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When women hold hands, change follows

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As the country commemorates Women’s Month, civil society organisations like the 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 (GBV) and domestic abuse.

Based in Mthatha, UWSC creates a safe space for women and provides holistic healing interventions targeting physical, spiritual, psychological and financial wellness.

Established in 1999 as a centre for abused women, UWSC’s mission has been community development where women placed in shelters are empowered with skills that can generate them an income.

The centre has since progressed to include the provision of social worker services and offers free therapy counselling that supports the victim’s mental health.

At the helm of the organisation is Koliwe Nongauza, who is the Programme Director and a leading figure and pillar of strength for women in and around Mthatha, including the villages of King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality and Baziya, Mpheko, Tabase, Ntshabeni, Msana and Bumbane.

Born into a nuclear family of nine children in Willowvale Village of Mbhashe, Nongauza aspired to be a teacher. She went on to study BCom Accounting and Personnel Management before starting her career at Standard Bank of South Africa until her resignation in 2015 at managerial level.

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In 2010, she eventually followed her calling - taking on studies towards becoming a social worker and after graduating joined UWSC.

Nongauza's core belief is 'Knowledge is Power', that communities can only advance their own development when mindful and through programmes.

One of UWSC's leading Victims Empowerment Programme (VEP) focuses on mental health. The programme, called Masiphunge, offers therapeutic support group sessions where groups of rural women gather in safe spaces to talk about issues that affect them and collectively find solutions.

The programme took full effect in 2020, when the National Development Agency (NDA) granted UWSC funds to the value of R300 000 as part of government's response to high incidents of gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) during the COVID-19 lockdown.

UWSC and 64 other emerging and established community organisations received funds totalling R16 400 000 for the provision of prevention and direct GBVF services across the Eastern Cape from the Criminal Assets Recovery Account (CARA).

Forty rural women, who are independent small business owners, have continued to meet and support each other after the sessions and are whistle blowers of GBVF and other social ills in their communities.

About 65 cases of abuse have been brought to the attention of social workers from these groups.

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

She said working in close partnership with government departments is key to the organisation's programmes for follow through of victim cases and attainment of justice, but also for the sustainability of programmes.

The sector requires servants with passion and empathy, she said, 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," Nongauza said.

Her wish is to get assistance to build a structure for social worker offices and a skills development centre to capacitate young and older women towards job opportunities.

"This way UWSC can create additional employment for the social workers that are currently volunteering at UWSC," Nongauza said.

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Apart from being a beacon of light for rural women, a mother of three children and grandmother of two, Nongauza also mentors and coaches aspiring GBVF organisations and serves as a member of O.R Tambo Ikwelo.

Her message to women is that there is power in unity and “when women hold hands change follows”.

“Let us take a firm stand against social ills, the protection of our children and continue to be sources of strength, role models and prayer warriors for ourselves, our households and our country,” Nongauza said.

Mthatha is one of 30 GBVF hot spot areas identified by the South African Police Services. - [SAnews.gov.za](https://www.sanews.gov.za)

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General Contact Details

General Enquiries newsfiles@gcis.gov.za Tel: 012 473 0213	Editor Roze Moodley roze@gcis.gov.za	News Editor Janine Arcangeli janine@gcis.gov.za
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