

RAISING WOMEN'S VOICES IN SOUTH AFRICAN SHELTERS #2





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Our deepest appreciation to the 26 women former shelter residents and nine staff members who agreed to be interviewed for this research project.

The women and the shelters are not named in order to protect identities.

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INTRODUCTION



“Raising Women’s Voices in South African Shelters #2” is the second in a series of three publications on former shelter residents in nongovernmental shelter affiliates of the National Shelter Movement of South Africa.

The 2019 publication in this series focused on a sample of shelters in Gauteng, Free State and Northern Cape, while the 2021 focus will be on a sample of shelters in Kwa Zulu Natal, Western Cape and Limpopo.

The current publication focuses on nine shelters in three provinces – Mpumalanga, Eastern Cape and North West Provinces – and shares the experiences of twenty-six former residents of these shelters.

We try to honour their voices and the experiences they have entrusted us with. As writers we see our role as curating their voices, so that they may, as far as possible, speak directly to you the reader, so that you may get an understanding of their lives and connect with them as real live human beings, and not statistics.

Between June and August 2020, the women spoke to three interviewers. They spoke of their lives growing up, the relationships and events that led

to their taking shelter, and of their lives after shelter. With the exception of two interviews all interviews were conducted telephonically because Covid 19 lockdown measures restricted mobility and face to face contact. Ten of the interviews were conducted in isiZulu, eight in English, five in isiXhosa, two in Setswana and one in siSwati.

Fourteen of the women interviewed were former residents of five shelters in Mpumalanga, nine women interviewed were former residents of three shelters in the Eastern Cape Province and three women interviewed were former residents of one shelter in the Northwest Province.

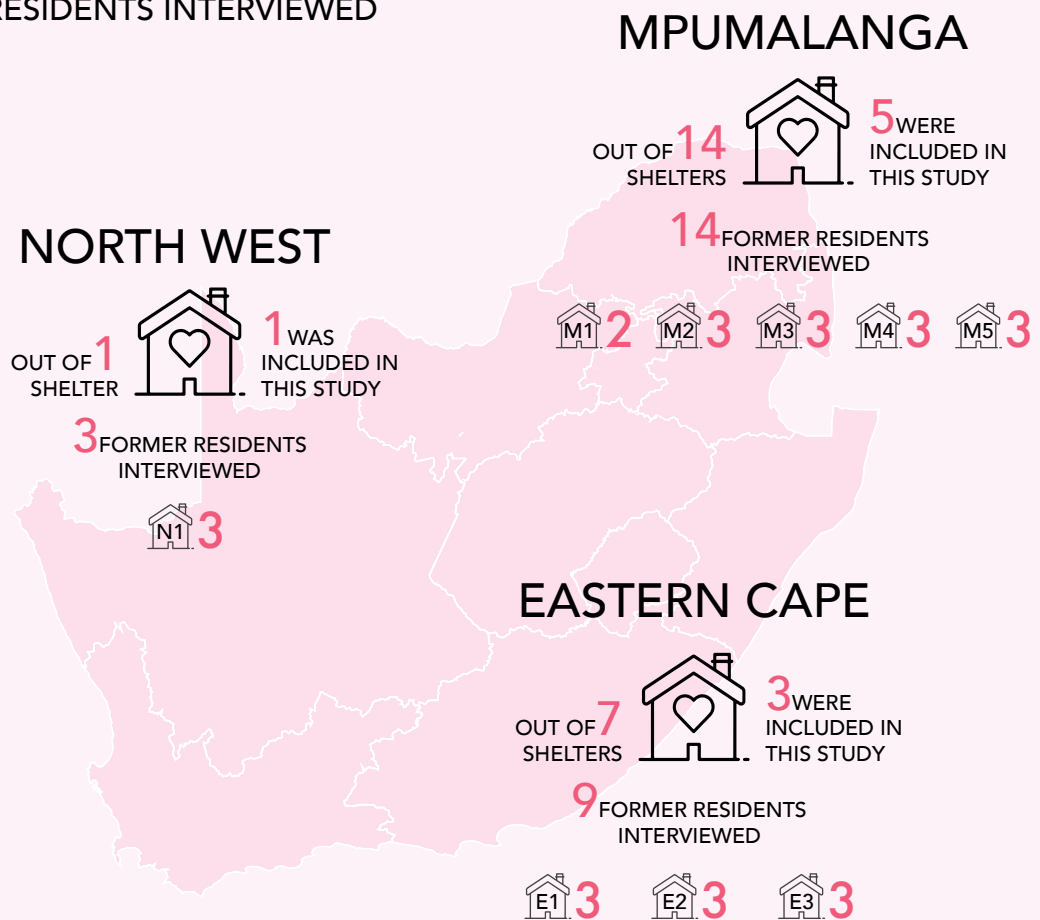
Nine staff members, one from each of the shelters also spoke to the interviewers. They shared the contributions made by the shelters and the challenges they experience in managing shelters and providing care to shelter residents.

Main Findings

The majority of the women were in precarious financial situations

The majority of the twenty-six women interviewed were under 40 years old; 50% had completed matric and of these four had tertiary qualifications. Most women did not have secure employment, or secure sources of income at the time of taking

NUMBER OF SHELTERS AND NUMBER OF FORMER RESIDENTS INTERVIEWED



shelter and the fact that they did not have to pay for services made taking shelter possible.

The majority, (18 or 69%) were unemployed and of these twelve received state child support grants (also referred to as SASSA grants) and one received a state disability grant. Two of those who were unemployed did not have identity documents and both faced difficulties with getting jobs as a result, and the one with a child could not apply for a child support grant child or place her child in a school. Six women were in employment and two women were studying.

The majority needed shelter as a result of intimate partner violence or family violence

Intimate partner violence was the reason the majority of the twenty-six women interviewed needed shelter. This was so for 18 (or 69%) of the women. The second most common reason was conflict with and violence by a family member. This was so for 6 (or 23%) of the women. Two of the twenty-six women needed shelter and healing as a result of being raped.

The women had nowhere else to turn for help in a moment of extreme crisis when their lives were in danger or when

they needed healing from a traumatic experience. With no other support they fled to the police, a social worker or were taken to hospitals with severe injuries or trauma.

The violence done to women by the men they once loved and who were themselves once loving was horrific. It was as if these women had been in a war. The more extreme injuries included an ear cut off, damaged kidneys, a broken shoulder, an injured spine, and a disabled hand. This is in addition to the deep emotional scars left by years of physical and emotional abuse.

For those who experienced conflict with family members such as aunts and fathers, who are expected to take care of them, there was a feeling of abandonment, being alone and uncared for.

In the case of the women who were raped there was the need to heal and to be restored after a trauma. For all of the women the shelters provided a space for reflection, care and healing.

The women interviewed took shelter from between one month (three women) and eleven months (one woman), with the majority (19 or 73%) residing in the shelter from between two to seven months. Women were interviewed between one month and seven years of leaving the shelter

Shelters provided a space of respite, peace and healing and enabled women to rebuild their lives

The shelters provided a safe space respite from situations of abuse, time to reflect heal, recover and prepare for a new life. The women's experiences in the shelter were healing and empowering and they felt ready to start their lives again. One

woman described the shelter as a "turning point".

Counselling helped healing and built self-confidence. Shelter staff provided support in dealing with police and court processes.

Activities included Bible study, prayer groups and attending church services, gardening, developing CVs, craft work, and computer literacy. One shelter had a personal development programme. Most shelters offered skills development. One woman continued her high school studies, another completed a security guard training.

Since their basic needs were covered, women were able to save money from state grants and in one case from a job and these savings helped them to make a new start.

Relationships with shelter staff were affirming, as were relationships among shelter residents. Women used words such as "love" and "respect" when talking about their relationships in the shelter. Women shared household chores of cooking and cleaning. They made friends, talked with and encouraged each other. Conflicts were resolved through talking through the issues. Coming out of unsafe and abusive situations, the experience of living in a situation with supportive and caring relationships and where conflict could be resolved peacefully was important for healing and for the women to shape new lives.

The shelter provided care and support to the children who accompanied their mothers

Fourteen women came to the shelter with their children – among the youngest were four babies ranging from newborn to six months. The oldest was an 18-year-old

daughter. Most women (8 of the 14) had one child with them at the shelter. One woman had five children with her.

Ten of the fourteen women shared that their time in the shelter was very positive for their children. Their children “received love and care” and “felt at home.” Three children, who were old enough, received counselling from the shelter, while 1 child was referred to another service for counselling.

Two of the fourteen women said that their children did not have an easy time at the shelter. One shared that once her children got used to shelter rules, things got better; the other woman and her five children were made to feel that they were a burden by the care worker who admitted them into the shelter on their arrival and this unhappy experience coloured their entire stay.

Shelter staff value their contributions even as they face financial challenges

The nine shelter staff interviewed, 1 from each shelter, were proud of the work of the shelters and saw their work as important in providing space for women in need and in some cases as literally saving lives. They saw the women as brave survivors, and admired them for taking steps to rebuild their lives.

Among the challenges they faced were some clients having difficulties following shelter rules, security (especially when women divulged the shelter address to outsiders), the need for skilled training linked to jobs so that women could be financially independent, and the major challenge of subsidies not paid by government to shelters on time.

Sheltering helped women build emotional resources but financial resources are a challenge

Most of the women who experienced intimate partner violence (15 out of 18) did not return to the abusive relationships that they had taken shelter from. Four of the six women who had experienced conflict and violence from a family member moved onto new living situations.

The two women who took shelter after being raped by strangers spoke of their time in shelter as empowering and healing. However, while one of these two is doing well, the second faces ongoing challenges in her life and needs ongoing support.

From an economic or financial point of view all twenty-six women were struggling to survive at the time of the interviews. Twenty of the twenty-six women did not have secure employment. Fourteen of these women received state child support and/or disability grants. Two women were studying to complete their high school education. One received a state student grant from NFSAS and did piece jobs.

The six women with secure employment worked as a cook, as a mentor at an Arts NGO, as a junior receptionist, a domestic worker, in a job with the expanded public works programme, and one woman worked at the shelter where she had been a resident.

For most women (23 of the 26), employment and money was their major worry, and the lack of financial stability a huge obstacle in creating safe and comfortable lives. The women shared their dreams – these included jobs, better paying jobs, their own houses, and safety and security for themselves and their families.

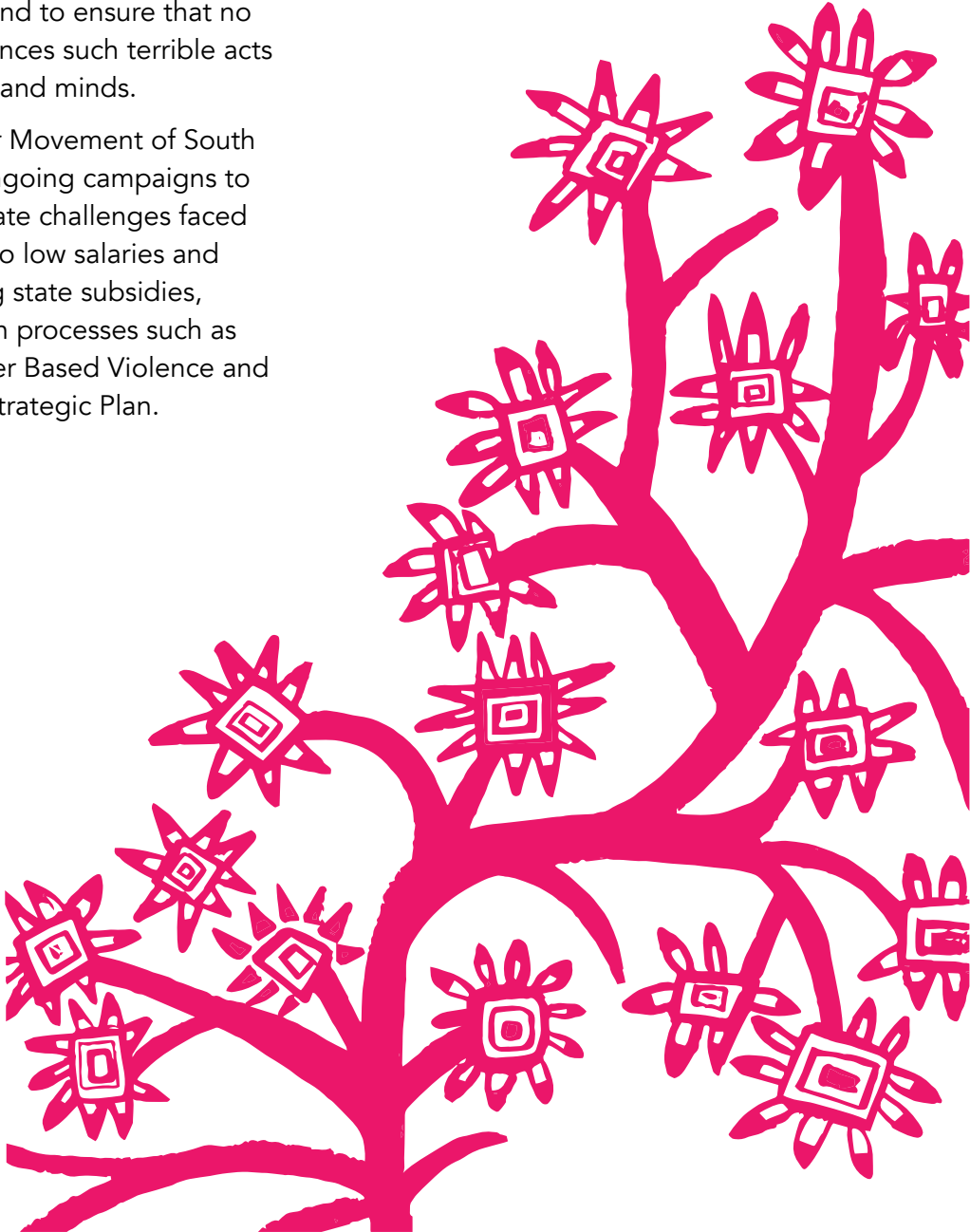
During interviews eight of the twenty-six

women were in emotional distress and the interviewer arranged for these women to receive follow up counselling.

Shelters need resources and work needs to be done to end violence against women

The experiences of the twenty-six women point to unacceptable levels of violence, levels which are akin to torture or wars. There is need to address the causes of such violence against women in order to end such violence, and to ensure that no woman ever experiences such terrible acts against their bodies and minds.

The National Shelter Movement of South Africa undertakes ongoing campaigns to address the immediate challenges faced by shelters relating to low salaries and delays with receiving state subsidies, even as it engages in processes such as South Africa’s Gender Based Violence and Femicide National Strategic Plan.



CHAPTER ONE

THREE WOMEN SPEAK



Three women speak of the events that led to their taking shelter. They speak of their experiences at the shelters which strengthened them emotionally and provided much needed psycho-social support, and they speak of their lives on leaving the shelter.



(interviewed 8 months after leaving shelter; 5 month stay)



EC5

I lived with my grandmother during my teenage years. Still in my teenage years I lost my parents. I have a son. I am 29 years old. I am also raising my sister's child and my younger brother.

I did my grade 12 and then I went to a college to study Performing Arts. At the moment, I am working for an NGO mentoring early adolescents. My son gets a SASSA disability grant because he is autistic.

I think it was the beginning of June – I am not sure of the date – but it was the first or second week of June 2019. I was raped. I am an active person, so I had gone for a jog in the stadium and that is where I got attacked. I ended up at the shelter because things got to be a bit too much for me to handle. When I was at the Thuthuzela Care Centre, on the third day after the incident, the sister helping me saw how I was doing and said that I was actually becoming worse than the last time she saw me. She suggested that I go to the shelter. She called the social worker and that is how I got referred to stay there.

When I got to the shelter I was an emotional wreck. I don't think I knew what was happening and I don't even remember what day it was. I had gone through a traumatic experience. I felt like I was going to collapse, it was like a moment of blackness and I was weak in the knees.

The House Mother was welcoming. She offered me food, although I didn't want anything – but she insisted that I eat. Everyone was nice, even my roommates. I just wanted to be left alone in the room and not see anyone. I was shown my room and roommates and I locked myself up, but they came to me and they introduced themselves. Like, they left the TV and came to start a conversation with me, and they were laughing. I thought to myself this

was cool. I remember one of them asking me to put down the book I was reading so that we can all chat.

