



Norma Oliver (73 years)

## “It was only the women in the trains”

It was 1976 when we were forced to move from District Six to Lavender Hill, I was in my forties. At that time, Lavender Hill was just two courts [block of flats]; there was nothing else, just empty fields. I had three boys at that time; my daughter had just got married. The boys were in their teens and we had to travel to Cape Town every day to go to school and back. Once, when we were traveling by train I lost one of the boys. It was so busy; the train was so full, that he got lost. I'm a person that knows what she wants. I only want the best for myself and for those around me. When I got married and started a family, everything was fine for five years. When we were removed from District Six we had to adjust and things didn't feel right anymore. My youngest child was nine at the time and I had to cope with the gangsters in the area with three teenage sons. Things were just standing still for me and my family. There was nothing wrong with us. But all of a sudden people were talking about Lavender Hill. They started calling it the Killing Fields. If you mentioned you came from Lavender Hill, it was like a weird name, there was a stigma.

After some time in Lavender Hill, the civic organisation started, people were coming together, having meetings. I wanted to see what was happening. I started going to the meetings and I got involved. That was also the time where my life started as a victim. After we moved to Lavender Hill, after some time, the men didn't go to work anymore. My husband also decided, one day, that he wasn't going to work anymore. He said there was no work. He was an artisan and when there was no work he did not want to do menial work instead. That was when I saw all the men hung out at street corners and the women went to work. It was only the women in the trains. I said to my husband: "Why don't you go to work?". I give his lunch and his money for transport to go to work. At the end of the week I asked what did you do? He didn't want to tell. Because they were also forming groups, the men themselves, I think it was gangsters. He stopped working and got himself involved in drugs. I was the breadwinner for twelve years. This caused a power imbalance. So he started abusing me. Yet I stayed in this relationship for thirty five years...

He was physically abusing me, but not so that anybody could see. And it was also mentally. If he wanted money I had to give it and when I didn't have there was confrontation. But never in front of the children. First it was the verbal abuse but when I started to speak out it was also physical. Then I would refuse to have sex with him and he would rape me.

“I think I am also a victim”

I always liked to have my daily newspaper. I like to be on top of things. That's how I found myself reading this weekend Argus. There were three stories in it about women that were abused. That's how I found out that it's not normal. I read the stories, I got the contact number and on Monday morning I went straight to NICRO. I said to them, I think I am also a victim. I was a wreck at the time and I felt like a zombie. I gave them my story. Then they advised me to come to the safe house. But I felt safe at home; I did not feel that I had to get out of the house. I thought to myself that's a lot of things to give up; it's almost my life I'm giving up. I did not want that.

Then my husband started to come to my work place and wanted to push me off the train, he also tried to push me down the mountain when we went for a walk. But every time I was just one step ahead of what he wanted to do. He did throw boiling tea on me, once. I went to bed and I had all the blisters on me. The following night I was so sick, they had to rush me to the hospital. That was because of the burns. I was there for seven days. They wanted me to make a case against him, but I always thought I could handle it myself. The doctors said they fought for my life; there was all these needles and stuff in me. The nurses said that he came looking for me in the hospital to finish me off. Then one day they needed my bed for another patient and asked me if I had a safe place to go to. I said yes. Then, while they were trying to get me out by the backdoor my husband was at the front door, looking for me. I went to my auntie because she has a big dog. I had to make a decision to lose my family or to get on with my life. That is when I started fighting back. He wanted to eliminate me, I don't know why. Maybe because I'm a strong person. With coloured people, you must listen to the man, the women is nothing.

When I got better I left my auntie and went back home because my husband said he was going to keep the house if I wasn't coming back. Then I just subdued because I did not want all this fighting. Then, it was around that time, there was this ad in the Southern Mail for a training on how to start your own business. That is how I ended up at the New World Foundation and it has been the stepping-stone of my life. My whole life changed. I did other courses as well and learned more skills. Slowly my strength returned.

I started working at the factory from 13 years of age. When I stopped working I was about 42 years old. I stopped because, all of a sudden, the walls were coming down on me. I couldn't do it anymore. I stopped working at the factory when I came to assist these meetings in Lavender Hill, organized by the South African National Civic Organisation. They even made me Secretary of the Chair. That was about the same time that I came to the New World Foundation. It was difficult with my husband but I would just slip away.

My husband died fifteen years ago. I never divorced him. I just pacified him. I used to be a 24/7 girl here at New World Foundation. The course turned into something else, I never got out. First it was training, then we started a school of performing arts, and then we became 'Women in Action'... We even got involved with a new women's movement. It was helpful to occupy my

mind and not to feel sorry for myself. I empowered other women by doing this thing for us in Lavender Hill. I learned so many skills at this three-month course at New World Foundation, like office administration, entrepreneurialism and computer skills. I still use it. I never started my own business though, because I'm so involved with the people. I want people who are destitute to grow.

