Lesbian South Africans are living in fear as rape and murder become a daily threat in the townships they call home.

Noxolo Nkosana, 23, is the latest victim of a series of violent attacks against lesbians.

She was stabbed a stone's throw from her home in Crossroads township, Cape Town, as she returned from work one evening with her girlfriend.

The two men - one of whom lives in her community - started yelling insults.

"They were walking behind us. They just started swearing at me screaming: 'Hey you lesbian, you tomboy, we'll show you,'" Ms Nkosana tells the BBC.

Before she knew it a sharp knife had entered her back - two fast jabs, then she was on the ground. Half conscious, she felt the knife sink into her skin twice more.

"I was sure that they were going to kill me," she says.

Dying in silence
Many lesbians have died in such attacks - 31 in the last 10 years, it is reported.

In April, Noxolo Nogwaza was raped by eight men and murdered in KwaThema township near Johannesburg.

The 24-year-old's face and head were disfigured by stoning, and she was stabbed several times with broken glass.

The attack on her is thought to have begun as a case of what is known as 'corrective rape', in which men rape lesbians in what they see as an attempt to "correct" their sexual orientation.

The practice appears to be on the increase in South Africa.

More than 10 lesbians per week are raped or gang-raped in Cape Town alone, according to Luleki Sizwe, a charity which helps women who have been raped in the Western Cape.

Many of the cases are not reported because the victims are afraid that the police will laugh at them, or that their attackers will come after them, says Ndumile Funda, founder of Luleki Sizwe.
"Many of them just suffer in silence," she says.

"The cases people read about in the media are not even the tip of the iceberg. Lesbians are under attack in South Africa's townships every day."

Reports of police ridiculing rape victims abound in the gay community.

"Some policemen in the township mock you saying: 'How can you be raped by a man if you are not attracted to them?' They ask you to explain how the rape felt. It is humiliating," says Thando Sibiya, a lesbian from Soweto.

She says she knows two people who reported rapes but then dropped their cases because of their treatment by the police.

'Un-African'
Some trace the root of the problem to pockets of traditional African society that have not accepted homosexuality - especially among women.

"African societies are still very patriarchal. Women are taught that they should marry men, anything outside of that is viewed as wrong," says Lesego Tlhwale from African gay rights group Behind the Mask.

"It is seen as un-African for two women to marry. Some men are threatened by this and then want to 'fix' it," she adds.

She notes that the women who have been killed in South Africa so far have been described as "butch lesbians" - a slang term used to describe lesbians with a masculine or manly appearance.

"They are threatened by these kinds of lesbians in particular. They say they are stealing their girlfriends. It is a warped sense of entitlement and a need to protect their manhood."

South Africa is the only African country to have legalised homosexual marriage, and one of only 10 in the world. The constitution specifically forbids discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.

But on the ground, prejudice remains common.

On the streets of Johannesburg, it is easy to find men who support the idea of "corrective rape".

"When someone is a lesbian, it's like saying to us men that we are not good enough," Thulani Bhengu, 35, tells the BBC.

Very few cases of rape against lesbians have ever resulted in convictions.

No-one knows how many of the more than 50,000 cases of rape reported in South Africa each year are committed against gay women, because the victim's sexual orientation is not recorded.

Defiance
But after the murder of Ms Nogwaza - and a petition signed by 170,000 people around the world calling for an end to "corrective rape" - the justice department has begun to listen.

It is in the process of setting up a team to develop a strategy for tackling hate crimes against gay people, and is considering introducing heavier sentences for offences where the victim's sexual orientation is a factor in the crime.

Ms Nkosana is afraid that she might be attacked again, but says she will not be "forced back in the closet" - made to pretend that she is a heterosexual.
"They made me a victim in my own neighbourhood but I won't let them win," she says. "They can't stop me from being who I am."

But despite her defiant attitude, Ms Tlhwale says many South African lesbians are deeply worried.

"Everyone is scared," she says. "We have seen an increase in attacks against lesbians in recent months. Everyone we speak to is afraid that they might be next."

Here is a selection of your comments.