I think the reality of women being abused and going through a lot got to me. I realised that there are people going through things similar to me. I got support from the people at the shelter. The clients who were there when I arrived and the House Mother supported me. They helped a lot. They didn't know what I had gone through because none of them had experienced what I had gone through, but the support was amazing. When I first arrived, one of the House Mothers – who was very strict – would wake me up. She had her own painful experience which made me realise that I am not the only person who has had a traumatic experience. If she was able to come take care of us, then why should I lock myself up in the room and be emotional? The clients also shared their experiences with me, and this was apart from the group sessions we shared. We would sit and talk. Those are the things that made me realise that my experience might be painful, but each of us had our own painful and probably very traumatic experience, but it's never the reason for one to give up and stay in a state where you are depressed.

I got along with everyone. As time went on I got to be myself. I am a person that likes to make people happy wherever I am, so I think about a month after being at the shelter I got to be my old self again. There were days I felt like I couldn't, but I started getting back to myself.

My child was not with me. I had sent him to his grandmother because I couldn't handle him. Being around children can be draining when you are stressed, as they demand your attention and have a lot of questions. They will want to play with you and do everything that they are used to doing with you, and you are not in the right space to do those things. So, the shelter can be a good environment where you can get time to focus on yourself and your healing.

I made friends. I am still in contact with a lot of the ladies I met. We treated the shelter as our own home and we had a roster for cleaning, doing the laundry and who takes out the rubbish. I liked cooking, so I did more cooking – and they loved me for that, and being the youngest in the house I would sometimes be asked to do things. Sometimes when they felt that I've been doing most things, the older ones would be asked to do things.

We had challenges. I mean it's a group of women put together with everyone used to their own space – so, there would be challenges. There would be arguments, but we would sit each other down. If I had an argument with one person I would go to their room and talk to them. Even when there were others that did not get along, I would talk to them to get them to try and sort out their differences. This is because the negativity

would affect all of us, because when we are watching TV we sit in one lounge and when we are sleeping maybe the people that you are not getting along with are the ones you share the room with, so then who will you speak to? Things get awkward.

I received counselling and I also got a lot of help with the police with how they were handling my case, and although it hasn't been solved yet, the help I got at the shelter was amazing. Even with having to go to the police station. For example, the first time I went to the police – I went on my own. I got back and reported to the shelter about the treatment I got. So, they decided that at my next appointment I would be accompanied, so that I didn't get ambushed and come back being in the state that I was in last time. So, they would accompany me to my appointments with the police, they would even ask questions and take notes of everything. They fully supported me.

We did group counselling. We did a short course from another organisation that works with the shelter, a short course on personal development. We did a Skills Development course for about six weeks, which equipped us for the business world. At least we didn't get to sit around and do nothing.

During my time at the shelter I would spend my days reading, working out, writing and getting involved in activities. This was until the end of November, when I had to go work for the NGO that I am working for now.

My family, my aunts and cousins – they all supported me. My family has fought a lot and we spent years not speaking, but the amount of support I received shocked me. A few days after the incident my cousin and her mother flew in from Pretoria to support me and, to me, that was a big thing. They spent the weekend with me. It was very shocking but amazing. I also remember in my first week at the shelter, on the weekend my aunt came again, together with my other aunt. They asked if they could take me out to spend the day as a family. All that support, calls every day and checking up on me – it was amazing. Even though my cousins and I always fight, they were able to do all these things to support me. It gave me strength. Even when the police were being difficult they offered me support. I have a strong support system, and I still have relationships with some of the other shelter residents.

I was lucky that I got the job around the same time that my time to exit the shelter was coming up. I needed to exit to go for training (for my new job). I was excited about the new job and excited to be working with kids; doing what I love. But, I got sad on my exit day. The other clients did not want me to leave, also the House Mother on duty was emotional. Everyone started crying. I had not realized that I had created that much of a bond with them.

I felt ready to leave, but I wasn't sure how I would react back in the same place that made me go to the shelter in the first place. Though, I think you will never really know how you are going to react once you get out. I just told myself that if I am emotionally ready then I should be fine.

I went back to my older sister for a couple of weeks. I went to training for two weeks. Then I went home and after I came back in January, and found my own place to rent.

Because I was getting training at work, and we had free food and everything I didn't struggle financially. My cousin helped me out with toiletries and snacks. I managed until I started getting paid in January.

One day, when I was in a taxi from an event for ex-clients at the shelter, halfway through the drive I looked at the driver and saw that it was the same person that had raped me. I messaged the investigator of my case to tell her and she told me to write down the registration plate of the taxi and I did. However, to this day they haven't caught the guy. She just tells me that they have not forgotten and that was it.

Presently, everything feels awesome because things are normal again. I am doing great at work. I have been asked to write a manual for creative arts and that manual is going to be used in schools. For me, it's a huge thing that kids at schools are going to be taught with a manual that was written by me.

I am planning on starting my own program to assist children with autism and special needs, because there are no public schools that cater for children with special needs in small towns. Parents have to move to East London, Port Elizabeth or Grahamstown to access such schools. So, I have been gathering information on how I can have teachers in public schools trained. Also, children with autism are not even diagnosed. Parents and teachers will say he is being silly because they do not know or understand that he or she has autism. So, I want such situations to come to an end.

At the moment, I am trying to offer support to other women who have been through the same thing that I have been through. The reality is that the rate of rape in our country is alarming, but people don't get to report their cases and it is not taken as a serious offence. I have had talks with two of my niece's friends who have been raped by the same person, and he stays in the same area, but walks around freely as if nothing had happened. The reason that he is free is because his father is well known and has a lot of money. One of the kids said the question she was asked at the police station was: "Why would he rape you, what is it that you have that would make him do that?"

So, I am trying to offer support to other women. The reality is the justice system is failing us. But, don't remain depressed – I am not saying don't fight for your case to get resolved, but if it is not happening, then find ways to uplift yourself and move on with your life. I would like to thank the shelter for everything and their support. Everything felt like family. I think that place is like my second family.

(Interviewed 2 years 6 months after leaving shelter; 4 month stay)



NW 1

I am 53 years old, am divorced. I have three sons, they are 34 years, 23, and 25 years old. I was 50 years old when I entered the shelter. I studied up to Grade 11. I am unemployed and don't have any source of income at the moment. I got a temporary disability grant for 6 months and then it stopped. I have high blood pressure and diabetes.

I was married for 27 years. I was the child who obeyed the law from the bible that says obey your parents. My mother wouldn't hear of it when I told her I wanted a divorce. She ended up getting in and out of the hospital because she was so traumatized. So, I said to myself: "Let me stay in this loveless marriage for her sake." But, the abuse was really unbearable, I couldn't take it. I lived under the cycle of abuse. Today he's (abusive) like this, tomorrow he's regretting, later he is physically abusing me. That's why I ended up with a broken shoulder. My husband left the house in 2015 after he broke my shoulder. He left the house to stay with another woman. Later he came and threatened to shoot me. On the day he wanted to shoot me I got a call from the hospital informing me that my brother passed away. My brother's death saved my life on that day.

I moved out of the house because my life was in danger. I went to stay with my aunt in Joburg. Towards month end, January 2017, I got a summons for divorce. So, I went back to attend the divorce case. I asked my sister's kids if I could stay with them for a while, until I sorted out the divorce. So, I stayed with those kids but they are very young. The oldest was born in '95, the other one in '97. I had a lot of stress. I went to receive counselling to help me. The first three sessions were very hectic. I broke down because I was feeling too much pain. And then I don't know what happened, and what drove those kids to chase me out of my sister's house. I didn't ask because I had too much to digest. On the 6th of June they told me to move out of their mother's house. I sent a 'please call me' to the social worker. So that is when they took me to stay in the shelter.

When I reached the shelter I met people with similar problems. We were the victims of gender based violence and, in certain cases, human trafficking. My kids were allowed to visit me (three boys – one is 34 years old, the second one is 25 and the third one is 23). I was 50 years old when I entered the shelter. First of all, I knew nothing about the shelter. When they told me I was going to a shelter, I pictured myself sleeping in a corner of a big hall. I was so shocked when I reached there. It's a very neat house, a good place. Three houses, for small babies, for teenagers and for adults. The welcome was very warm. When I entered I was crying since the morning with no idea where I will sleep. The lady who was working there welcomed me with open arms. She asked me, "Do you have toiletries?" That's the first thing she offered me, and she took my bags and showed me where I was going to sleep. To my surprise, I had my own bedroom. There was a blanket and everything. It was a Wednesday, and every Wednesday we used to have a small prayer and then some sessions to empower us.

Every morning you would get a different breakfast, lunch (which was the same) and in the evening you would get a different supper. At the shelter they ask you to do a little work, like crafts and beading and sewing. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we had people from Love Life empowering us to stand up for ourselves, to be independent people. They would bring survivors of gender based violence to talk to us, so when you have a problem you can learn how to get out of it. And they used to bring pastors so that we could empower ourselves when we leave the shelter. When I went to collect my medication, there was a driver who took me to the clinic – to and fro.

We lived like family because even if you were not feeling well, you'd tell them I'm not feeling well because of this and this. We never quarrelled. Everybody went there with a different problem. The staff cooked for us and cleaned for us. We only helped on weekends because the lady there worked 5 days, so, Saturdays and Sundays were our own problem. On Sundays we attended the church. You forgot that you have a problem when you were there. When you remember something bad that you went through, and you talk to another one and you end up discussing and you see that: "eish, now, my problems are much better than this one's problems." Even if some of them were shy to talk about their past, they eventually opened up and felt free. Sometimes, most of us went there in tears, so, we wait for you to cool down and then it will be up to the client whether she wants to talk or not. If I'm in a fight with another client, they sit us down and hear both sides of the story. They would talk to us, saying that we must understand that while we are both here, you are one person – so you must try and control your temper.

You felt like you are at home, but different from where you come from because that shelter is very warm, it's full of love. Mrs R is a lovely person. I love that woman very much. She's a very warm- hearted person. She herself was a victim of gender based violence and she survived. Now, look how she turned out. She is running a shelter.

The 1st of October is when I left the shelter, after staying there four months. I wanted to learn to stand up for myself and to see if I can. I left on a good note, on a clean slate. After I left the shelter I was staying with a lady who worked for one of the shelter staff. I stayed with her, but it was not her house. One day I went to the clinic to collect my chronic medication and I met a granny who heard me talking about my situation. She asked me to come and stay with her. She was feeling alone as her children are no longer staying with her. I'm now staying with this granny. The SASSA grant I am receiving is a temporary disability grant, which they give you for six months and then after that it stops. Right now, I'm not getting any money from anywhere.

Compared to 27 years of hell, now – I'm happy. I don't have stress anymore, like (in the past) when the sun sets or when weekends come thinking I'll be running up and down in the street, thinking that I'll be running away from my husband. I'm okay. Some of the things that I'm experiencing like lack of money, food, its normal and it can happen to anyone, but life is 100% perfect. My main concerns are food and a lack of money. I would like to get a good, understanding husband who doesn't drink alcohol, who doesn't talk too much, one I can sit down and communicate whatever the problem is, so that we can sort it out.

I've learnt that we as women must never depend on men to support us. You see, I'm suffering like I'm telling you, but I don't go roaming the streets looking for money or for food to eat. Me and the granny eat soft porridge; nobody can notice that we didn't eat. But, what can I do? Sometimes when the granny gives me money, or sometimes when I ask her to give me money, I go to the shelter to visit aunty R and see how everything's going. The last time I went she had built a house for small babies that had been abandoned at the hospital or on the street.

(Interviewed 1 month after leaving shelter; 3 children at shelter; 6 month stay)



MP12

I am 35 years old, in a customary marriage and have three daughters. I struggle to make ends meet with my salary from domestic work. I get SASSA grants for the three kids. I have kidney problems that resulted from the beating by my husband that landed me in hospital in January 2020.

I went to the shelter early this year (2020), around January, because I was abused severely by my husband. I was abused for a long time, not knowing what to do. Until that day when my husband came home early in the morning, at around 4 am, after he had been away for a long time, and beat me up so badly that I ended up in hospital. He had tendencies of just going and coming as he wanted. His violent behaviour had become a norm, the children and I were used to him suddenly coming home from nowhere and beating us up. But that day, it was different. I was taken to hospital, not able to walk or talk. I stayed in hospital for many days because the doctors said my kidneys were damaged. I still attend hospital to be checked for my kidneys.

Before I ended up in hospital, the abuse was going on for a long time. I had reported to the police, but the police kept dismissing me whenever I went to report that he was beating me up. This happened until I decided to keep quiet and endure the abuse. I ended up confused, not knowing what else to do. My mother is a sickly person and I used to report to her that my marriage was not working out and she became too stressed because of that. As a result, I would go to my aunt, instead of my mother, when I needed to talk. I had support from my mum's sister and my siblings. They tried their best but they could not find a solution for what was happening in my home. We were together for 16 years and our first born is now 12 years old. It was love. He was loving towards me. He was a very good person at first, and life was good for some years in our relationship, and through the years I gave birth to our children. He started his abusive ways after I gave birth to my last born, 6 years ago. He is very violent and I am very scared of him now.

While I was in hospital, my brother arranged help for me and my children at the shelter. I was told that I will be referred to a shelter upon my discharge from the hospital. I learnt about a shelter for the first time on that day. I wondered what kind of a home will accommodate me and my 3 children. I wondered how we would be fed and looked after. This was because I had once gone to family members for safety and they soon got tired of us because we were many, and it becomes difficult to feed us and keep us for long.

So, when I was discharged, although the social worker informed me that they are waiting for me at the shelter, I did not go to the shelter. I went home to find out how my children were coping. I had left them the day I was hospitalised. I stayed home for days and the social worker, realising that I was not willing to go to the shelter, arranged to collect us. When we got to the shelter we were introduced to the care worker, and she welcomed us very well and made us feel at home. Life was good at the shelter. After realising that they are indeed caring people, I even shared with them the reasons why I was afraid of going to the shelter. I informed the staff at the shelter that I was very confused.

I stayed in the shelter for almost six months. I went to work (as a domestic worker) on week days, and on Saturdays. There was one other woman at the shelter, and after work and on Sundays we sewed together. We learnt how to make masks, which we sold. We got along very well, and we never argued. Sewing brought us together and we chatted while sewing. My children received care and love from the shelter staff and they felt peace, after a long time without peace in their lives. They also participated in making masks. They enjoyed it because money made from that was spent on goodies of our choice. So, they enjoyed it because they bought pizza with their money.

There were no challenges when I was in the shelter. It was actually a very good and peaceful environment. I received counselling, I attended sessions with a psychologist and I also learnt sewing skills. There were days I used to attend the sessions with a psychologist because I had a problem of thinking too much. I was stressed over my life, my property that I left behind. I had worked very hard to buy my household items and I worried what would happen to my things while I was in the shelter. They treated us very well. However, my heart was somewhere else. I always thought of my belongings. I wanted to leave the shelter, to stand on my own, to return home to rebuild my life again. I was well empowered and I am thankful to the shelter, and what the staff did for me and my children. Being in the shelter gave me a good opportunity to save money and prepare for a time when I will go out and start life on my own. I bought myself a new fridge when I was discharged, because the court ordered me not to take anything out of our house.

The challenge I experienced is that the father of my kids informed the court that he cannot move out of our house because he is not working. His aim was to force me to stay in the house with him, since he is aware that the house is mine. I informed the court that I will go and rent a place, and leave him there. I went to rent a room with my 3 children, because I cannot stay with him under one roof again. I am on my own and he stays in our house. I am not considering going back to him ever again, although he wants us to go back

to him. He is always asking me to come back. My kids are happy where we are, they do not want to go back to their father ever again. I am no longer afraid of my husband. I have courage to speak for myself and I know there is help out there. I can say that I have peace because of the counselling I received. I want to live happily from now on.

I am struggling financially, but I am trying. I wish to get a good job so that I can support myself and my children. My kidneys are not yet alright. I still attend hospital for check-ups. A home is my major worry as I foresee that he will fight me over my home. I have been to the municipality but they said the stand numbers changed and I did not have a title deed for that place. That is likely to create problems for me, but if he insists on taking my house I will let him do that because he uses a lot of muti and I am scared he might kill me.

