

The Women of Marikana

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South Africa has about 90% of the world's platinum and most of this is found in the Rustenburg and Brits districts in the North West Province. And yet, this wealth does not reach the people living right on top of the platinum reserves. Instead of bringing wealth, for many people the platinum industry brings pain. Mine workers and their families are forced to live in inhumane and undignified conditions, and their wages do not reflect the value of their contributions. These are some of the factors that led to workers from Lonmin PLC going on strike in August 2012 to ask for a decent living wage. The strike was marred by tragedy when police shot and killed 34 mine workers, an event which has come to be known as the Marikana Massacre.

Voices of the women

As a result of the Marikana Massacre, many women in the community lost their partners and family members. The women are the foundation of their communities – they put food on their tables, create homes with what little they have, raise children, care for the sick and the elderly, and sometimes work in the mines themselves. Without the women of Marikana, mining would not be possible. In the aftermath of the massacre, they came under unimaginable strain as they struggled to come to terms with their grief and continue to support ongoing strikes by the workers. And yet, the responses to the massacre, and the systems of power at play, have consistently failed to acknowledge the humanity and suffering of these women.

Despite this attempted silencing, or perhaps partly because of it, the women of Marikana have formed their own community-based organisation called 'Sikhala Sonke', a name which literally means "we are crying together" but can also be interpreted as "we are all in the same pain". Together, through Sikhala Sonke, the women have organised protests, fought to have their voices heard at the Marikana Commission of Inquiry and continue to strive for better living conditions for all in their community.

Protest

In September 2012, Councillor Paulina Masuthe, a leader in the community who was providing support to the families of the deceased, injured and striking mine workers, was shot in the leg by police during one of their operations and later died in hospital. Sikhala Sonke decided to organise a peaceful protest to the police station, to honour Paulina and call for peace in the community. The women were confronted by opposition from both Lonmin and their municipality.

Notwithstanding this attempt to silence them, the women of Sikhala Sonke did not back down and consequently sought legal assistance from the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALs). Following failed engagements with the police and municipality, the women were heard in the Mahikeng High Court on an urgent basis on the evening before the protest was due to take place. The Court ruled in their favour, setting aside the municipality's decision and ruling that its refusal to allow them to march was an unjustified limitation of the women's constitutional right to protest. This was a victory for the women and the protest went ahead peacefully the next day.

Two years later, in January 2014, another wage strike swept the platinum belt. This strike continued for 5 months and was the longest wage strike in South Africa's history. It devastated the families and communities of the mine workers. During this hardship, the women of Sikhala Sonke came together again to take action. Not only did they meet for prayer sessions in fear of another Massacre, but the women were trying to find ways to feed their families. In their meetings, the women decided to organise a march to Lonmin's offices to express their grievances as a result of the wage strike.

The women once again sought assistance from CALS to march to Lonmin's offices. Yet again, there was much opposition to the notice to march. After threats from the women to take the matter to court, Lonmin officials eventually agreed to receive their memorandum. The march took place on 21 March 2014, Human Rights Day. In a very emotional plea, the women requested that Lonmin put an end to the strike and that the mining company increase its workers' wages. The women detailed how the strike had affected their homes; that they did not have food; that their children were unable to attend school; and they called for peace and an end to police brutality.

The Marikana Commission of Inquiry

In the meantime, in October 2012, President Zuma appointed a Commission of Inquiry to investigate matters of public concern arising out of the tragic events at Lonmin's Marikana mine. The investigation was divided into two phases, with the first phase examining the conduct of the police and the second intended to encompass the broader systemic issues of inequality in the mining industry which culminated in the strike. Despite many attempts by the CALS legal team to engage with the Evidence Leaders and the presiding officer of the Commission on the importance of the second phase, the Commission did not prioritise this.

The Commission of Inquiry sat for close to 3 years and during that time only one hour was set aside to hear from the women of Marikana. Aside from this testimony from the chairperson of Sikhala Sonke on the living conditions in Marikana, the women of the community had no voice in the proceedings. They attended the Commission every day, but sat silently in the back. Yet again, their contribution to the community and the tragedy's impact on them was undervalued and their voices silenced. Yet again, they refused to accept this. In response, in partnership with CALS, the women made a [documentary showing their living conditions and their protest action](#), which was used as evidence at the Commission of Inquiry. The purpose of this documentary was to showcase the story of the women of Marikana and to show what it was like to be a woman living in Marikana.

Complaint to the International Finance Corporation

Throughout their struggles, the women have consistently expressed a hope that, one day, Lonmin executives, including the CEO, would sit around the table with them and acknowledge their pain, their lives and their unanswered questions about their living conditions. Again claiming their agency, in June 2015, the women filed a complaint with the Office of the Compliance Advisor of the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the private lending arm of the World Bank that had invested in Lonmin. This mediation process is currently underway.

The struggle continues

The women of Sikhala Sonke have great ambitions for the living conditions of the people of Marikana. They envision a safe community for all, roads, clinics, houses, employment and peace. Sikhala Sonke, now a registered non-profit organisation, continues to fight for a better Marikana community. Despite the difficulty they continue to encounter within legal processes and attempts to realise their constitutional

rights, the women continue to tell their own story, engage in civil society forums, with government, with the media, with mining companies and the community at large for better living conditions.