

INTERVIEW BY HARRIET LOWE, COMMUNICATIONS & RESEARCH OFFICER



**FUNDI NDABA,
JAMILLA
MADINGWANE
AND
SIPHOKAZI
NOMBANDE**

**FORUM
FOR THE
EMPOWERMENT
OF WOMEN**

Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) was established by black lesbian activists, Donna Smith and Zanele Muholi in the Gauteng area in 2002. It engages in advocacy, education and capacity building to secure the rights of vulnerable communities, who face sometimes life-threatening violence alongside significant discrimination.

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How did FEW start and what are its main goals?

In the early 2000s, it was very hard to be gay in South Africa. It still is. But back then lesbians were being killed every month. There was a need for an organisation that focused on issues facing Black lesbians, especially in townships. We needed an organisation to take up our issues.

In the early days, FEW would meet twice a month in a safe space where women could come and talk about their problems. At that time, there were organisations that focused on LGBTI groups and gay issues were getting a lot of attention, but the voices of Black lesbians were not being heard. FEW filled that gap.

A lot of what we do is advocacy to support the women we work with. An important part of our advocacy work is community dialogue – we sensitise communities about sexual orientation and gender identity. In a lot of communities we live in, it is taboo to be queer. We talk about issues that are uncomfortable – we have to as we come from those communities and to shy away from those conversations would be detrimental. The topics range from coming out, to understanding sexual

orientation and gender identity (SOGI), and our experiences as lesbian women.

We also have a hate crimes programme, in which we help women to understand the criminal justice system in South Africa. There are a lot of cases of hate crime in our communities – women need to understand how to report a case, how to be vigilant in court and to understand sentencing in this context. We have also been doing sensitisation work with government institutions and the South African police service.

We do as much solidarity work as we can. Collectively, we manage to achieve much more with minimal budget and have a bigger impact.

How has life been since March 2020 and how did your work change to respond to the coronavirus pandemic?

Black lesbian women were made particularly vulnerable by the COVID-19 lockdowns. Many work in the informal sector and restrictions meant they were unable to work. Others lost their jobs. You can imagine, based on your sexuality, you might be the last one in and first one out. FEW distributed food packages to households in need, and later vouchers.

Lockdowns posed challenges. It was difficult to travel between provinces and within provinces. People were scared to travel as well and staff also got infected with COVID at points. Many women we work with don't have the smartphones, so it was hard to keep in touch with them, even if we gave out data.

Most of all, there have been a lot of cases of murders during the pandemic, not just of lesbians, but of LGBTI people, including gay men, which is not as common a phenomenon.

This has been a vulnerable time for all of us. People had to return to their homes because of COVID and to fend for themselves. For example, people had to leave Jo'burg and go back to the Eastern Cape where they don't have safe spaces or queer spaces. We were vulnerable and people took advantage of that vulnerability.

I think this time has shown us that the war is not over. We need to re-strategise so we can engage differently with government and wider society.

Another challenge has been that we do a lot of case monitoring of hate crimes where we support the families of people who have been murdered or raped. We would normally go to court with the families, but court restrictions meant that we couldn't show up for families who had lost loved ones.

How are things now? What will FEW be doing in 2022?

We would say we have been working normally – we haven't lost sight of our goals!

We have been looking at our plans for 2022. We are already responding to cases from provinces outside Gauteng and we want to develop our work across all nine provinces. We are looking at how we mobilise on health issues and how we make sure we are included in the health system. We also have an opportunity to engage with the education system around awareness and inclusion. We will also continue to engage around the criminal justice system.

There is also a real need for better collection of data and monitoring of hate crime cases. The government says they don't have enough information, but we know these crimes are happening.

When you look at the community of women you support what are you most concerned about at the moment?

One of the main issues is health. Discrimination around sexual and reproductive health is a big problem. Lesbians presenting in clinics asking about STIs for example will get a lot of discriminatory questions.

The other issue we are concerned about is intimate partner violence. When we see gender-based violence in the mainstream media, there is nothing about the violence that goes on in the intimate relationships of queer people. We want to have more focus on this in 2022.

And in turn, what gives you the most hope?

We are also hopeful about our ambitions to work on a more national level, and we are very hopeful about progress we have made so far raising awareness of SOGI with criminal justice stakeholders.

We are also excited about the opportunity to engage more on a Southern African platform. As Black lesbians in South Africa we are in a better situation than some of the other countries in the SADC region. We want to say to them that we have faced the same challenges and this is what we did.

What would you like FEW to have achieved in five years' time?

We want to see a lesbian who is socially and economically engaged. A lesbian who can engage fully in society without fear. But to achieve that, we need to address these challenges.

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