

Women's Day: Umtata Women's Support Centre continues to march for the plight of jobs and violence against women and girls

As the country commemorates Women's Month under the theme *Women's Socio-Economic Rights and Empowerment: Building Back Better for Women's Resilience*, civil society organisations like Umtata Women Support Centre (UWSC) make it their daily mission to provide gainful employment opportunities, psychosocial support and counselling to women who experience gender based violence and domestic abuse. Based in Mthatha, the organisation creates a safe space for women and provide holistic healing interventions that target physical, spiritual, psychological and financial wellness.



UWSC beneficiaries led by Ms Koliwe Nongauza

At the helm is Ms Koliwe Nongauza, the Programme Director. Born into a nuclear family of 9 children in Willowvale Village of Mthatha, she aspired to be Teacher. She went on to study BCom Accounting and Personnel Management before weaving her career at Standard Bank of South Africa until her resignation in 2015 at managerial level. In 2010, she eventually followed her calling taking on studies towards becoming a Social Worker and after graduating joined UWSC.

Established in 1999 as a centre for abused women, UWSC's mission has been community development where women placed in shelters were empowered with skills that could generate them an income. Often women stay in abusive relationships due to the reliance of financial support from their partners, income generating skills in basic sewing, baking, décor, beading and artwork and detergent production are still being offered through a Victim Empowerment Programme (VEP). The centre has since graduated to also focus on the provision of Social Worker services and offering free therapy counselling for gender based violence (GBV) that supports victim's mental health.

Today, Ms Nongauza is a Programme Director, leading figure and pillar of strength for women in and around Mthatha including villages of King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality including Baziya, Mpheko, Tabase, Ntshabeni, Msana and Bumbane. One of her core beliefs is 'Knowledge is Power', that communities can only advance their own development when mindful and through programmes

UWSC has been able to deliver awareness by conducting educational social issue campaigns and advocacy work.

One of UWSC's leading VEP programmes focusing on mental health is called Masiphunge, therapeutic support group sessions where rural groups of women gather in safe spaces to talk through issues that affect them and collectively finding solutions. The programme took full effect in 2020, when the National Development Agency's (NDA) granted UWSC funds to the value of R300 000, 00 as part of government's response to high incidents of GBVF during Covid-19 lockdowns. Mthatha is one of the 30 GBVF hot spot areas identified by South Africa Police Services (SAPS). UWSC and 64 other emerging and established community organisations received funds totaling R16 400 000, 00 for the provision of prevention and direct GBVF services across the Eastern Cape from the Criminal Assets Recovery Account (CARA). 40 rural women are independent small business owners, have continued to meet and support each other after the sessions and are GBVF Whistle Blowers of GBVF and other social ills in their communities - about 65 cases abuse have been brought to the attention of Social Workers from these groups.

"Communities with high levels of social ills are not easy to develop. Despite greater awareness and effective community development programmes, too many women and vulnerable people still experience violation of their human rights and economic exclusion.

Working in close partnership with government department is key to our programmes for follow through of victim cases and attainment of justice but also for the sustainability of programmes. Moreover, this sector requires servants with passion and empathy as we work with poor and vulnerable people who look to us to help them positive change to their lives. UWSC is championing and advocating for issues of development affecting women in the rural communities. We are forging a legacy for rural community development that will continue for many generations to come. My message to women is that there is power in unity, when women hold hands change follows. Let us take firm stands against social ills, protection of our children and continue to be sources of strength, role models and prayer warriors for ourselves, our households and our country" says Ms Nongauza.

Other than being a beacon of light for rural women, Nongauza mentors and coaches aspiring GBVF organisations. She also serves as a member of O.R Tambo Ikwelo whilst parenting 3 children and a grandmother to 2 young grand-daughters.

It is her wish to get assistance to build a structure that houses additional space for Social Worker offices and a skills development center to capacitate young and older women towards job opportunities. This way UWSC could create additional employment for the Social Workers that are currently volunteering at UWSC.

Say "No" to Gender Based Violence #Kwanele