I am happy for what the shelter did for me and my children. It gave me life again. My mind was confused, I was thinking of killing my kids, then myself. I had thought of that because I love my children too much and I could not bear the thought of leaving them to suffer. But the shelter made me come back to life. I came back alive from the shelter.

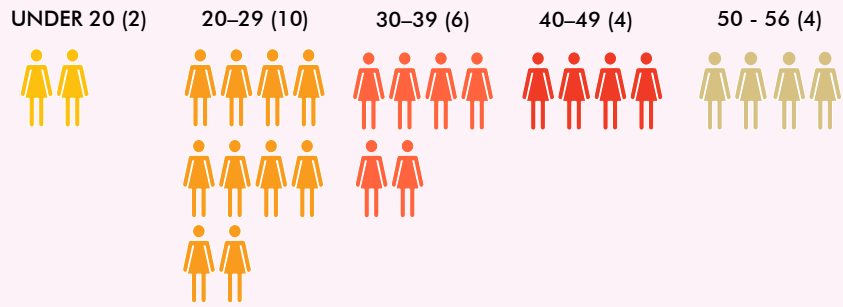


CHAPTER TWO

INTRODUCING THE 26 WOMEN

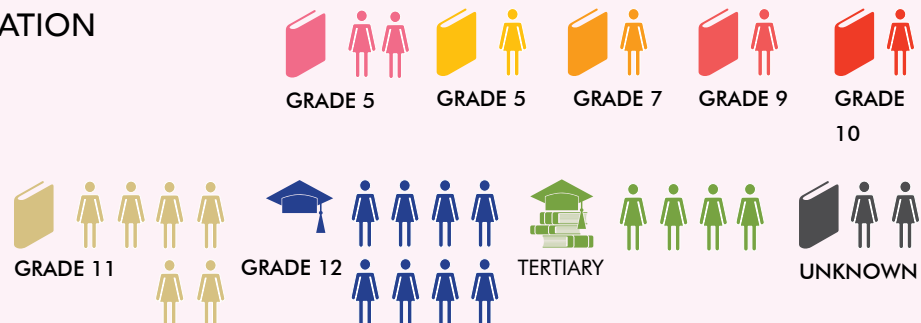


AGE ON ENTERING SHELTER



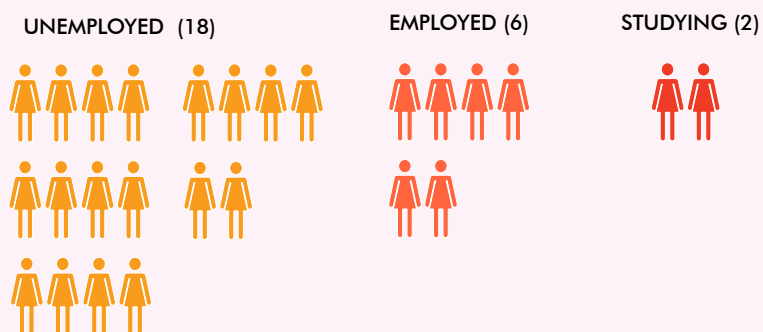
At the time of entering the shelters the majority (18 or 69%) were under 40 years old; two women were under 20 years old (one of these 17, the other 19 years old) and 4 were over 50 years old.

FORMAL EDUCATION



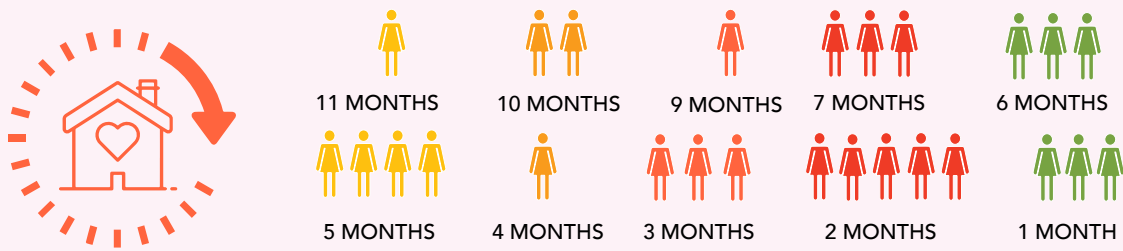
Twelve women (50%) had matriculated with 4 of the twelve completing tertiary education (Teacher, LLB graduate, Performing Arts qualification, Honours in Communication Science); 12 women (50%) did not complete high school

EMPLOYMENT



Most women did not have secure employment, or secure sources of income at the time of taking shelter and the fact that they did not have to pay for services made taking shelter possible. The majority, (18 or 69%) were unemployed, 6 women were in employment and 2 were studying. Twelve of the 18 who were unemployed received state child support grants (also referred to as SASSA grants) and 1 received a disability grant. Two women did not have identity documents, both faced difficulties with getting jobs as a result, and the one with a child could not apply for a child support grant child or place her child in a school.

LENGTH OF STAY AT SHELTER IN MONTHS



The women interviewed took shelter from between 1 month (3 women) and 11 months (1 woman), with the majority (19 or 73%) residing in the shelter from between 2 to 7 months.

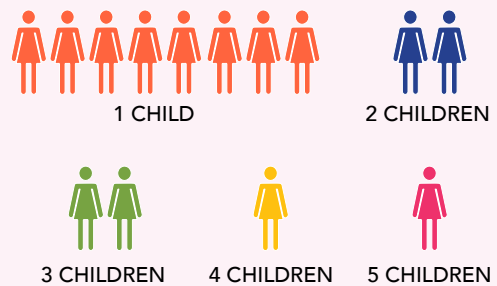
REASON FOR TAKING SHELTER



Intimate partner violence was the reason why the majority of the 26 women interviewed needed shelter. This was so for 18 (or 69%) of the women. The second most common reason for needing shelter was conflict with and violence by a family member. This was so for 6 (or 23%) of the women. Two of the 26 women needed shelter and healing as result of being raped.

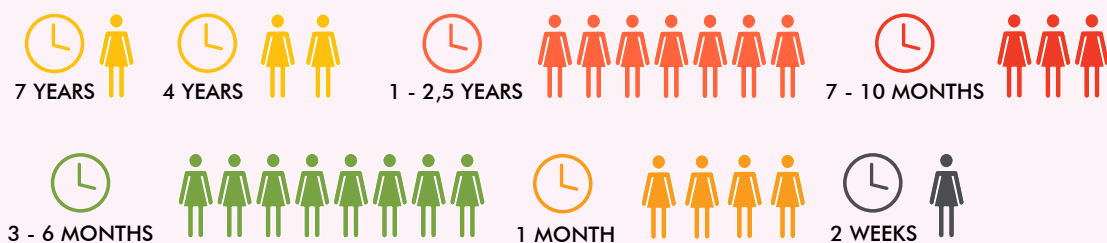
CHILDREN

Most of the women (22 or 84%) had children, with 14 (or 63%) of these women taking a child or children with them when they went into the shelter. Most of these women had one child with them at the shelter. Among the youngest were a new born, a month old, a 6-week-old, and a 6-month-old. The oldest an 18-year-old daughter.



LENGTH OF BETWEEN LEAVING SHELTER AND BEING INTERVIEWED

Women were interviewed between 1 month and 7 years of leaving the shelter



In their own words

These introductions are taken from the interviews.
The ages given are at the time of interview.

Women who took shelter because of intimate partner violence

EC3 (Interviewed 1 year after leaving shelter; daughter with her at shelter; 9 month stay)

I am a stay at home mom. I am 43 years old. I'm divorced. I have 2 kids. I only have grade 12. I worked for one company for about ten years – working on and off with them. I've also been a truck driver, and I've done building of aluminium furniture. Now, I am unemployed but I am receiving a SASSA grant for my daughter. Growing up I had a wonderful mother – she was not just my mother, she was also my best friend. My mom and dad got divorced, but they stayed good friends. My mother got custody of us, but my dad always contributed and made a plan to see us on a regular basis. My parents passed away about 15 years ago. I don't have contact with my family. There are six siblings older than me. I have been unemployed for four years. Whenever I get a piece job, I will do it.

EC4 (Interviewed 2 years after leaving shelter; 3 children with her at shelter; 6 month stay)

I am 35 years old. I've got 4 children, I'm divorced, and unemployed. I get a SASSA grant for 3 of my children. Because granny receives the grant for my oldest child, I don't get it. I am earning NSFAS (The National Student Financial Aid Scheme,

a South African government student financial aid scheme which provides financial aid to poor undergraduate students) but sometimes they pay and then they do not, so I have to put up a fight for this. I'm doing my level 4 which is equivalent to Matric. I started level 4 when I was still in the safe house (shelter). I sell Avon, Justine and Tupperware as a way to get money. But, because of Covid-19, business has been quiet now. I grew up in Bloemfontein, I stayed with my mother. Then when I was 16, I went to stay with my father. My mom was poor. She lost her job because she had back operations. My mom always put her boyfriend before her own children. Me and him would get into fights, and so I phoned my father and he came to fetch me and I went to stay with him. My stepmother also didn't like us very much. Me and my stepmother did not get along very well. My dad used to drink a lot and my stepmother would blame us for that.

EC8 (Interviewed 4 years after leaving shelter; 9 month stay)

I am married. I am 27. I have two kids. My mother is still alive and working and my father passed away in 2012. My husband is also working, and I have a sister and a brother. My level of education is grade 12 and then I went to a computer class through the shelter. Hopefully I'll be doing my learners or license soon. The past year I was working, but at present I am not employed.

EC9 (Interviewed 6 months after leaving shelter; 5 month stay)

I am 57 years old. I've been divorced over 20 years. I met this man, a friend from my past, and moved to be with him. But, clearly, it did not go as well as I thought it would. Currently I am working here (at the shelter). I am a teacher – a qualified teacher. I studied a hard for four years to earn my degree. So, if possible, and God willing, when I am done here, I want to go back to teaching. I grew up on a farm, between cattle and cornfields and milking cows, and all that. I matriculated in a small countryside town. I qualified as a teacher then I started to teach in a small town. I got married and I had two beautiful children. My son is 30 years old, and my daughter 32. They are also qualified. They are working and I'm already a grandmother. I have two little granddaughters. I love needlework, knitting, crochet, and I also do love gardening.

NW1 (Interviewed 2 years 6 months after leaving shelter; 4 month stay)

I am 53 years old and am divorced. I have three sons, they are old – 34, 23, and 25 years old. I was 50 years old when I entered the shelter. I studied up until Grade 11. I am unemployed and don't have any source of income at the moment. I got a temporary disability grant for 6 months and then it stopped. I have high blood pressure and diabetes.

NW2 (Interviewed 6 months after leaving shelter; 2 month stay)

I am 29 years old. I am single, I don't have any children. I completed grade 11 and I am unemployed. My mother and sister are there for me.

NW3 (Interviewed 1 month after leaving shelter; 6-week old baby with her at shelter; 5 month stay)

I am 20 years old, single, and have a 6-month-old baby. I completed matric. I am unemployed, I get a grant for my baby. My family are supportive.

MP3 (Interviewed 2 years 4 months after leaving shelter; 2 month stay)

I am 37 years old. I am single and don't have any children. I went up to standard 3. I am working at an Expanded Public Work Program (EPWP). The past year, life was just up and down. Life is a struggle but I have been surviving. In terms of relationships, it has been a struggle.

MP4 (Interviewed 1 year 11 months after leaving shelter; 1 month stay)

I am 22 years old. I have never been married. I have 1 child. I completed matric and trained as a security officer. The training was sponsored by the shelter and I have a certificate. Before (the Covid-19) lockdown I was working as a security guard but that contract ended because of lockdown. I am unemployed and do not have any financial support at the moment. So, I am struggling financially. I sometimes work in farms harvesting sugar beans. I go up and down looking for piece jobs. My daughter lives with her grandmother, and she receives the grant on her behalf.

MP5 (Interviewed 1 year 6 months after leaving shelter; 4 children with her at shelter; 2 month stay)

I am 38 years old. I am married according to customary law. I have four children. I completed matric and I am doing a computer course. I am undergoing

treatment, for the hand injury I suffered during the domestic violence incident which led me and my children to be admitted to a shelter. My right hand is disabled completely. In the past year I have been settling in at our new house which we have been building for the past years. I have been a fulltime mother staying at home, looking after my children, ensuring they go to school and come back to cooked meals. There is too much work at home, and no one pays me for the hard work I do at home. I am looking for a job. I depend on my husband for financial support, and I supplement this with SASSA child support grants I get for three children – the eldest has outgrown the grant.

MP7 (Interviewed 7 months after leaving shelter; 18-year-old daughter with her at shelter; 6 month stay)

I am 52 years old. I am divorced. I have 3 children. I completed Grade 12 and I have a certificate in computers. I survive on my disability grant that I get because I have Arthritis. I get a child support grant from SASSA for my last born. In 2019, I had a piece job as a cleaner at an old age home. My contract ended and I stayed home again.

MP8 (interviewed 1 month after leaving shelter; son with her at shelter; 2 month stay)

I am 44 years old. I have 3 children, 2 boys and a girl. I am single. I completed standard 5. I am unemployed and things are very bad financially. I'm trying to build a home. I have a stand (site). I am struggling. My 2 sons are living with me, yet we survive on my disability grant and my younger son's grant. My older son is 23 years old and unemployed. I was registered to receive a disability grant

for just a year, and my grant is due to expire in July 2020. I rely on my 2 sons for emotional support. I was diagnosed with cervical cancer and I did radiation in 2016. I later developed cancer of the spine and I am undergoing treatment for this. I used to do domestic work but my condition does not allow me to do that kind of heavy work anymore. I am very weak now.

MP9 (interviewed 5 months after leaving shelter; 6-month-old baby with her at shelter; 3 month stay)

I am 29 years old, single and mother of a boy of 11 months and a girl of 13 years. I completed Grade 12. I'm struggling since I am unemployed. I do people's hair and manicures. I live with my parents in their home. I once worked shutdown (as a casual worker) at Sasol, but that was temporary. I get a child support grant for one child. I haven't registered the little one. I get support from my mum and my sister who lives with us at home. My mum is my pillar. I am taking treatment for HIV. My boyfriend abused me to an extent that he cut off my ear and I have no left ear as we speak.

MP10 (Interviewed 4 months after leaving shelter; 5 children with her at shelter; 1 month stay)

I am 44 years old. I have 5 siblings – we are 3 boys and 3 girls. I am in a customary marriage. I have 5 children, 3 girls and twin boys who are also last borns. I have my grade 11. I am unemployed and survive on child support grants for 4 children and my disability grant. I am not well at all. I can't walk anymore, I have arthritis and a damaged spine. My husband beat me one day and my spine was damaged. I can say that I am useless in this state of health now. I can hardly lift my legs. Emotionally, I am drained. I am struggling with a lot of

things. Financially, it is too bad. I'm not well emotionally. I have a friend I rely on. I have a family, but mostly I talk to my friend.

MP11 (Interviewed 5 months after leaving shelter; 2 children, her new born baby and 6-year-old were with her at shelter; 1 month stay)

I am 23 years old, living with a boyfriend. I have 2 children - 6 years and 7 months old. My mother got sick in 2006, and my uncle came and took us to stay with him in 2007. My mum passed away in 2008. My uncle passed away in 2018 and we remained with his wife. She was very abusive but we were patient with her since me and my little sister did not have anywhere to go. I did not go far with school, I dropped out in grade 4. I am struggling financially, since I do not have an identity document. My mum did not have an identity document. I cannot work, and I cannot apply for a SASSA grant. My older child cannot be enrolled at school, as she does not have a birth certificate. There is a woman, Mrs M, who is like a mother to me. My little sister, who is 16 years old, stays with her boyfriend. Our aunt is not helpful at all. We have no one. I am HIV positive.

MP12 (Interviewed 1 month after leaving shelter; 3 children with her at shelter; 6 month stay)

I'm 20 years old. I used to stay with my granny and my aunt. I have a brother and a half-sister. [Over the past year] I was working and I was also a client here at the shelter.

MP13 (Interviewed 1 month after leaving shelter; her daughter was with her at shelter; 2 month stay)

I am 26 years old, single and have 1 daughter. I completed grade 10. I am unemployed. I have been looking for work, but there are no jobs. I get a SASSA grant for my daughter. I am okay financially as my brothers help me out. I have a friend who I feel free to share my problems with. She is understanding and helpful. I am HIV positive.

