Conqueror

When one Zimbabwe native decided to fight for the future of her country, she became an activist.

When she was beaten, raped and nearly killed for her activism, she became a survivor.

By James Kindle

For Zimbabwe native Sehlule Ngwenya, it happens every day. Usually it’s when she’s sitting on the bus or in a taxi that she’ll feel the gnawing pain in her right knee. And then she’ll remember all that comes with it.

She’ll remember the mob outside her house in the middle of the night, breaking her windows.

She’ll remember her flight to Botswana and subsequent deportation back to Zimbabwe.

She’ll remember her abduction in broad daylight and the room that became her cell for three days.

She’ll remember the beatings, the dousings with freezing water, the gang rapes by familiar men—her neighbors—on the cold cement floor.

And she’ll remember her escape, when her tormentors slammed into her with the truck they used to kidnap her, attempting to destroy her life but only succeeding in destroying her knee.

On this shattered knee, Ngwenya fled a dangerous, ineffective hospital and left her native country for a second time, traveling across the border to South Africa, where she would find her way to the South African Centre for Survivors of Torture (SACST). Ngwenya, 32, now works there, providing therapy to other torture survivors and, in doing so, giving therapy to herself.

It is here that Ngwenya sees the second daily reminder of what she went through—in the stream of survivors who come, unceasingly, through the front door of the center’s downtown
Johannesburg office, only feet from where Ngwenya sits at her desk. A third are women. Through their stories, she continually confronts her own—finding dozens of other members of this brutal sisterhood—and confronts the scope of the Zimbabwe government’s war on its own people.

“I’m not the only one,” Ngwenya says. “There are many victims outside who have gone through what happened to me.”

**The fight begins**

Ngwenya is sitting in a spacious 11th floor conference room of SACST. Her short dreadlocks are pulled back from brown eyes that shift from vibrancy to blankness. Her feet, wrapped in black slip-on shoes that twist into a braid of leather over her toes, are stretched in front of her, her knee unable to bend the right foot back. When Ngwenya lifts her lime green pleated skirt, this knee is an uneven, speckled bump—a mix of brown skin and white scars. Her arms, too, bear the white markings of the whip that was used on them.

Just down from these scars are 12 bracelets in green, red and black. They’re the colors of South Africa’s flag. And Zimbabwe’s.

The story of Ngwenya’s scars, and of her relationship with the countries whose flags’ colors wrap her arm, begins with her first name: Sehlule, which means “winner” or “conqueror” in her native Ndebele.

In 1975, when Ngwenya was born, Zimbabwe was on the cusp of a revolution. Great Britain’s rule in what was then Rhodesia was facing intense opposition from native African political parties, notably the Zimbabwe African National Union party (ZANU). The year before, ZANU had elected an influential political prisoner named Robert Mugabe as its president.
“When my mother gave that [name] to me, I think, in 1975…it seemed independence was around the corner,” she says.

It was, and in 1980 a 5-year-old Sehlule Ngwenya watched as her newly free, hopeful country elected Mugabe as its first prime minister.

By 2000 things had changed. Now president, Mugabe had grown increasingly authoritarian: rigging elections, assuming greater powers and wiping out thousands of Ndebele rebels in what many consider ethnic cleansing. In early 2000 he put forth a constitutional referendum to seize white-owned farms and give them to black Zimbabweans. It failed—the party’s first loss in any vote.

But Mugabe’s party, now ZANU-PF, went ahead with the land redistribution anyway, further damaging an economy facing, at that time, 50 percent unemployment and 60 percent inflation. Today, unemployment is 80 percent, at least; the inflation percentage is in the multi-millions.

ZANU-PF also began brutalizing members of the fledgling opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), then only a year old.

Like so many who end up beaten, killed or simply vanished in Zimbabwe, Ngwenya decided to raise a dissenting voice. In 2000 she joined the MDC.

“When I joined it, I wasn’t worried about [retribution] because my main focus was to make a change in Zimbabwe,” she says, adding that widespread beatings were not yet taking place.

Ngwenya, who lived in Bulawayo, the country’s second largest city, signed up as a youth leader for the group. But to join the MDC was to draw the attention, and wrath, of ZANU-PF supporters, and in 2002 they came for her.
In the middle of the night, men showed up at her parents’ home—shouting for her, breaking windows and frightening her young daughters, then just 2 and 6. “That was the first time when I got very scared,” she says. “My daughters…they couldn’t really understand what was happening.”

Ngwenya and her family were able to flee out the back door from the men screaming outside her home, shattering her windows like they shattered her sense of security. The next day, with her parents’ help, she took a bus to the border of nearby Botswana and, having no passport, jumped the fence.

