UK. This makes her quite the opposite of the victimised Nigerian schoolgirls whose chances of getting a good education are being whipped out from under them by terrorist Islamic group Boko Haram.

"A country like Nigeria, which is neither landlocked, waterlogged, bankrupt nor short of human capital or natural or mineral resources, shouldn't be in the dire position in which it finds itself," says Yemi. "There's just no reason for it."

Nigeria's problem lies, she says, with a youth that knows no different, a generation whose expectations have become diminished. As the structures of a productive society and economy erode, so the hopes and dreams of its youth are dashed by corruption, patronage and abuse.

For Yemi, the solution is simple. "Social media has given Nigerians a platform to be heard," she says. "To get onto traditional media, radio, TV or print, you either have to have money to pay for an ad, or know someone in the sector to get you on for an interview."

The beauty of social media is that people have access to information, facilitating transparency and accountability. Plus it's accessible, free and it gives people a voice. "It's an equal-opportunity platform," she adds. "Your gender is irrelevant and there are no barriers to entry."

An example of this is the recent #BringBackOurGirls campaign, which went viral and catapulted the Boko Haram kidnappings onto the world stage – and into the direct path of global leaders.

"I think it has been fantastic in embarrassing our government into action," says Yemi. "It has also called into question the Nigerian government's ability to secure all its citizens, something promised in the constitution."

Yemi aims to live a life that matters. "A life where you wake up in the morning and feel you're really contributing something to society."

And to do this, you need to speak up. "Unfortunately, we don't do a good job of telling our stories," she says. "Most of the stories out of Africa are of gloom and doom, but there are so many exciting things women are doing – building lives, communities and businesses. The more we share these stories, the more we gain strength from our shared humanity." **TBI**

All of these profiles were provided by the **Behind the Faces** women's storytelling platform. Visit behindthefaces.org or follow them on Twitter: @behindthefaces.

TALK TO US!

Know any inspirational women? Got something to say about this story? We want you to share your thoughts and ideas with us. Email editor@bigissue.org.za.