MP14 (Interviewed 3 months after leaving shelter; daughter with her at shelter; 2 month stay)

I am 32 years, single and I have one daughter. I completed grade 11. I live with my uncles at my grandmother's home. My granny supports us all in the household with her grant. She is very old but I trust her a lot. I am unemployed and get a SASSA child support grant. In 2019, I was at home except for a few times when I worked with my boyfriend at his construction jobs.

Women who took shelter because of family conflict and violence

EC2 (Interviewed 4 years after leaving shelter; 7 month stay)

I am 57 years old. I am unemployed. I studied with UNISA for a BA. I did my honours in Communication Science. I have 2 sisters and I do not have contact with them.

EC6 (Interviewed 10 months after leaving shelter; 2 children with her at shelter; 3 month stay)

I am 24 years old. At home we are 4 siblings. I am not married. I have 2 children, a boy and a girl. I am receiving child support grants. I am unemployed.

EC7 (Interviewed two weeks after leaving shelter; 9 month stay)

I am a mother of 2 daughters and 2 boys. I had 2 marriages that didn't work out well, but I am still moving forward. I am 46 years old. I am working as a junior receptionist. My dad was always hitting me, and I had to go to school with purple and blue legs and so my grandmother took me and I stayed there for some time. I even failed my standard 4, because I couldn't handle it.

MP1 (Interviewed 1 year 7 months after leaving shelter; 1-month-old baby with her at shelter; 3 month stay)

I am 35 years old. I am single, unemployed and I have a 2-year-old child. I completed grade 11. I rely on a government child support grant and maintenance from the father of my child. I stay home full time since I do not have anyone assisting me to look after my child while I seek work.

MP2 (interviewed 7 years after leaving shelter; 5 month stay)

I am 24 years old. I am in a relationship. However, we haven't done a white wedding or civil marriage. I have 3 children. I have been up to primary school level. I am unemployed and receive a government child support grant. I have a family whom I consider my happiness. My husband and my children are my source of support. I do piece jobs from different companies so that I assist my husband financially, but most of the time I am at

home, since jobs are hard to find. I have been minding my home making sure that it is beautiful and peaceful.

MP6 (Interviewed 6 months after leaving shelter; 7 month stay)

I am 25 years old. I completed grade 9. I grew up with my mother, aunt, uncle and grandmother. My mother passed away in 2009 when I was 14 years old, and my life has been a struggle from as far as I remember. I am unemployed and struggling due to lack of ID and lack of education. My mother did not have an ID herself and if I ask my aunt about my mother, her response is that my mother was a prostitute. That hurts me a lot. But I do not know much about my mother and her lifestyle, so I cannot say much. I am not married and do not have children. I have no emotional or financial support from anyone in my family, not even my grandmother or aunt care.

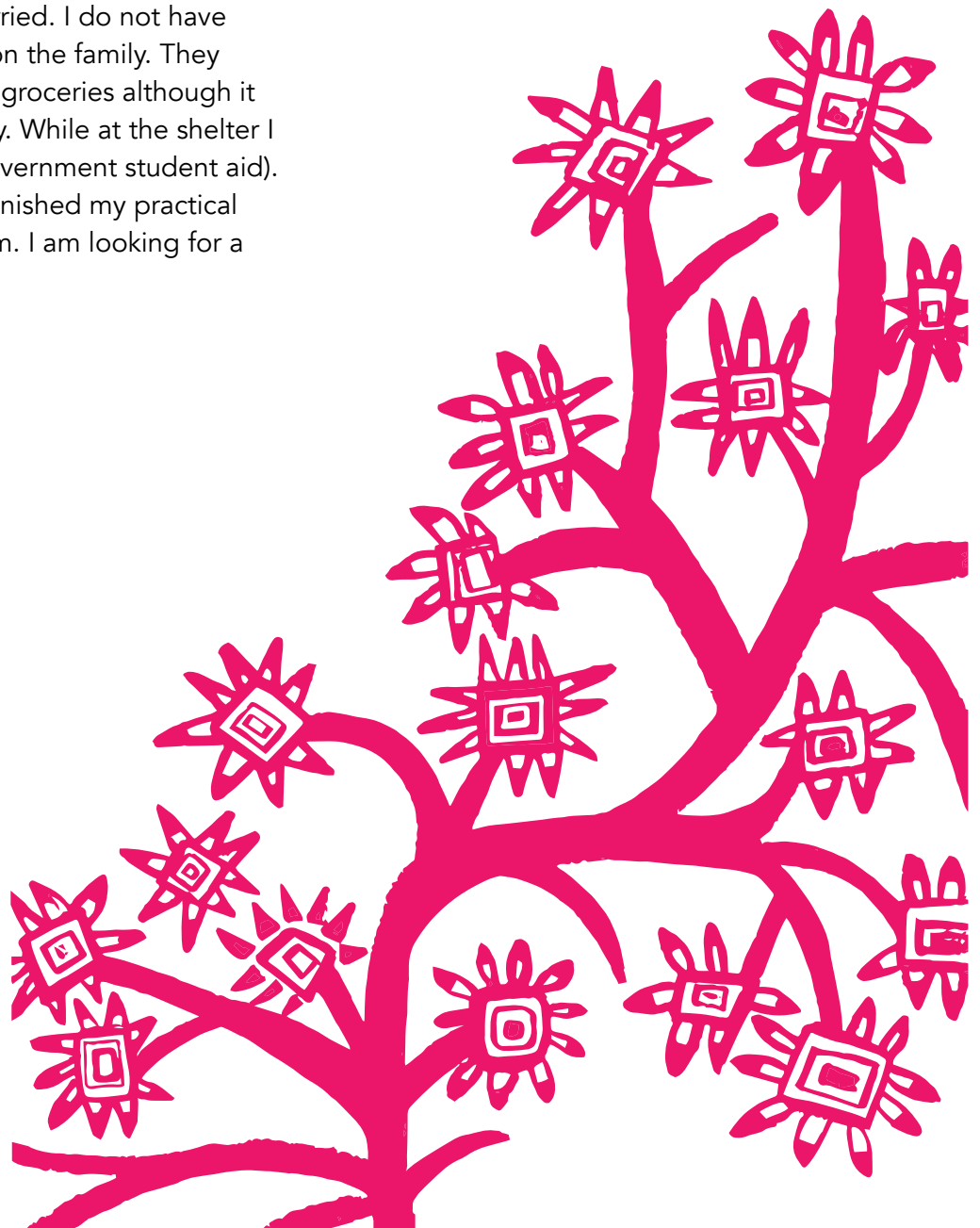
Women who took shelter because of rape

EC1 (Interviewed 3 months after leaving shelter; 10 month stay)

I am 25 years old. I grew up in a rural area, in Eastern Cape. I moved to East London after I passed grade 12 to study at the University of Fort Hare. I graduated in 2018 with my LLB degree. I grew up with my brothers. My parents brought us up and everything was normal and we were happy. I am not married. I do not have children. I depend on the family. They send me money for groceries although it is not a lot of money. While at the shelter I received NSFAS (government student aid). In February 2020 I finished my practical training at a Law firm. I am looking for a job.

EC5 (interviewed 8 months after leaving shelter; 5 month stay)

I am 29 years old. I lost my parents and went to live with my grandmother during my teenage years. I did my grade 12 and then I went to a college to study Performing Arts. I have a son. He receives a disability grant because he is autistic. I am also raising my sister's child and my younger brother. I am not married. I work for an NGO. I have a strong support system. My family, my aunts and cousins, all support me emotionally.



CHAPTER THREE

WHY WE TOOK SHELTER



Intimate partner violence was the reason the majority, that is 18 (or 69%) of the 26 women interviewed took shelter. Conflict with a family member coupled with lack of accommodation was the reason that 6 of the women took shelter. Rape was the reason that 2 women took shelter.

For many of the women, and particularly for those whose partners were violent, there was nowhere else to turn for help in a moment of extreme crisis when their lives were in danger. Alone and with no other support they fled to the police, a social worker or they found themselves in hospitals with severe injuries. The injuries they sustained at the hands of the men they once loved and who were, themselves, once loving included an ear cut off, kidney damage, a broken shoulder, an injured back, and a disabled hand. It was as if these women had been in a war.

For those who experienced conflict with family members such as aunts and fathers, who are expected to take care of them, there was a feeling of abandonment, being alone and uncared for.

In the case of the women who were raped there was the need to heal and to be restored after a trauma. For all of the women the shelters provided a space for reflection, care and healing.

Ten of the twenty-six women were referred to a shelter by a social worker, seven by police, three by a hospital, two from other shelters, one knew of the shelter from other women in the community, one found the shelter through an internet search, one through a friend and one through her daughter's teacher.

Women who experienced intimate partner violence

Of the nine women interviewed in Eastern Cape, four took shelter because of intimate partner violence (IPV), all three of the women in North West took shelter because of IPV, and of the fourteen women interviewed in Mpumalanga, eleven took shelter because of intimate partner violence.

One of these women, a 43-year-old with two children, who had been in a shelter on two occasions, was not willing to talk about her reasons for taking shelter. However, she spoke of her husband, who she is now divorced from, as being an alcoholic and said that they had fought. He is now dry for a year and she rents a room from him. She was willing to tell the researcher: "The relationship between me and the perpetrator is much better as we are not arguing. He's an alcoholic but he has been dry now for a year. So yes, that has been really good, we've gotten along much better" (EC3). She stayed 9 months in the shelter the second time and was interviewed a year after leaving the shelter.

All of the women who shared the early years of their relationships said that there were happy times.

"The early days of the relationship was the honeymoon phase, where he spoke to me nicely and everything was nice." (EC8)

"We had some beautiful times together at first. He would buy me ice cream or we'd go watch a movie. You know, he had this charm and he could make you feel so good." (EC9)

"There were nice times. He spoilt me, he took me out on picnics at the park." (NW2)

"The early days were nice and exciting. He used to do everything for me, everything that I wanted." (NW3).

"He seemed like a very good person when I met him in the 90s." (MP7)

"There were good times during the first months. He was loving and caring." MP9.

"Life was good for most of our 17 years together." (MP10)

"It was love. He was loving towards me. He was a very good person at first, and life was good, and through the years I gave birth to our children." (MP12)

"He loved me a lot, at first." (MP14)

Most of the women were not sure why things went bad in their relationships. For some, drugs and alcohol seem to explain the changes they experienced with their partners. Two women shared that the abuse started after they got pregnant or had their first child.

"Things started to go wrong when I started fighting him about the drugs, then, we would argue a lot." (EC8)

"I don't know what changed. I found out while we were dating that he was taking drugs and he was an alcoholic. As time went by, he started abusing me. Hitting me for no good reason, shouting, swearing at me" (NW3).

"Soon, after we moved in together, I realised my husband was not a good person. He would tell me that a man is never asked questions, a woman is not supposed to hold money and he cheated a lot. We continued together and in 2002, he started beating me. He attempted many times to harm me and he would tell me via SMS that I should be careful." (MP7)

"Things changed while I was pregnant. I cannot explain what made him change. He would beat me violently, use fists, kick me even when I am down. One day, he ended up taking out a knife and sliced my ear out." (MP9)

"My husband changed from being a loving husband to a monster. He beat me one day and my spine was damaged. I can say that I am useless in this state of health now." (MP10)

"He started his abusive ways after I gave birth to my last born, 6 years ago. He is very violent and I am very scared of him now. I have kidney problems that resulted from the beating by my husband, that landed me in hospital in January 2020." (MP12)

The extent of the abuse was akin to torture for many of the women. Some withstood the violence many years before they sought help.

A 53-year-old (50 years old when in the shelter) was married 27 years. She stayed in a loveless marriage for her mother's sake until the "abuse was really unbearable. In 2015, he broke her shoulder and left the house. He later came back and threatened to shoot her. She says she got a call that her brother passed away while he was about to shoot, and that this call saved her life. (NW1)

A 37-year-old (35 in shelter): "He was drinking beer. He choked me, demanded that I agree or confirm that I am cheating with different men. Fearing that he would kill me, I felt like my breath was going out. He was even saying that he intends to kill me. He also forced himself on me and had sex with me without my consent". This led to her seeking shelter. (MP3)

A 22-year-old (19 in shelter): "He said I was cheating. He was drinking beer. He hit me with a bottle." He broke the bottle, stabbed her, dragged her into a bush and raped her all night. Before dawn, he locked her in his room. She was taken to hospital, lost a lot of blood and upon discharge was taken to the shelter. (MP4)

A 38-year-old (36 in shelter): has a disabled hand as result of violence from her

husband and his lover. She was taken to hospital, and from hospital to a shelter with her children. (MP5)

A 29-year-old (29 in shelter): After a long time of enduring the abuse, I decided to ask for help. I wanted to find out if there were places where women suffering like me can get assistance." (MP9)

A 23-year-old (twice in shelter aged 22 and 23): "He began abusing me a lot when I was pregnant (in 2019), to an extent that I became a regular at the police station reporting him for violence. He would go to other girlfriends and leave me for days without food or money. I began begging from neighbours. On the day of delivering my baby, he was not there. He had gone to see another girlfriend. I ended up delivering the baby on my own with the help of neighbours. Soon after, (when the baby was a month old) he beat me up very badly". She ran out of the house, her 6-year old child ran out with her, the baby was left in the house. Later that evening, he did not allow her to enter the house. She slept at a neighbour's house. The police were a distance away, and so she had to wait until the next morning to make the trip to the police station. The police went with her to get the baby and took her to shelter. (MP11)

A 26-year-old (26 at shelter) was in the relationship for five years. Not long after they started living together, he learnt he was HIV positive. He came back home from the clinic and beat her up, blaming her for his HIV status. "The years that followed, I continued to live under his torture. He threatened me with death if I attempted to do anything against his wishes. The abuse started in 2015, and I finally gathered courage to share what was happening in my life in 2020, with a young woman who lives nearby." She then went to the police and was referred to the shelter. (MP13)

A 20-year-old (20 at shelter) "I went to the shelter this year (2020) in February because I was abused by my boyfriend. I had nowhere to go because I had so many problems with my family. My social workers took me there. I knew nothing about shelters." (NW3)

The women had nowhere else to go in a moment of crisis, when many were in fear of their lives. They went to the police, a social worker or landed up in hospital with injuries and it was the police, social workers or health personnel who referred them to shelters. Many had no idea that there were places such as shelters.

One woman (MP12) was in disbelief that there could be such a place that would take care of her and her three children. The injury caused by her husband had resulted in her hospitalisation. She left the hospital for her home after recovering, even though her brother had arranged with the hospital and social workers that she and her three children would be taken into a shelter. She told the researcher that in the past she had gone to relatives but the relatives had not been happy to have her and her children stay because they were too many mouths to feed. So, when the social workers told her about the shelter, she could not believe that any place could provide for her and her children. It was only when the social worker came to her house and convinced her that they would be taken care of at the shelter that she was willing to accompany the social worker to the shelter.

What follows are some of the experiences the women shared with the interviewers...



MP3

I am 37 years old. I am single and don't have any children. On a certain evening in December 2018, my boyfriend and I were drinking beer at his home. He started attacking me verbally and I went out to the police station to report him. When I got to the police station, police officers turned me away saying that I am drunk, so I should come back when I am sober to report the problem. When I got back home, I found my boyfriend throwing my clothes outside because it was his house. I asked him to stop doing that, and at that time I also told him that I had gone to the police station to report him. Upon hearing that, he started choking me, and demanded that I agree or confirm that I am cheating on him with different men. He forced me to mention names of people. When I refused to do that, he choked me more until I mentioned names that I just thought of, fearing that he would kill me if I did not say what he wanted to hear. He was choking me to an extent that I felt like my breath was going out. He was even saying that he intends to kill me. I would say that I want to pee and he would say I should do that on the bed. While doing all this torture, he also forced himself on me and had sex with me without my consent. This continued until morning, and he woke up and started going house to house hunting for the people that I mentioned that night. I felt afraid and ashamed, and when he got back, he called the neighbours and continued embarrassing me in front of people in the area. At that moment I remembered that I heard about the shelter from women in the community and I went there.