*"I had tools to use, that I learned in the domestic violence workshops"*

Since fifteen years I am now on my own and fighting for myself. First I had to overcome my fear. Then I got angry and my anger made me strong and so I could get out of the abusive situation. I could do that because of the empowerment of my training and being involved in the community and having access to information. That kept me going. I didn't give in to my husband, I had tools to use that I learned in the domestic violence workshops. Say for instance, if he comes in now and he gets abusive. I would use to give back checks. But now I won't entertain what he's doing. He used to come here to New World Foundation, he knew what I was doing. At first he would say I am not allowed to go to the New World Foundation. He came in here one day, when I was at New World, and he says he is hungry. I'm not allowed to leave the home, I must cook for him. So I quickly went into the kitchen of New World Foundation and I got everyone who knew about my situation into the kitchen and we organised him a meal. Then we took him to the social workers, they told him he must calm down. I was just sitting there quietly, listening. He was telling lies and I was just sitting quiet. I don't know what was going through his mind. Maybe he observed the environment. Then he said, you have the police behind you, that's why you can do these things. But something changed and then I was allowed to come to the New World Foundation every day. At that time the children had left the house, it was just the two of us. I was so afraid. I know what can happen even if other people are around. Killing was my main concern.

Then I find out he is sick, I never knew, because he was a very tidy person. But one afternoon I came from the work at New World Foundation and for the first time he was lying on the bed. I must go to the toilet, he says, and there I get the shock of my life. It was like all his guts were laying in the toilet. I said, why did you never tell me? We rushed him to the day hospital at False Bay. They kept him for a week. I already knew that he wasn't going to come back. I just wanted to stay five minutes with him, when the children left the hospital. Then I told him, you know what, don't worry about me, don't worry about the children. But when I go home now, you pray to God and ask him to relieve you from his pain and just open up. He said, when I come home now, the two of us will have a new life. But I knew the new life won't be with me, it will be with his Creator. The next morning they phoned me to tell me he passed away.

So I didn't even think about divorce. I was always thinking, the next day will be different, change will come. I'm so free now, and I'm glad to be alone. If I must think now of having another person that is going to make decisions for me... I don't know if it's God's will for me to have another partner, but at the moment, I'm doing fine. And I never thought sixteen years would fly by so quickly.

Next year I want to open up my own organisation MASAKHAN'I. I want to do tourism and performing arts. We will work with youth and the performing arts. I am also concerned about ex-offenders, so we will be working with correctional services. We've got a school, this principal is so excited about what we are going to do! We wanted a venue, here I am talking with the principal. We were talking for two and a half hours and then he said the whole school is yours. I didn't ask for anything! I just knocked their boots off. But I don't want nothing for me, I want empowerment for the people, they are lacking. They feel used. I always say don't use the people, empower them. The mentality of the people has to change.

### *"Telling our stories gets us respect"*

That is also why I am part of the Community Police Forum. I don't twist a thing; I just say it as it is. One day they were giving the stats about violence and they said the police commander is pulling out his hair, he can't do anything about the notorious gangsters. He would like the community to also come out and work with the police. Then I said, I feel the same like you. I also want to tear out my hair and break my clothes. But you know what, everybody whose doing this, it's one of their families, if it's not their mother it's their sister, and they know exactly. They know who it is who is in the gangs. Silence. Nobody said anything. One of these pastors came and said to me you don't mince words. I said I came here to clean the forum. I'm spitting it out, and if you don't want it you don't take it.

If you don't speak out you won't stand up. I have found a lot of power in telling my story. Telling our stories gets us respect as women. I feel strong now. I don't have anything but yet I have everything. People say to me I must write a book I say yes, I must write a book. My books name will be "Life can be beautiful".

If you are educated, you can help yourself. Education is the most important thing in anybody's life. It's not about learning the ABC, but about who you are. If I sit with people I can have a conversation, because I'm informed. If you are not informed, you can't perform. If you don't know anything, people will push you around, because you don't know your rights. If a gangster says to me "give this to me", I ask him "who are you?". And if he can't say why he is doing that to me he must just move on, because he has got no right to ask me.

If we don't give to this generation, what is going to happen to the youth of now? It used to be just a button or a dagga smoker. But the things they do now, look at the teenage pregnancy! Because of indoctrination colored people have a funny mindset. To get out of that, we need leadership. But it's very difficult to get good leaders. Once they think they are up there, they misrepresent. Most of the times, they want it all for themselves.

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**Norma Oliver** attends the Community Police Forum meetings once a month, representing the Religious Leaders Forum (a platform of people and organisations from different religions working together for the benefit of the Lavender Hill community). In 2012, Norma wants to open her own non-profit organisation, called MASAKHAN'I ("Let's build together"), that will run holiday programmes at primary schools in Lavender Hill. Her dream is to get her house in District Six back.