How can people act with such hatred to one another? Rape is rape and those men committing these heinous crimes should be put away for a very long time! The actions of these barbaric individuals are simply unacceptable.

Joan, Nairobi, Kenya

The justice system should be amended to stipulate penalty for offenders. Institutions and organizations need to be encouraged to set up programs to correct this social ills as well more protection for targeted individuals. People need to be educated, as a well informed individual will have respect for human right and value for human existence.

Monyei Patrick, Asaba, Nigeria

The world is still dominated by patriarchal attitudes and men still see women as sex objects, pandering to their needs. We are individuals and determine our own lives without the constraint of men. The fight continues as it has done for hundreds of years and men must wake up to the fact that not all of us women find them sexually attractive.

Roe Freeman, Italy

The problem is that most black men in South Africa are powerless, jobless, living in shacks. This is caused by mis-appropriated funds that are not being used for education, but instead to grow trade and business. South Africa wants to compete in the global market but is not taking care of what is happening to make the lives of their people better. Africa is the way it is because of the outside nations exploiting their resources and bribing their governments. People who are crying about something to be done in Africa should volunteer a year of their life and go teach in a school instead of reading an article and feeling informed.

Amanda, Cape Town, South Africa

How can South Africans legalise lesbianism? It is very bad and not too good for our culture as an African. Though raping them cannot correct such acts, we should also know that it is not biblical to be gay.

Bright Faloye, Nigeria

While I do not support the idea of legalizing gay marriage in Africa, I believe rape is worse. Convicted rapists need to undergo comprehensive psychiatric check-ups to certify them fit to even live with normal human beings in prison. How can anyone make love to someone begging and crying? All these things just make me want to regret being an African. Being gay in Africa is enough trauma how much more being a scared one?

Afeez Alade, Lagos, Nigeria

I can't even begin to describe how sickened I am by this story, Noxolo Nkosana is just an incredibly brave young women, if South Africa really wants to promote itself as a civilised, forward-looking country that respects the rule of law and the rights of
minorities, it should hold Noxolo up as a shining example of its aspiration.

Gareth Sinclair,

It is bad and barbaric for anyone to lynch or murder another due to his/her sexual orientation and this must be condemned in no uncertain terms. Having said that, it is also unnatural and unAfrican for people to engage in such practices that go against all laws of nature. Not all things that the developed countries practise are good for us. Lesbians and gays are not "Africans". Our values and way of life must be maintained.

Daniel Afetsi, Accra, Ghana

I equally don't subscribe to the notion of same-sex affairs but people have made a choice and we have no right to judge them. They will one day have to account for their decisions before God. But what continues to disgust me is how certain sections of the South African community continue to wallow in ignorance and vent their frustrations at people who have nothing to do with their sorry lives. There is a moral decay, a lack of respect for human life that can not continue to be ignored.

Chilufya Musosha, Lusaka, Zambia

Rape is used for control, no more, no less. As a nurse, I've had many female patients who are terrified of telling the police what happened. Insecurity within the rapist, of his own manhood, is not easy to prove, yet it is the motivating factor. Acceptance that people are not here to be owned, or treated at the whim of others is a reality. Why can that not be understood, internationally? That baffles me, daily. My prayers are with each of you.

Grace Jones, California

In 2011, we should accept we are all individuals and are allowed to make our own choices of who we love and who to share our lives with. In this case it is about acceptance of others, if the men who attack these women cannot face up to their own securities and stop to blame others who are different to them, I fear this situation will never change.

PB, Hong Kong

I am a gay woman who has been married to my wife just under a year. I think it is ridiculous that these men are allowed to get away with such horrendous acts of demoralisation and degrading acts on women just because of their sexual orientation. I count myself lucky that I was born in a country where I can walk down the street without fear of being attacked!

Leanne Bird, UK

My son is gay and living in an open and happy relationship. He had bad times even in this country because of his sexuality, but nothing like these poor women are suffering. He now lives in Iceland where your private life seems to be accepted as just that, private. When I read of suffering like this I am even more certain that the people of the world need educating in so many ways; men in particular need to be taught to be tolerant and understanding of the lives and loves of others.

Ernie Noble, UK

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