MP4

I am 22 years old. I have never been married. I have one child. In June 2017, it happened that I was staying with my 33-year-old boyfriend at his parent's home, where he lived with his two sisters. On the day of the violent incident we spent the day well, as usual. However, my boyfriend was drinking beer. Later, in the early evening around 7 p.m., he called me to join him in his outside room where we slept. When we got there, he began accusing me of cheating on him and demanded to see my phone. He did not find anything on my phone, but he insisted that I am cheating on him. It was just about to get dark. He began hitting me with a bottle and I screamed, when I screamed his sister and neighbours came and tried stopping him. He pretended to stop and said we should go inside his room again. Once we were inside, he broke a beer bottle and used a broken glass to stab me. He was stabbing me all over my body. He locked the door so that I could not escape. When I tried screaming, he would stab me even more. He then dragged me to a bush. One neighbour saw us and tried to stop him but he over-powered her, and we continued to move to the bushes.

As we were going away, I saw police arriving at his home because his sisters had called them. I could not break away from him at that time because he was more powerful than me. We walked until we got deep into the bushes, he continued stabbing me until I could not move. He then raped me the whole night. Before dawn, he took me back home and locked me in his room again. On our way back, he had a glass that he used to stab me on my back. Whenever I tried to break loose from him, he would stir it deep inside my back. This happened until we got home. In the morning he opened the door and his sisters and neighbours asked where I was. I heard him telling them that he does not know. They asked him where he was going and he told them that he was going to buy Panado because he had a headache. I gathered my strength and I opened the door. I went outside and fell down in the sight of those who were outside there. Everyone was shocked and they called the police. The police came, and they called an ambulance. I was taken to hospital because I had lost a lot of blood. The police could not arrest him that day, because he ran away before they arrived. I was taken to hospital and I stayed at hospital for 2 days. When I was discharged the police and the hospital staff told me that I will be going to a shelter because my boyfriend was not yet arrested. Police and hospital staff decided that I would rather be sheltered because they feared that he would attack me if I went home.



MP5

I am 38 years old. I am married according to customary law. I have four children. I completed matric and I am currently doing a computer course. I am currently undergoing treatment for the hand injury I suffered during the domestic violence incident, which led me and my children to be admitted to a shelter. My right hand is disabled completely. In the past year, I have been busy settling in at our new house which we have been building for the past years. I have been a fulltime mother staying at home, looking after my children. My husband and I used to drink a lot. It happened that he found a new woman at his work place, where he stays while at work. One day, late in 2018, he decided to bring that woman to our house. When they arrived, I was out. When I came home, I found them in my bedroom and I went inside to confront them. My husband held me and pushed me outside of house. When I got outside, I took a brick and broke a window trying to open it. They held my hand until it was cut by glass so badly that my right hand was severely injured in the process. All this was happening in full view of our children. I went to the police station and the police called an ambulance and I was admitted to hospital. Upon discharge, I was referred by police to a shelter and my kids were brought to join me at the shelter.



MP9

I am 29 years old, single and a mother of a boy of 11 months and a girl of 13 years. I completed Grade 12. I'm struggling, since I am unemployed. I do peoples' hair and manicures. I live with my parents in their home. I went to the shelter because I was in a relationship with an abusive man, who is also the father of my 11-month-old baby. This guy abused me to an extent that he cut off my ear and I have no left ear. We met in 2017, and we were together for 3 years. There were good times during the first months. He was loving and caring. He hid his dark side, for sure. Things changed while I was pregnant. I cannot explain what made him change. He would beat me violently, use fists, kick me – even when I am down. One day, he ended up taking out a knife and sliced my ear off. My mum phoned for help and I was taken to a nearest clinic because we knew it was going to be faster to get help from there. When we got there, nurses asked for the piece of the ear and my mum had to rush back to the scene to look for it. Unfortunately, she did not find the piece, since my boyfriend had taken it or had thrown it away. I do not know really what he did with it. So, I was taken to hospital and treated. Now I do hair styles that cover my ear so that I do not get asked about my missing ear. My mum was with me all of the way. His family also supported me so much more than they support him and they said if ever he abuses or tries anything, they will be the ones to call police to get him arrested. After a long time of enduring the abuse, I decided to ask for help. I wanted to find out if there were places where women suffering like me could get assistance. Many people did not know where I could be helped, until I spoke to my cousin. My cousin knew a social worker who visits a creche nearby, and I went to that creche and explained my situation. The social worker asked that I visit social workers in Evander Office. I did not waste time. I went there the following morning and I found social workers from the shelter there. The social worker explained that I can stay at a shelter while trying to figure out how I will overcome the challenges I was facing. She told me about counselling and I became very eager to go to the shelter to get away from the abuse. I went to the shelter, and stayed for 3 months.



MP10

I am 44 years old. I am in a customary marriage. I have 5 children, 3 girls and twin boys who are also last borns. Life was good for most of our 17 years together. My husband did not want our children to lack anything. He provided for his kids, he did not like his family to starve. I still wish life was the same. Things changed when we moved. My husband changed from being a loving husband to a monster. He beat me one day and my spine was damaged. I can say that I am useless in this state of health now. In September 2019, when I realized that things were bad, I returned to our previous home and left him with the children. I was suffocating. The way he drastically changed left me confused. I was very sick, in a lot of pain and his violent abuse was making me worse.

In February 2020, I was forced to move back because he reported to the social workers that I abandoned my children and took the grant money with me. My aim was to look for a place to stay away from him, with my children. They were all in school and I did not want to inconvenience them by changing schools.

I went to our home and things got very bad. My husband locked me in the house and made sure that I never stepped outside. He refused to let me go to my children's schools to get their transfer reports. I was very scared. I relied on my second born for a lot of things during the time I was locked in. One day, I arranged transport to take us away. I arranged that the transport would come when he was away and that they would assist me to get out. But he came just in time and chased away the transport and locked me inside and informed me that I was not going anywhere.

The day when I finally got out, I asked my daughter to ask for help. I was referred to a chief who lived nearby and he phoned the police. I managed to get my children to quickly pack their clothing but I did not take my things. I cannot walk fast enough, I spend my time sitting on a chair, I barely do anything due to my painful back. I left everything there because all I needed was getting out of that house and nothing more. The police arrived and took me and my children out of that house and transported us to a shelter. Before this, I did not know that there were places called 'shelters for women.'



MP11

I am 23 years old. I have 2 children – 6 years and 7 months old. In 2017, I met my boyfriend who is also the father of my 7-month-old baby girl. He was a kind person, he supported me financially and showed promising signs of being a good person. I agreed to move in with him. He was good for the first months, until I fell pregnant in 2019. He began abusing me a lot when I was pregnant to an extent that I became a regular at the police station reporting him for violence. Maybe he got tired of the relationship and used my pregnancy as an excuse. I really do not understand why he suddenly changed towards me. While I was pregnant, he would leave me for days and go to other girlfriends leaving me with my child without food or money. I began begging from neighbours. Others gave me food without even asking because they could see I was struggling. On the day of delivering my baby, he was not there. He had gone to see another girlfriend, far away. I ended up delivering the baby on my own with the help of neighbours. Soon after, (when the baby was a month old) he beat me up very badly. The cause of the fight was that he came home from work and asked me why our neighbour's meat was in the fridge. He did not want our neighbour to put his meat in his fridge. I responded that he should tell the woman not to bring her meat anymore. He took out the meat and threw it out and began beating me. My two kids were in the house and I ran out after noticing that he was getting worse. My first born who is now 6 years old ran out with me and I left our little baby inside. That night, he refused to let me inside. When I realized that he was not going to open up for us, I went to the woman next door and asked for a place to sleep. Because the police station is far and we live in the farms, there was no transport to go there at night. Early in the morning, I asked a neighbour for money, and went to the police station. The police accompanied me to his home and we took the baby. The police said they will not leave me in his home, as he had been reported a number of times. They took me to the shelter. It was my first-time hearing about shelters on that day. I was very sad and angry when I first stepped into the shelter. What had happened at home had left me very angry.



MP13

I am 26 years old, single and have one daughter. I am HIV positive. I was physically and emotionally abused by my boyfriend. I met him in 2015, and we agreed to move in together into his parents' home soon after. The early days were good. We were in love but that did not last a long time at all. He seemed loving but I guess I trusted him too quickly. We were together for 5 years and from the beginning it was a very violent relationship. Not long after we were living together, he went to a local clinic and tested positive for HIV. When he came back home, he said nothing. He just got on me and beat me up so bad that I thought I was going to die. All the time he was beating me, he kept saying that I had brought him death and he is going to die. I survived, and life continued to be extremely hard for me. He informed me that I was not going to go anywhere as I would have to stay and die with him. He blamed me for infecting him with HIV. The years that followed, I continued to live under his torture. My brothers knew what was happening and they would tell me that they have nothing to say or do because I chose to move in with the guy. My father did not know (what I was going through) since he remarried after my mother's death. All along when this abuse was going on, my daughter was with me. She watched the abuse and became very afraid of my boyfriend. My boyfriend would stalk me. I was not feeling safe at all. He wanted to know where I went, and when I left the house. He threatened me with death if I attempted to do anything against his wishes. The abuse started in 2015, and I finally gathered courage to share what was happening in my life in 2020 with a young woman who lives nearby. She informed me that I can go to the police and report the matter as it is violence. I had become so afraid of my boyfriend that I almost did not go to the police but the young woman assisted me to gather enough courage to go to the police station. When I got to the police station, I explained what happened from the time the violence began. The police phoned the shelter and I was taken there that very same day. That is how I escaped the domestic violence I had endured for a very long time. I only knew about the shelter the day I was taken there by police. I had never heard of a shelter before.

Women who experienced family conflict and violence



Of the six women who sought shelter as a result of conflict with family members, one (EC6) had a fall out with her sister. When her sister took out a knife and wanted to stab her, she sought help in fear of her life and was referred to a shelter.

A second woman (EC7) had problems with her father and her stay in the shelter resulted from an incident where her father tried to stab her. She got a protection order against him and spent three months in the shelter.

A third woman (MP1) lived with her aunt who she felt did not love her. After the birth of her baby she felt "hurt and very alone." Her aunt "did not touch the baby even once." When the baby was a month old, they had a quarrel which turned into a fist fight. "My aunt bit me on my chin and pushed me telling me that I should leave her house. I told her that I had nowhere to go and she maintained that I should leave her home and never come back." She went to the social workers who took her to the shelter.

A fourth woman (MP2) went as a child with her mother, to live with her sister and brother in law. Her brother in law, she says, "started sleeping with me. At the time I was 13 years old. I would report to my sister but she did nothing about it and I thought that maybe she was afraid since her husband was our source of living." He was also abusive. She fell pregnant and had his child at 14 years of age. Her sister passed away and one day she caught her brother in law attempting to rape her mother. At age 17, she summoned

the courage to go to the police and was referred to a shelter. She was all alone with no support at all.

A fifth woman (MP6) was raped by her uncle when she was 10 years old, "but my grandmother never wanted the matter to be raised or discussed at all. She made sure that we never spoke about the incident at home ever. As I grew a little bit bigger my aunt organised a guy she was working with to sleep with me and told me that the guy will marry me. I was young and I did not have any power to argue with my aunt. That man slept with me and I suspect that he was giving my aunt some money for sleeping with me." In 2018, she was raped by a stranger on her way back from the shops. She returned home, blood all over her clothes but her aunt did nothing. She wondered if her aunt had arranged the rape. She shared her problems on Facebook and a woman contacted her offering her a job. She went to work for this woman but was ill-treated. "At that stage I felt committing suicide was the only thing as my life was getting harder instead of better." The woman's mother in law, who lived next door, took her to a social worker who referred her to the shelter.

A sixth woman (EC2) was living with her brother and sister in law. When her brother died her sister in law told her to leave as she was selling the house. She had no job and nowhere to go. A friend referred her to the shelter where she was accommodated until she found accommodation.

Women who were raped



One of the two women who entered a shelter after rape (EC1) was a law student at the time of the rape. She rented a flat and as she relates: "some monster came to my room and he raped me.

A lot of people were blaming me for what happened. Asking me why I had gotten drunk because I would not have been raped had I not gotten drunk. In fact, that was a response from my parents and my brothers. I told my uncle, who is an investigator, what had happened but the main point they focused on was that if I had not gone next door to a party, then none of this would have happened. So, they installed that picture that I must have been very drunk. They did not understand that even if you are not drunk and you are at your house, you could get raped. I think it is only now that they understand, but back then they did not."

"I would ask my friends from res (student accommodation) if I could stay with them at their residences, as I felt I would be much safer, but they would tell me: "No, we are also scared." My best friend kicked me out of her residence room saying that she will not be able to accommodate me as she is also scared. I ended up packing my bags and then I met with social workers."

A friend referred her to social workers at the University. She started counselling and the social worker referred her to the shelter. "The only support I received was from the social workers, and psychologist. It was very painful when I would go to court because I was the victim and the person who did this is the offender. Every time we went to court he would be accompanied by his whole family - aunts,

cousins, friends were all there. But as the victim, there was no one on my side to support me. So, it was very painful, and it would seem like I was lying and making this up.

At some point, I wanted to withdraw the case because I needed support. The social worker convinced me not to withdraw and they assured me that they would be there to support me."

The second woman (EC5) was raped when she went jogging at the stadium. "I ended up at the shelter because things got to be a bit too much for me to handle. When I was at the Thuthuzela Care Centre on the third day after the incident, the sister helping me saw that I was actually becoming worse. She asked what was going on and I told her. Then she suggested that I go to the shelter." In her case, she had the support of her family. "My family has fought a lot and we spent years not speaking. But the amount of support I received shocked me. A few days after the incident my cousin and her mother flew in from Pretoria to support me. So, to me, that was a big thing. They spent the weekend with me. It was very shocking but amazing."

CHAPTER FOUR

OUR EXPERIENCES IN THE SHELTERS



For all the women, shelters provided them with relief in a moment of crisis where they had either nowhere or very few places to turn to for support.

"I felt like prison was over from the moment I stepped inside the walls of the shelter."

"The shelter made me come back to life."

"The shelter was a turning point for me."

"They gave me my confidence back."

"I was empowered to stand on my own two feet and be well."

"I am forever grateful to the shelter and the staff who welcomed me."

"Counselling helped me to focus on myself and the positive things that I needed to see happening rather than the hurt and pain I was boiling up inside"

"I have learned so much that I feel I am worth living."

"I felt cared for and loved with my baby. He was just very small, but staff members assisted me to bath him and dress him up."

"My daughter felt at home and she enjoyed being in the shelter."



Fourteen of the twenty-six women spent a period of three to seven months in the shelters. Eight women spent less than three months at the shelter (two of these spending just one month), and only four women stayed for longer than seven months in the shelter. Three of the twenty-six women had taken refuge in a shelter twice in their lives, and one had taken shelter three times.

One of the women interviewed was offered a job at the shelter, which she accepted. After a five month stay as shelter, client and resident she took up a job as a shelter staff member.

When women arrived at the shelter

Women arrive at shelters in moments of life crisis and trauma. The majority had nowhere else to turn for safety. When first arriving at the shelter they were in turmoil. They spoke of being scared, confused, angry, sad, overwhelmed emotionally and not knowing what to expect. Many (nine of the women) shared that they felt relief to be in place where they could feel safe, even if at first they were scared or unsure of what to expect.

A few women said they were shocked at how clean and comfortable the shelter was and that they had their own room.

The shelter staff were welcoming, warm and caring. This was important in helping the women to feel safe and at ease, given the situations that they were fleeing.

