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Black lesbians particularly vulnerable to violent attacks

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Another 16 Days of Activism is upon us. Activists have marked November 25 since 1981 to commemorate the day that the Mirabel sisters were assassinated in the Dominican Republic. How many of us remember them? And why are their deaths relevant to us?

Minerva, Patria and Maria Teresa were killed by the Dominican Republic's dictator, Rafael Trujillo.

Fascist violence, rape and sexual assault against women share a relationship. They operate within the same economy of brutality, hatred and an all-consuming power to silence and repress.

The reality of gender-based violence in South Africa serves as a political, social and cultural reminder that the Mirabel sisters' quest for freedom and democracy came at a price.

Since 2002 the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development has earmarked a public campaign to combat violence against women and children through partnerships between the public, the government and the private sector.

It is admirable that our National Campaign during the 16 Days should create solidarity to highlight and prevent violence against women. But some of our sisters who happen not only to be women but are also lesbian, are often forgotten during this period.

We are not suggesting that lesbians are forgotten by the state. Rather, public debate and awareness-raising campaigns during this period usually view

violence against women within a heterosexual framework.

In our collective efforts to erase violence we ought to be doing more to highlight that already stigmatised and marginal groups such as black lesbians are not only vulnerable to homophobic attacks. They must be factored into campaigns that address the violence equation.

Evidence confirms that the epidemic of violence against women sweeping our country knows no colour, caste, creed or indeed sexual orientation.

We are reminded of Zoliswa Nkonyana's death in February. She was stoned, beaten and stabbed in front of her house by a gang of men in Cape Town only for being a lesbian.

In September 2005 another young lesbian nearly died to death during the Johannesburg Pride march after being attacked while on the Forum for Empowerment of Women float.

In December 2004 a 26-year-old lesbian was raped in Meadowlands, Soweto, while in the same month another teenage lesbian was raped in Mshakeng, Randfontein.

Like any reported statistics on violence against women, many incidents of violence against black lesbians go unreported and unnoticed and are therefore absent from the public consciousness.

Part of the problem is a societal and cultural one. We have noble legal instruments that offer protections, but the reality is that, as a society, we live in the face of heightened stigma towards homosexuality.

Physical violence against black lesbians provides us with contemporary examples of

how stigma, machismo and masculine power combines with heterosexism to suggest that violence is somehow normalised in our communities.

Such attacks show that violence against women is both systemic and cultural. This social devaluation through physical attacks on lesbians confirms the symbolic stigma attached to homosexuals as a marginalised group.

Many of the lesbians who are attacked are accused of being an embarrassment and a menace to society through their gendered roles and sexual behaviour.

Many who report their attacks tell of men accusing them of being less of a woman because of what some men perceive to be women who masquerade as men. Such men, it is reported, want to teach lesbians to be "real women". Should we not be rather teaching ourselves to become a society tolerant of differences that we can learn to live with?

As researchers, activists, policy-makers and concerned citizens, we ought to make commitments to invigorate our human rights solidarity during this year's campaign.

Violence against black lesbians has a gendered and cultural basis. Beliefs about lesbians are influenced by stigma. Such stigma cannot be allowed to fester in a democratic society.

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