“When I arrived I was shocked about how big the house is, shocked about having my own room with a shower and that we would take turns when it came to cooking. You know how it is for someone who had always struggled, so, I could not believe what was happening. I thought maybe there would be something else wanted from me.” (EC2)

“When I got to the shelter I was an emotional wreck. I don’t think I knew what was happening and I don’t even remember what day it was. I had gone through a traumatic experience but then I got support, firstly, from the people at the shelter, the clients who were there when I arrived, and the house mother supported me.” (EC5)

“First of all, don’t laugh at me, neh? I knew nothing about the shelter. The time they told me I was going to a shelter, I was thinking: big hall. I was picturing-imagining myself sleeping in a corner. I was so shocked when I reached there. It’s a very neat house, a good place. Three houses, for small babies, for teenagers, and for adults. The welcome there was very warm. They asked me – because when I entered there, I was crying since morning. On that day I was crying with no idea where will I go to sleep - then when I was there, I met a lady who was working there, she welcomed me with open arms and asked me: “Do you have toiletries?” Because the first question that they ask you when you reach there, they ask you if you have any toiletries. That’s the first thing they offer you when you’re there, and they take your

bags and they show you where you’re going to sleep. To my surprise, I had my own bedroom. There was a blanket and everything.” (NW1)

“I felt so much relief to be out of that house. I promised myself that I will never go back to that man again. I felt like prison was over from the moment I stepped inside the walls of the shelter. I was welcomed by the care worker when I got to the shelter. She welcomed me warmly. Police had already told me about the shelter, so I was relaxed because they assured me that it is a very safe space.” (MP2)

“I was very sad and angry when I first stepped into the shelter. What had happened at home had left me very angry, I wondered what kind of life I would live since I was used to being in my own space. But after chatting to the social worker and meeting other women in the shelter, I felt very relieved and at home. It did not take me even an hour to calm down. Seeing other women helped me a lot.” (MP11)

One unhappy exception

But, there was one exception. One woman shared that she and her children were not treated well and not made to feel welcome by the care worker who received her and her children.

“We were not treated well at all. The care worker failed to welcome us nicely. She did not offer us any water for bath, she locked herself in one room and left us to find our own way around a place we did not know. She did not offer us any food. When social workers came in the following morning, I informed them what happened and they did talk to the care worker strongly about her actions. The way we were treated reminded me of the situation I was coming from. The social worker apologized to me

and assured me that it will not happen again. As a result of that incident, I felt I was just wasting my time at a place where I felt reminded of very traumatic experiences I had suffered previously. I was so reminded about how the father of my kids treated me. He locked me inside and it felt exactly the same for me.” (MP10)

The following morning the woman informed the social workers about her unhappy experience and the care worker apologised. However, this woman and her children never felt completely comfortable in the shelter during their month long stay at the shelter. This shows how important that first experience of welcome can be for women.

Services at shelters

The shelters provided a safe space for women, where they were offered counselling and where all their basic needs were covered - of food, toiletries and, where necessary, clothes.

Where necessary, women received support in dealing with police to lay charges against perpetrators and with court processes for protection orders, rape cases and divorce. Women also received support with information, advice, transport money and accompaniment to the police and courts. This support is essential in contexts where women do not get the help they are meant to from police or courts.

One woman reported getting support with applying for an ID, though the process was never completed.

Other activities and services that women mentioned included:

- Bible study, prayer groups and outings for church services
- Gardening

- Help with CV's, classes to develop CV's
- Craft work (building tables, jewellery making, knitting and sewing, painting)
- Making masks for selling (during the Covid-19 lockdown)
- Personal development programmes (e.g. a step-based recovery programme at one shelter)
- Computer literacy classes
- Security guard training (sponsored by a shelter in Mpumalanga)
- Talks with survivors of gender based violence
- Exercise (e.g. jogging)

Most of the women (18 of the 26) were unemployed at the time they took shelter and spent most of their time within the shelter. Most shelters had some sort of skills development programme in place. One woman used the time in shelter to continue her high school studies. One woman completed a security guard training through the shelter. Three women went out during the day to work or to attend classes for their studies.

In some shelters, women's days were structured through programmes and activities offered by the shelter. In other shelters, women structured their own activities - spending time together, or on their own. Women at most shelters shared household chores of cooking and cleaning.

Many women were able to save money during their time in shelter. One woman who worked as a domestic worker managed to save money to rent her own place after she left the shelter. One woman earned money washing cars for shelter staff, and two women in one shelter earned

money by making masks which the shelter sold during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Some women share their thoughts on the support they received and on life in the shelter as follows:

“From the time I arrived at the shelter, I received support in many ways. I was accompanied to hospital, to court and was provided with counselling. I was given food and toiletries. The social worker went an extra mile with me. When my boyfriend was finally arrested, the social worker prepared me for court. She even took me to see the court before the day of the court. She supported me on the day of the court hearing. I received good services and I am grateful. I was not going to be able to stand in court on my own but it became very easy due to the support I received from the shelter.” (MP4)

“I received counselling and help with the police. The first time I went to the police I went on my own. I got back and reported to the shelter about the treatment I got so they decided that on my next appointment I would be accompanied so that I didn’t get ambushed and come back being in the state that I was in last time. They accompanied me on my appointments with the police, they would even ask questions and take notes of everything. They fully supported me.” (EC5)

“For the first month, you have to stay inside the shelter. The first 3 days they give you time to sleep and to detox but after that you get to join the program. They have Bible classes, we also have chores, like you would do when you are at home, we then had a thing called Pacer where you learnt how to pace your life and how to see things in order and we learned how to set our goals. Then, at 1 o’clock would be lunch time and certain people would be on the roster to cook, then at five o’clock we would do the end of day Pacer.” (EC8)

“I would do house chores with other women. We also watched TV and I did people’s hair. I All of us spent our days in the shelter. We went out of the shelter only when there was a reason to go out. Some days, I attended counselling sessions.” (MP9)

“We had chores to do and then you would have to do your homework. I would go for walks as exercise for my depression. You come back and do your cooking and cleaning, and then at 7 p.m. everyone has to be in their room. They helped me do my CV and send it to people. I did a skills development program that was very meaningful. We built tables, I built an ironing board and made jewellery.” (EC3)

“We went to church, did some physical activities and some counselling and run around the house. And if you want to go to the clinic or you need help with anything, yeah, they take you there. And if you are looking for a job, they help you. Like painting, dancing, and bible studies.” (NW3)

“We did beadwork, sewing of masks and also sold the masks. Once we produced items, there was a woman who works for the shelter who sold for us and would bring back the money so that we would decide how we wanted to spend it.” (MP13)

Counselling

All women received some form of counselling during their stay. This included one on one sessions with social workers or psychologists and, in some cases, group sessions. Twelve women spoke about how the counselling helped them. They said it “made them feel better,” “built confidence,” that it was “helpful” or that the sessions were “good.” Some shared that the counselling changed the way they saw themselves and their lives in a positive

way. Two women shared that counselling helped them understand the different kinds of abuse (emotional and physical) and their rights to stand up for themselves in the face of it.

"I did feel like I could start over with my life because when I first went to the shelter I did not even want to see a male person. I didn't even want to smell them. After attending counselling and all those sessions, I got better. I was empowered to stand on my own two feet and be well." (EC1 who had been raped by a stranger)

"What I appreciate the most about the services is that counselling helped me change my view and outlook on life. I used to drown my problems in alcohol, but after receiving counselling I stopped drinking heavily and I stopped being angry. I never used to manage being around children, I would get angry very quickly, but with counselling, I can now spend time with children without being irritated. I also appreciate that I can distinguish various kinds of abuse. It was through counselling that I can now stand up for my rights. I did not know how to say no to many forms of abuse but with counselling I can tell a man: "I do not want to sleep with you." So, I feel very empowered." (MP3 who experienced intimate partner violence and has no children of her own)

"I appreciated counselling so much since it helped me to get over the anger I had inside of me towards my aunt and the family. Counselling helped me to focus on myself and the positive things that I needed to see happening rather than the hurt and pain I was bottling up inside." (MP1 who experienced conflict with and abuse by her aunt)

One shelter offered a step based recovery programme which clients worked through during their stay. One woman shared her experience of this:

"We were doing steps. I call them 'steps of recovery' because I took it as my steps of recovery to overcome things, be independent and how to deal with being rejected as a child. It helped me a lot with how to cope and at this point in time, I have learned so much that I feel I am worth living." (EC8)

Relationships in the shelter

A core part of the experience of women in shelters was the relationships with other women clients and with the shelter staff. Shelter staff included House Mothers, care workers, social workers, psychologists, cleaners and cooks.

Relationships with staff members

Thirteen of the women (or 50%) had only positive experiences with staff members while 6 women (or 23%) had positive experiences as well as challenges in these relationships.

The thirteen women who had only positive experiences spoke of "being treated well", that they appreciated being able to talk to care workers and housemothers about their lives, with one woman speaking of staff members as the parents they never had. Two of these women share their experiences:

"When I first arrived one of the House Mothers, who was very strict and had her own painful experience, made me realise that I am not the only person who has had a traumatic experience. If she could be able to come take care of us, then why should I lock myself up in the room and be emotional?" (EC5)

"All staff members were okay towards me. Sometimes I chatted with care workers and they also helped me to think better about life. They encouraged me for the better." (MP2)

The six women who had mixed experiences with staff shared that some staff members treated them “bad” or “didn’t do their job”, or were “not helpful” or treated clients unequally. One woman shared that during her stay, staff did not respond to complaints the women clients made in evaluation forms. She said that evaluation forms were important because some women are more comfortable with writing down complaints than speaking.

Two of the six women shared that their relationship with the problematic staff member had improved by the time they left. One woman, though, moved to another shelter because of a difficult relationship with a House Mother. However, all six of these women had positive experiences with other staff members as well.

Here one woman of the six who had mixed experiences shares her experience:

“Some House Mothers were fine and some were not. I will not lie. We were different races, Xhosa, white, and Sesotho. So, other housemothers did not treat us equally. You would find that for example if they are speaking to this one it’s in a softer tone, and then with the other they would raise their voices. Some were fine – basically; they were not the same. Some House Mothers did understand the purpose of the shelter and others did not seem to, as they had different personalities towards us.” (EC1)

Relationships with other women residents

For the vast majority of women, their relationships with other women residents at the shelter were an overall positive experience.

However, there were two exceptions - one woman said she was sick and preferred to be on her own and a second woman said language and race differences prevented her and her children from connecting with others. “Sometimes they would have a conversation and we wouldn’t be included in the conversation because we could not understand.” (EC3)

Most women shared positive accounts of their experiences with other women residents at the shelter. They made friends, spent time with each other talking, cooking, cleaning, watching tv, braiding hair, taking care of children and doing the various activities that shelters offered. They said that they “got along well,” “shared problems,” “supported each other,” “encouraged each other” and “built new relationships.” A few women said that hearing the experiences of other women, made them realise that they weren’t alone, that others had painful experiences too. Eleven of the women spoke also about challenges between women residents. This included fights and arguments over doing chores and duty rosters; differences in viewpoints or opinions and misunderstandings. A few women shared that there were one or two other women who they found to be difficult or aggressive. However, these challenges were soon resolved, either through the intervention of staff members, or through the initiatives of the women themselves.

For women coming out of unsafe and abusive situations, the experience of living in a situation with supportive and caring relationships and where conflict can also be resolved peacefully cannot be underestimated in its importance for healing and for women being able to shape new lives. The women used words such as “love” and “respect” when talking about their relationships in the shelter. They spoke of sitting together and talking

through problems. Here are some women in their own words:

“The clients, too, shared some of their experiences with me, and this was apart from the group sessions we shared. We would sit and talk. Those are the things that made me realise that my experience might be painful but each of us had our own painful and probably very traumatic experiences, but it’s never the reason for one to give up and stay in a state where you are depressed. We did have challenges. I mean, it’s a group of women put together with everyone used to their own space, so, there would be challenges. There would be arguments, but one thing that made it easier to sort out is that we would sit each other down. I have had my arguments and I remember that if I had an argument with one person I would go to their room and talk to them. Even if the other person does not want to, we will talk and sort it out.” (EC5)

“At the end of the day we all didn’t see eye to eye because of the different backgrounds and different characters, but we learnt to work together. At the shelter there’s a saying that with the people in this house, we have to learn to work with each other because when we get out into the real world there will be people exactly like the same. But the differences weren’t too big because the longer you were there the more you got to know the people and not just on their shallow side. I got to make a lot of friends at the shelter. The women were very supportive amongst each other because one day you may see that someone is having a very bad day or that one had received bad news, so we would either give them space or comfort them.” (EC8)

“We were living like one family because that’s when you remember something bad that you went through and you talk to another one and you end up discussing

and you see that: “eish, now, my problems are much better than this one’s.” Things like that we used to talk about, even if some of them were shy to talk about their past they eventually open up and feel free. We went there with the same problems, the headline was abuse, so we met through that word and we empowered ourselves.” (NW1)

“Life in the shelter was very good for me, considering that I was coming from a home with no love. In the shelter, we treated each other with respect and love. I never had a challenge or a fight with anyone.” (MP1)

“We interacted very well as women in the shelter. We shared, as women, about the struggles that brought us to the shelter and supported each other emotionally. Life amongst ourselves, as women, was always up and down. There was nothing extraordinary - our quarrels were because we had different problems and different viewpoints towards life. We supported each other emotionally. We talked about our problems and shared ideas a lot.” (MP2)

“There were days when we had to be called to meetings as clients because there would be fights over who cooks or other chores in the shelter. There were other women who had money and would buy fancy stuff, but I could not afford that, but it did not matter at all. We sometimes sat and talked about the problems that brought us to the shelter. We watched TV together.” (MP7)

“Life was good. We did not have any problems. We were like a family. We took turns to cook and do dishes. No one needed to be reminded about what they needed to do. We became friends. We helped and supported each other emotionally. We sat and talked about our hopes, our dreams and what we would

do if things favoured us in future. We also supported each other in cleaning the house. The house is very big so we needed each other to ensure that it is clean. We also did our laundry together.” (MP11)

Children in Shelters

Fourteen of the women came to the shelter with their children – the youngest, a 6-week-old baby and the oldest, an 18-year-old. Some women came with one child, others came with up to four children.

Ten of the fourteen women shared that their time in the shelter was very positive for their children. Their children either liked or loved being in the shelter, “received love and care,” “played with other children,” “felt at home” and some older children participated in activities or skills development with the women.

Two of the fourteen women said that their children did not have an easy time at the shelter. One woman shared that her children had challenges getting used to the rules, but that once they did, it got better. The other woman and her children did not feel welcomed when they arrived at the shelter, as already mentioned, and this affected their stay.

The shelters supported women with their children in various ways. This included support with getting to and from school, lifts or transport money. In one case, a shelter paid the creche fees for a child, so the mother could continue with other activities during that time. Three children, who were old enough, received counselling from the shelter, while one child was referred to another service for counselling.

Two women who were in shelter with small babies shared that they received a lot of support from the staff with feeding, bathing and dressing. One woman

suggested that it would be helpful for the shelter to have a creche so that mothers could go look for work.

Women share their experiences in their own words:

“I had my little baby with me at the shelter and I received a lot of care and support from the staff, especially the care workers. I felt cared for and loved with my baby. He was just very small, but staff members assisted me to bath him and dress him up. They showed me how to care for a little baby which is something I never received from my family.” (MP1)

“My son was treated very well. He loved being in the shelter very much. He misses the shelter and always talks about life in the shelter. He became so close to the granny (Gogo) who was there with us. He felt bad when we were leaving the old woman behind. My son got counselling. When we got to the shelter, my son was a very angry person. The counselling he received healed him and this is evidenced by the fact that one day he phoned his step-father and apologised for all the things that happened in our past. My son hated that man so much but now he is over the anger.” (MP8)

“My kids are able to fit in everywhere, so they did like being there. They liked everyone, they aren’t racist or anything. They knew all the rules and so they just adapted. They were able to play with other kids, so it wasn’t a bad thing. The House Mothers would always play with them, they loved them and the people in the house were always friendly towards my children and my children were always friendly to them. They never beat up the children, they loved my children very much.” (E4)

“My kids are still very small. My daughter felt at home and she enjoyed being in the shelter. She had toys to play with and at home she does not have anything. There is also a play area, which she enjoyed a lot.” (MP11)

Exiting the shelter

All women received some psycho-emotional benefit from their stay in the shelter. For some, this was life changing and they were ready to re-enter their lives, while others did not feel ready to leave.

In some cases, women were able to extend their stay while in others women had to leave after their stipulated time period was up. For example, one woman in the Eastern Cape had to leave after three months, while another woman at a different shelter in the same province stayed for over a year.

Sixteen women left the shelter at a time when they felt ready. For some of these women their time at the shelter had come to end, for some they chose to leave because they felt ready, there was the impetus of something to return to, or the conditions they fled had changed which made it possible to leave. For these women their experience in the shelter was healing and empowering and they felt ready to start their lives again, even if leaving the shelter was at the same time scary and emotional. Many of these women spoke about having a new approach to their lives and relationships. One woman described the shelter as a “turning point” in her life.

Three women left to start new jobs, while one woman left to continue the process of applying for her ID. One woman left after her abusive ex-boyfriend was arrested, and she thus felt safe to be outside again.

Another returned to her relationship with her husband after he visited the social worker and apologised for his abusive behaviour. One woman shared that she had the opportunity to save money while at the shelter which allowed her to start a new life away from her husband. Another woman left to be with her family as she missed them.

“It was my choice to move on. My emotional state was much better. I was out of my depression and I worked through my difficulties and my mistakes.” (EC3)

“I was very eager to go and live my own life again and make different choices and try to build a new life for me and my children. But when I was out I did miss the support. My heart was sore, but I knew it was time to move on.” (EC4)

“The shelter was a turning point for me. It was also an eye opener. I started thinking about how I can better my life and give my children a better future as well.” (EC7)

“I was ready to leave the shelter. I was already healed emotionally and physically. At first, it is scary because I am going to a place that I am not used to but now I’m happy that I did it because now everything is fine. Yes, I was ready to start my own thing. They gave me my confidence back” (NW3)

“I left the shelter because it was time to leave. I felt like I had to experience life outside the shelter again. After 5 months in the shelter, I felt ready to go out and start a new life. I wanted to go out and apply what I had learnt at the shelter. I felt very empowered to go out and live on my own.

I am forever grateful to the shelter and the staff who welcomed me, those years back. I am here now because of the shelter. I am very happy now because of the counselling I received.” (MP2)

"I left the shelter when I got a promise of a piece job in my home area. My mum had visited me in the shelter to check how I was doing. She informed me that there was a woman who needed someone to work temporarily. In other words, I can say the work offer helped me decide to leave the shelter. I was feeling okay emotionally. I had received good support and I had healed from trauma and stress. I was happy and I felt good. Even when I got home "wonke umuntu wayebabaza ukuthi nginonile" ("Everyone back home was saying I am fat.") This is because I was very thin when I left home but when I came back, I had gained weight a lot." (MP9)

"I felt ready to leave and start life and build a home for my children, and start on something that will give me hope to face life with my children. I am the one who stated that I want to go out of the shelter and I even set a date for myself but there was a day when I changed my mind due to fear of leaving the comfort of the shelter. I was very empowered with allcounselling and emotional support I received from the staff members at the shelter. I was empowered and I needed to implement the new ways of thinking I had gained." (MP8)

Eight women left the shelter before they felt ready. Of these, two women did not feel ready because they could not afford to get their own place or had nowhere to go to. However, their time at the shelter "was up". Another three women wanted to stay longer, but decided to leave to attend to urgent things at home or with their families. One woman said she wanted to continue counselling but also wanted to get home and "sort things out." Her final decision to leave was affected by the fact that she didn't feel welcomed by staff in the shelter when she first arrived at the shelter.

One woman said that she felt emotionally ready to leave but wanted to stay longer. Another woman felt scared to leave and start again after a period of eleven months in

shelter, though she did have a job and a safe living situation to move to. All of these women were grateful for their time in shelter and benefited from it in some way.

"I had to leave because the family of the father of my child were coming to my aunt to pay damages. That compelled me to go back because that could not happen if I was still in the shelter. I felt that I needed to apologise to my aunt for how we fought and get over differences we had. As a result, I went back home to my aunt's home. Actually, I did not have any other choice because I do not have an income to rent my own place. I cannot say I was empowered to leave the shelter but it was my wish to return so that other processes of the damages payment can happen. Counselling helped me to face my aunt again." (MP1)

"No I did not feel ready, because I was going back home and I did not know how things would be at home with my sister who I had a fight with, or how we would look at each other. My three months were up and I did not know any other reason for me to stay, because at the end of the day I would have to exit either way." (EC6)

"I left the shelter because my little sister was pregnant and she was about to deliver, so I figured that I should be brave and return home. I wanted to stay longer in the shelter but the pressure of having my sister struggle on her own forced me to move out and return home. I was angry when I got to the shelter but I received love, care and support that enabled me to become a better person emotionally." (MP3)

The Voices of Shelter Staff

During the course of this research we also spoke with nine shelter staff – one staff member from each shelter, and all women. They included four housemothers, an acting manager, a shelter coordinator and a centre

manager. 2 of the women had dual roles – one was a coordinator and House Mother, and the other was a social worker and centre manager.

All staff members were proud of the work of the shelter and their contribution to it. They saw their work as important in providing a space for women in need, and in some cases as literally saving lives. As a shelter coordinator put it, “people who may have been killed come here for safety.” (S6)

The roles of the staff we spoke to included running and managing the shelter, making sure that clients are comfortable, fed, and that their health needs are addressed (through providing medication and taking them to clinics or hospitals). In some shelters, staff conducted Bible study and crafts activities. In all shelters, all staff played an informal role in supporting clients psychologically and emotionally while the centre manager/social worker in one shelter was the only staff member interviewed who provided professional counselling.

Shelter staff shared that a key part of the shelter’s work is to make women feel safe and at ease, from the moment they arrive.

“They come in, I mean, we all know that they come in from situations that are really bad and it is wonderful for me to see that within minutes they relax and feel comfortable and feel wanted. So, these are the things I enjoy most.” (S2)

“You feel for these women who don’t have a place to go and then they get dropped off here. And, you can see the hurt in their faces and they feel embarrassed and it’s for you to make them feel comfortable.” (S4)

Staff members shared that they, and the others they worked with, saw the women who sought shelter as brave survivors, not victims. They spoke of admiring the

women for taking the steps they did and that they had empathy for their clients.

However, the acting manager from one shelter said that some of the staff she worked with were judgemental towards women who came to the shelter. She shared that these staff members only saw abuse as physical violence, so judged women who did not arrive with physical evidence of abuse, such as bruises.

Positive Impacts on Women who took shelter

All staff members described seeing a shift in women during their time in shelter:

“At the point of admission, I see how broken some clients are, but as time goes, I see a transition in their lives. It is a positive transition in terms of their emotional wellbeing.” (S7)

“Some of these ladies are terrible when they come here and they haven’t eaten but when you look at them after six months then they are beautiful. They have rebuilt relationships, sometimes their family relationships have been broken, so they work on those relationships. There should be more places like this. By the time they leave here we are sure that they are walking into something that is more stable. Hopefully, what they have learnt here on the program will enable them to make decisions that are better and they make better choices.” (S3)

“Women come here with lost hope, they come here feeling neglected, they come here crying, with lost self-esteem. And, we provide services that restore women to their original self. We bring them back to life. Our shelter receives battered, broken women and we restore their dignity through our services.” (S6)

"I am proud of the fact that we assist victims to turn around their lives. Women come with various problems and by the time they leave, the shelter and its team would have managed to assist them with most of their problems." (S8)

Some of the staff mentioned counselling specifically as contributing to these shifts. The social worker/centre manager we spoke with also described the role of group sessions: "I also empower victims to share their stories amongst themselves, so that they feel that they are not alone in their problems. This is done through group work sessions. I do this in order for women to understand that when they are feeling very down, they can still make it because of encouragement from other women." (S7)

Another staff member said that the step-based recovery programme her shelter ran was impactful.

One housemother shared the important role of arts and craft activities: "They need something to occupy their mind, something to stimulate them, something to relax." (S4).

Another staff member said that the shelter offering women a safe place was key to healing.

Two staff from different shelters mentioned women who were offered training as security guards and who now had jobs as successes of their shelters' work.

Challenges experienced in providing shelter

Most staff members shared that they sometimes experience challenges when clients do not want to follow the rules and regulations of the shelter. One housemother said that women who are depressed can find it difficult to follow the

routine of the shelter. Two staff members shared that often when women stay for long time periods, they start to resist the regulations.

Security was a concern mentioned by three staff members. Two shared that when women are in communication with people outside of the shelter, and share their location this can jeopardise security. One staff member said that her shelter did not have a security guard on duty during the day and this was a concern for her.

All staff felt that their shelters needed to do more in relation to skills training/development for their clients. As one of them put it: "We need to offer more than counselling." (S5)

Staff see women leave emotionally empowered but without the economic empowerment needed to be independent and provide safe and secure lives for themselves and their children. This, in many cases, leads to women's return to abusive situations. Staff were of the view that sewing machines and computers, and more training in areas such as crafts, baking, cooking and hairdressing would enable women to start their own businesses when they leave the shelter. One staff member wanted to be able to offer clients accredited skills training.

However, as one staff member noted, other actors have a role to play in the economic empowerment of women: "(The shelter) really does its best. The remaining role is for government to create more jobs for people, especially women. Our shelter does its best in giving women skills but when they have those edited and improved CVs, they still cannot get jobs." (S6)

Two staff members said that it would help if there was a creche at their shelters to support women to go out and look for

work and participate fully in activities at the shelter.

Staff also shared financial challenges at their shelters. This included subsidies coming in late from the government, making it difficult to cover costs, and the fact that salaries were too low (mentioned in 2 cases). In one case, a housemother shared that salaries were cut from R5000 a month, to R3100 a month, with no explanation.

Other desires for their shelters were:

- Space to garden and grow food
- A vehicle and drivers for the shelter, to run errands and raise funds
- For the shelter to own their building rather than rent
- Long term contracts for staff members, including pension plans. (The staff member that mentioned this said that contracts at her shelter were renewed every year.)
- Teambuilding, training and self-care for staff



CHAPTER FIVE

OUR LIVES AFTER SHELTER



For most women their time in shelter was a huge turning point and they left the shelter able to move into new situations. Of the twenty-four women who were living in abusive situations – either with intimate partners or families – the majority (19 or 79%) did not return to these situations after their time in shelter. However, five of these twenty-four women returned to live within the abusive situations they had left, as they had nowhere else to go.



All twenty-six women interviewed moved out of the shelter into a world filled with challenges with most struggling to survive in contexts that were very precarious financially. Twenty of the twenty-six women interviewed did not have secure employment at the time of being interviewed. Fourteen of these women received state child support and/or disability grants. Two of the women were studying to complete their high school education. One received a state student grant from NFSAS, and did piece jobs as well.

The women who had secure employment worked as a cook, a mentor for adolescents at an Arts NGO, as a junior receptionist, and as a domestic worker. One woman had a job with the expanded public works programme, while another woman got a job at the shelter after her time as a client.

The vast majority of women (23 out of 26) mentioned employment and money as their major concern or worry. The lack of financial stability was a huge obstacle for these women in creating safe and comfortable lives.

During their interviews for this study, eight of the twenty-six women interviewed were in emotional distress and the interviewer arranged for these eight women to receive follow up counselling.

Women who took shelter from Intimate Partner Violence

Experiences of significant change

Most of the women who experienced intimate partner violence (15 out of 18) did not return to the abusive relationships that they had taken shelter from.

For these women, the shelter provided a moment of significant change and allowed them to end an abusive situation, which for some had continued for many years. These women now lived with friends, family members or on their own.

For these women their emotional state after sheltering was completely different to when they arrived at the shelter. Through their time in shelter they had experienced healing, and created new mindsets. Most spoke about their lives being “better,” with more “peace” and “happier” or “stable.” One woman said she felt empowered and that she left the shelter to implement “the new ways of thinking I had gained.” (MP8)

A woman who was addicted to drugs shared that: “The cravings would come and the stress and I just remembered what Aunty S had taught me. The How

To Movement: if you are feeling angry, hungry, tired or lonely, then there are certain procedures and things that you are going to have to put in place because you actually know you're going to feel that way before you actually get to that point." (EC8)

Another woman shared the profound impact the shelter had made: "My mind was confused, I was thinking of killing my kids, then myself. I had thought of that because I love my children too much and I could not bear the thought of leaving them to suffer. But the shelter made me come back to life. I came back alive from the shelter. I am no longer afraid of my husband. I have courage to speak for myself and I know there is help out there. I can say that I have peace because of counselling I received. I want to live happily from now on." (MP12)

Some spoke about having the energy to start new projects, which came out of their time in the shelter. One woman used the time in shelter to continue her studies: "I was very eager to go and live my own life again and make different choices, and try to build a new life for me and my children. It's better because at least I have goals, I want to finish my matric and get a good job and live my life." (EC4).

Another shared that: "I'm happy because I started my new life now. I can forget about the rape, about everything. I want to be a lawyer. I'm still studying with Vista. I have 4 months now." (NW2)

Yet another woman was putting her energy into building a house for her and her children on a plot of land she owned, while another described a new relationship and new plans:

"My life is better; I've met some people who love me for me. I've made new friends. I'm looking for a job. I've found

a new guy. He's a good guy. He loves me and my baby. He wants to see my family and talk to them. I'm happy in the relationship. Life is good. I've decided that this year I am going to make a budget for myself, so that next year I can go and study what I've always wanted to do." (NW3)

Little positive changes for two

Two of the women however did not describe their current situations as having positive aspects. Both these women had not felt ready to leave the shelter when they did. One of these women moved to another town, to be away from her husband who wanted custody over their children. The husband she said, "would send police or his lawyers to harass me and the children." She shared her current challenges: "That relationship (with my husband) is over and I don't even think about it. Actually, it was over for a long time but I kept going back because I was dependent on him for income. Life is very hard. As I speak now, we were told to move out because I am failing to pay the rent each month. Housing is my major concern and it gives me sleepless nights because I can see that my children are losing hope in this life too. They worry about not having a place to stay." (MP7)

The other woman who had severe spinal injuries as a result of violence inflicted by her abusive husband described her life now: "I went to my house which I owned from way back in 2006. Financially, it is tough. We survive on our grants for all our needs. My children left without (school) transfer cards, and I worry about that a lot. I think my children will miss out on their education due to the movements we made within a short time. I am not thinking of any relationship now because I am very sick. All I care about are my children. I do not want

to know anything about the father of my children at all. My life is ruined as you can see, I cannot walk, I have this special chair that I sit on, I barely move so I have no life anymore.” (MP10)

Stresses and challenges from lack of employment and incomes

Regardless of whether women who experience intimate partner violence felt empowered to leave and start a new life or not, or had a secure safe living situation – most women described major stresses and challenges in their current lives, much of which had to do with lack of secure employment and income. Without employment and financial stability, it was and is difficult for them to realise their dreams and create the new lives they envision.

As women shared:

“I am not where I have been with this crazy relationship. But I am not where I want to be.” (E9)

“I do not have many complaints because I have a roof over my head. But being unemployed is a challenge. I have dreams and wishes but being unemployed makes it impossible to achieve anything.” (MP4)

“A job is my major stressor. I know that if I get a job, all will fall into place.” (MP13)

When women had the emotional support of family and friends, this made a big difference in navigating hardships. “Life is hard for us but we are close to family and they support us with everything that happens.” (MP14)

At the same time women spoke about the desire to be independent and not rely on others:

“Financially it is hard since I have no stable job. I have to support my baby on my own without any help from his father. I do that from money I earn out of doing people’s hair and it is hard. My concern is getting a job that will enable me to fulfil my desires that include supporting my children and taking care of my needs. I also wish to help my mother with household needs. We depend on her too much.” (MP9)

“My granny provides for the family financially. We all depend on her. We all share her 4 roomed-house. I only get a child support grant. I have not found any work so far. Life is hard since I am not working. It is not good to depend on my granny like this.” (MP14)

One woman shared that while she was struggling to provide for basic needs she appreciated how much less stress she had now that she was out of her abusive relationship: “Compared to 27 years of hell, now I’m happy. I don’t have stress anymore like when the sun sets or when weekends come, thinking I’ll be running up and down in the street, thinking that I’ll be running away from my husband. I’m okay. Some of the things that I’m experiencing like lack of money, food, it’s normal – it can happen to anyone. But life is 100% perfect.” (NW1)

Three women were also dealing with ill health. For two women, their health conditions were consequences of the physical abuse by their intimate partners. One woman had spinal injuries while another had kidney damage for which she went for regular check-ups for. A third woman had cancer.

One woman said she felt free and safe after her boyfriend was arrested and charged, while two others felt safe because of protection orders against their abusive former partners.

Two women shared that they did not feel safe from their ex-partners. One said that: "He goes around telling people that I know that he will still do something bad to me because I have refused to get back with him. As a result, I try to make sure that I am always with people and my whereabouts are known, always." (MP9)

While the other woman shared that a concern is: "What's going to happen if my baby-daddy finds out where I'm staying?" (NW3)

One woman shared that she was now friends with her ex-husband.

Women who returned to their intimate partners

Three of the women who experienced intimate partner violence are now living with the partners who were abusive towards them. One of these women said that she returned to the relationship after her husband apologised and agreed in court to support her and her children. However, he was not doing so, and she expressed fear that if she approached the court, he would kick her and her children out, and she had nowhere to go and no other means of support.

A second woman was also not in a financial position to leave her partner, and furthermore she did not have an Identity Document. She shared that, "the relationship is still the same but at least he does not hit me. Ever since the police took me to the shelter, he has never laid his hand on me again." (MP11)

A third woman was renting a room from her ex-husband. She said the relationship is, "much better as we are not arguing. He's an alcoholic but he has been dry now for a year." (EC3)

All three women were unemployed and spoke about the stress of not having employment and the financial insecurity that went with it. As one said:

"The father of my child buys things for the child and he makes sure that there are pampers and wipes but he does not buy food at all. I struggle a lot with food. I rely on neighbours for survival. For example, at the end of June, he made sure that we fight so that he would find an excuse not to buy any food. So, I went through the whole month without food. I struggle financially. I am not working and I think he ill-treats me when I am not working. There are times when I find piece jobs in the farm and it gets better when I have money. My challenge is a place to stay. The issue of an Identity Document is bothering me a lot. I worry about when I will eventually get an ID so that I can try and find a permanent job even on the farm so that I earn an income for myself." (MP11)

At the same time the women expressed that they were in a better emotional place due to their time in the shelter. One woman said it had helped her change the way she saw herself in relation to men. Another woman expressed: "Sometimes when I fought with the father of my baby, I would think that maybe I was made to be abused by a male person on this earth, but the social worker assisted me to change my mind-set. I would advise women to go to a shelter so that they are taught to be independent and not depend on men for survival." (MP11)

Women who took shelter because of family conflict and violence

As with women who experienced IPV, time in shelter gave women who experienced family conflict a place of refuge outside

of abusive situations that most of them had grown up within. One woman shared that she felt that the shelter staff were the parents she never had in her life. These six women all shared that they benefited from their time in shelter, particularly through counselling, which they described as healing and beneficial. They all came out with a new perspective on themselves and life.

"I felt empowered that no matter the situation I may be in nothing will break me." (EC2)

"While I was at the shelter I realised that people can be given second chances. I also learnt that you can be someone even if you don't have support from others but be able to pull through and be independent." (EC6)

"The shelter was a turning point for me. It was also an eye opener. In some way I thank God that what happened between me and my dad had to happen so that today I can start my own life knowing I am grown enough to start and see that my children are my family." (EC7)

"I am here now because of the shelter." (MP2)

Four of these women moved onto new living situations. One woman described her plans to start an agricultural project and said that she was in communication with the municipality about funding, a second woman got a job, while a third woman described her happiness at being in a loving relationship. The fourth woman shared that, "I feel like I am emotionally empowered but lack of an identity document still holds me back. I am still struggling financially. I do not have a home or a job." (MP6) The shelter had helped her start the process of applying for an ID, but this had not been completed.

Of the two women who returned to their difficult family situations, one shared that her relationship with her sister was now much better, and the second woman shared that her relationship with her aunt has improved as counselling has helped. This woman shared that counselling helped her "get over the anger I had inside of me towards my aunt and the family" and that she is able to focus on herself in a positive way. However, the reality of the life she returned to was difficult and unchanged:

"My life is very difficult; I cannot work since I am still raising my child. He will be turning 2 years in June 2020. I survive on the grant I receive for him and the little maintenance from his father. Life at my aunt's home has not changed at all. She still makes me feel that she does not like me at all compared to other family members. I am staying there because that is the only place I know as home, otherwise, I wish I had an alternative." (MP1)

Five of the women shared that their main worry and concern was unemployment, and that they are not able to be independent and look after themselves and their families.

Women who took shelter because of Rape

Two women took shelter after being raped by strangers. Both these women spoke about their time in shelter as empowering and healing. However, they had very different experiences once they re-entered their lives.

One of the women (EC1) was interviewed three years after leaving the shelter. She shared that sometime after leaving the shelter she had entered into a new relationship and moved with her partner to a different province. When the business they started together failed and her

partner left her without any support, she attempted to commit suicide. At the time of the interview she shared that she was rebuilding her life with support from a psychologist, that she was looking for a job (having completed her law degree and her practical training in law). This woman received no support from her family at the time she was raped and while in the shelter.

The other woman (EC5) was interviewed 8 months after leaving the shelter to work in an arts NGO and is coping well. In her words: "Presently, everything feels awesome because things are normal again. I am doing great at work as I have been asked to write a manual for the creative arts section for the organisation and that manual is going to be used at schools. For me, it's a huge thing that kids at schools are going to be taught with a manual that was written by me. I am planning on starting my own program to assist children with autism and special needs because there are no public schools, that cater for children with special needs in small towns. I have been gathering information on how I can have teachers in public schools trained." This woman received considerable support from her family following the rape, while she was in the shelter and upon leaving the shelter.

Future Dreams

The women also shared their dreams with us. They wanted jobs, or better paying jobs and ones that they were passionate about. They wanted their own houses and safety and security for themselves and their families. Here are the women in their own words:

"One of my dreams is to get a good employer when I get employed. Thereafter,

I want to do wood-work and be a photographer. Everything is just about getting the money now, and thereafter everything else." (EC3)

"I would like to get a job, have my own place to stay and be independent during this time that my mother is still alive." (EC6)

"There's so much I would love to do. Like, empowering women. My passion is changing women because, if we are not okay our children won't be okay. Because a mother is the person that has to be there for her children, and if she's not mentally stable and financially stable she won't be able to make it." (EC7)

"My dream is to have a little place of my own. Just a little place where I can have a garden and fiddle around in the ground with my vegetables, or whatever. And a cat or a dog, and a pre-owned car and a proper job. Yes, a proper job and a place of my own." (EC9)

"I dream of having a good job that pays well so that I am able to achieve anything that I wish for. I also have a dream of becoming a Social Worker one day so that I give back to others, since the staff in the shelter helped me turn my life around. My last biggest dream is opening a shelter, myself, so that I can assist many women who become victims of horrible abuse like I went through. Women come to me for advice and I always share with them about the shelter. I talk to women about abuse and I emphasise that they must seek help and not be ashamed of reaching out for help." (MP2)

"My dream is to have a big and beautiful house where I will live in peace with my brother and sister. I also dream of a better paying job that will enable me to buy household goods that I desire, as a

woman, to make our house beautiful as many other homes that I see around. (MP3)

“My dream is going back to school and getting a job. Having my own home, without stress.” (MP6)

“My dream is to start a business. I am good at selling products. I have tried to stock bags and sell, but I am not getting anywhere because I eat all the money and get to ground zero again.” (MP7)

“My dreams are to stay with my kids at a home that belongs to me and to have

my children educated so that they do not become like me in the future.” (MP11)

“I would like to get a husband who will understand me and to build a home for ourselves. I do not want an abusive life ever again.” (MP13)

“My dream was to pass grade 12 and study to become a teacher. But since I have kids, how I will support them if I decide to go back to school and stop doing piece jobs and hair dressing? I am not working, so how will I afford fees?” (MP9)

In their own words

Here are some of the women’s experiences after being in the shelter:

(interviewed 1 year 11 months after leaving shelter, 1 month stay in shelter)

I left the shelter after staying for a month and some days, I left when my boyfriend was arrested and charged with attempted murder and rape. At that time, I felt safe and free to go out of the shelter and live my life again. When I left the shelter, I moved to stay with my uncle. I could not move to my grandfather’s home since he had chased me away from his home when I fell pregnant with my daughter. Currently, I am living with my aunt and her husband. I do not have many complaints because I have a roof over my head, but being unemployed is a challenge. I have dreams and wishes but being unemployed makes it impossible to achieve anything. In 2019, I was busy with piece jobs. I sometimes work on farms harvesting sugar beans. So, the whole of 2019 I was up and down looking for piece jobs. I always worry that my aunt may pass on and I will be chased away from her home because they will tell me that I do not belong there. I am worried because I have a daughter and a little sister who need to have a home.



MP4

(interviewed 1 year 6 months after leaving shelter, 2 month stay in shelter with 4 children)



MP5

We left the shelter early 2019, when my husband came to the Social Worker and stated that he is sorry for what happened and he wants his family back home. So, I agreed to go back home to him with my children. At that time, I was attending court and he also went to court to inform them that he will do everything for me and my children. When I left the shelter, we moved to our new house which we had been building all the while. I cannot say I was ready to leave but I felt like giving him another chance, since he was apologising. When we returned home, life was good, my husband was acting like he had changed. He treated me well during the early days of our return home. (At present) my husband is not doing any of the things he promised the social worker and the court. He was ordered to maintain me and my children with R7000, but he has never done that. He sometimes gives me R2500 and asks me to buy some building requirements afterwards. The woman who made us fight so much is still (in a relationship) with him and lives at his parent's house. I feel very frustrated because of this. I am concerned because I have been thinking for a long time about returning to court and informing them that my husband is not doing as he was instructed by the court. I am scared because I do not know what his reaction will be when he finds out that I have reported him to court officials. I am very concerned because he may decide to chase me out of the house and where will I go with my children? I am trying my best but it's hard. I am still unemployed and staying at home full time. I attend treatment for my hand (injured as a result of physical abuse by the husband). Doctors said I should apply for a disability grant since I can no longer use my right hand. I need help with my SASSA application. There is no SASSA doctor in Ermelo, and I have been holding my grant application papers for a long time now. My dream is to get a job and work for myself and my children so that I build a brighter life for my children. In the past year I have been a fulltime mother staying at home, looking after my children, ensuring they go to school and come back to cooked meals. I feel that there is too much work at home and no one pays me for the hard work I do at home.

(interviewed 4 months after leaving shelter, 1 month stay in shelter with 5 children)



MP10

I was not ready to leave (the shelter) but I decided to leave because I wanted to make myself comfortable in my house and make sure that my children get used to life in our own home. I did not make up my mind easily on leaving the shelter. I wanted to stay and continue counselling, yet I also wanted to get home and start sorting things out. To be honest, the treatment by the care worker put me off a lot and it is one reason why I decided to leave. My kids were not happy because they feared the care worker who ill-treated us on the first day. I was okay. I knew that other staff members cared for us a lot. I went to my house which I owned from way back in 2006. Financially, it is tough. We survive on our grants for all our needs. I do not want to know anything about the father of my children at all. My life is ruined as you can see, I cannot walk (as a result of damage to her spine caused by her husband). I have this special chair that I sit on – I barely move, so I have no life anymore. All I wish is that my children get an education and to see them get a better life. My arthritis and my spine are terrible and I get a government grant, but I do not know for how long. My wish is to get better and get work for myself, to get grade 12 and seek better opportunities. I wish I had gotten better counselling. I am too stressed, my kids, schools, my health everything is just not working out. I once took tablets wanting to commit suicide, but my kids rescued me and, so, I know meeting social workers did help me somehow. I would ask you to organise that I get counselling because if I get stressed, even over a small thing. I tend to think hard and worse because I cannot do anything for myself.

(interviewed 1 month after leaving shelter, 2 month stay in shelter with 1 child)



MP13

I was ready (to leave the shelter) because emotionally I felt so much better. Counselling made a huge difference in my life. I was not ready, but renovations that had to happen in the shelter disturbed my plans. I was not in a hurry to go home since I had my child with me. I wanted to stay a little longer. We went to my aunt, my mum's sister. I am happy to be able to visit family again. We are enjoying our stay with my daughter here. I survive on my grant. I just want to be happy and enjoy a life without any abuse or drama. I want to focus on myself for some time. The relationship is over totally. I have a protection order against him and he knows that if he ever bothers me, he will be arrested. My life is good now, I'm always happy. "Ngihlala ngihleka" (I am always laughing). A job is my major stressor. I know that if I get a job all will fall into place. I would like to get a husband who will understand me, and to build a home for ourselves. I do not want an abusive life ever again. I would tell women to get up right away, report and go to shelter without hesitating.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS



This publication illustrates the experience of twenty-six women in shelters in the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and the North West provinces of South Africa. Eighteen of the women interviewed needed shelter from their intimate partners, six needed shelter from family abuse and two women took shelter after being raped.

Most of these women had lived with abuse for many years before seeking help. Alone and with no other support they fled to the police, a social worker or they found themselves in hospitals with severe injuries and on being discharged from the hospital they were referred to a shelter. Two women were referred to the shelter by a friend, and one was referred by her child's teacher. Most women had no idea there were places such as shelters.

All twenty-six women made clear that shelters provided them with relief in a moment of crisis when they had nowhere to go, or no one to turn to for support. For many women their time in shelter was a huge turning point and they left the shelter able to move into new situations. The counselling, care, emotional and practical supports they received helped make this an empowering experience.

For women coming out of unsafe and abusive situations, the experience of living in a situation with supportive and caring relationships and where conflict was resolved peacefully cannot be underestimated in its importance for their healing and their being able to shape new lives.

Of the twenty-four women who had fled abusive situations with intimate partners or families – nineteen did not return to these situations after their time in shelter. At the time of the interviews these women were living with friends, family members or on their own. Five women however, returned to the abusive situations they had left, as they had nowhere else to go.

For all twenty-six women their time in shelter contributed to healing, and the creation of new mind-sets. The shelters gave them a place of refuge outside of the abusive situations many had grown up within. One woman shared that she felt that the shelter staff were the parents she never had.

Sixteen of the women were asked if they would advise other women to go to a shelter in times of need, and all these women said that they would. Two women said that they have already advised other women to do so.

The shelter staff members interviewed described seeing a shift in women during their time in shelter. Some staff mentioned counselling as specifically contributing to these shifts. Shelter staff saw their work as important in providing a space for women in need and in some cases as literally saving lives.

However, shelter staff noted that while women leave shelters emotionally empowered most women are still without the economic empowerment needed to be able to be independent and provide safe and secure lives for themselves and their children.

On leaving the shelters, all twenty-six women moved into a world filled with challenges. Most women struggled to survive in financially precarious contexts. Unemployment and lack of financial stability was the major concern or worry for almost all the women (23 of 26) at

the times of the interviews. Twenty of the twenty-six women did not have secure employment at the time of being interviewed. Fourteen of these women received state child support and/or disability grants. Two of the women were studying to complete their high school education. One received a state student grant from NFSAS and did piece jobs as well. Economic challenges were huge obstacles in creating safe and comfortable lives.

The six women who had secure employment worked as a cook, a creative arts mentor, a junior receptionist, a domestic worker, with the expanded public works programme, and one woman got a job at the shelter after her time there as a client had ended.

The lives that the women dreamed for themselves included jobs, better paying jobs, their own houses, and safety and security for themselves and their families.

Clearly, for women to build safe, happy lives after leaving the safety of the shelter they need considerable supports in terms of secure employment and financial support.

Many shelter staff were of the view that shelters could play a role in skills development, with one staff member noting that other actors have a role to play in economic empowerment and the creation of jobs for people, especially women.

NSMSA taking up the challenges

The interviews with the twenty-six women highlight just how important shelters are to women in need and how urgent it is to ensure that shelters continue to provide a place of safety and reflection from which women may emerge empowered so that they may lead happy fulfilled lives.

Challenges which affect the provision of services to women in need of shelter include late payments of government subsidies to shelters and low salaries of shelter staff. The NSMSA continues to take up these challenges with the Department of Social Development.

In order for women to live fulfilled lives on leaving shelters there is vital need for ongoing support in the form of skills linked to jobs and this requires action from other actors such as the private sector, and other government departments, besides Social Development.

The NSMSA has participated in discussion on the Gender Based Violence and Femicide National Strategic Plan in the hope that this clears the path to greater intervention by government to deal with the war like situation we as a country face in relation to violence experienced by women.

At the same time as ensuring the vital supports of counselling and safe spaces such as shelters, for those women who experience abuse, there is need for action to end violence against women. No women should ever have to experience the forms of abuse these twenty-six women have shared.