Ngwenya stayed in the capital, Gabarone, until August 2003, working as a school custodian. Her children stayed with her parents. (Ngwenya and her husband divorced soon after the birth of her second child.) Ngwenya refused to apply for refugee status because she didn’t want to stay in what she saw as restricted, dirty refugee camps Botswana had set up.

“It’s very horrible there. You’re not allowed to go out. You just sit in the camp, doing nothing, and there’s no food there,” says Ngwenya, a non-native English speaker who sometimes has difficulty with phrasings. “So I thought maybe I should just stay there without the legal papers because the idea of staying [in the camp] was something else.”

But Ngwenya was aware of the risks of staying in the country illegally. As she was being transported back to Zimbabwe after being caught by Botswana police in August 2003, she knew she might again face the violence of ZANU-PF.

“I knew that one day they will come back,” she said.

**Taken**

In less than a month, that day would come.
It was a cold, windy Thursday afternoon when she and 14 other MDC supporters were making their way to a party meeting along a busy Bulawayo road. It was about 2 p.m. Nighttime was dangerous in the city, but this was a bright day. Ngwenya thought she’d be safe.

“The day we were kidnapped, we didn’t think anything would happen to us,” says Ngwenya, who was 27 at the time. “We were so relaxed.”

Then she heard screeching tires behind her, a sound that still terrifies her. It was members of the ZANU-PF youth militia, a lawless contingent of young party supporters whom the government allows to brutalize dissidents with impunity.

Six people in the group managed to escape. Ngwenya did not. A man grabbed her by the hand, reached around her back and threw her into the cab of an open truck. She was taken, along with two other women and five men, to a private house in Bulawayo. It wasn’t until later that she discovered she’d been taken to a house notorious for torture—a house where friends of hers had been taken and never heard from again.

Ngwenya didn’t think she would ever be heard from again either. “What was in my mind was I don’t think we’ll survive because no one knew where we are.”

The first day, the beatings started. The men used a whip made from a stick and some rope to beat the women’s arms. They punched them, kicked them, threw them against walls. They poured buckets of freezing water on them. They demanded to be told information Ngwenya didn’t know, like the location of opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai. They called the captives white people’s puppets, dogs.

For the three days the women were held, they were given no food. They could only sneak drinks of water when they were escorted to the toilet.
Between the beatings, Ngwenya could see the room around her. Bare. Nothing but a cement floor, a window and white walls covered in dried blood. There was a locked wooden door and a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. There were no blankets, Ngwenya remembers. No mattresses.

The second day, the rapes began. There were five men. Boys, Ngwenya calls them, as they were all younger than her. They would come, drunk, and blindfold the women with black cloths. And in the darkness, in the room with no blankets and no mattresses, they would rape the women one by one on the ground. “[They would say,] ‘You girls are Tsvangirai’s prostitutes, so today we want to feel what Tsvanirai’s feeling,’” she says, emotionless.

By Sunday, Ngwenya was very weak. During the continued beatings and rapes, she would collapse, not knowing what was going on around her. Then she heard the sound of breaking glass—a sound that had meant the beginning of her nightmare a year ago. This time, it was the male captives helping the women to escape. But in her weakened state, Ngwenya had a difficult time running away.

Her abductors heard the sound of breaking glass as well, and though she managed to run a few kilometers, the men caught up with her. “[They were] using a car. We were running, so we didn’t have a chance,” she says.

On a busy street, as the sun set on Bulawayo, Ngwenya glanced back just in time to see the ZANU-PF youth ram their truck into her right side, trying to kill her. Starving and brutalized, she blacked out and fell to the pavement.

**Flights**
Ngwenya awoke in a hospital. While she had lain unconscious, the men who had hit her drove off, leaving her to die. Her fellow captives had called an ambulance, but not knowing where she had been taken, they and her family spent days going from hospital to hospital until they found her.

In the hospital, Ngwenya’s open wound went without care. With doctors on strike and nurses in short supply, especially for a supporter of the opposition party, Ngwenya was just given painkillers. A specialist might have salvaged her mangled knee; none ever came.

After a couple weeks, with the unceasing pain so sharp it made Ngwenya’s heart race, she made plans to end the pain forever by taking her own life. She stopped taking the painkiller tablets and sleeping pills that were her only treatment and instead hid them under her pillow.

“To me, I thought it’s better to die because that pain, I couldn’t stand for it,” she says. “I think there were about 20-something [pills]…and I thought that maybe if I just took them all, I would die.”

As she was preparing her cache of pills, Ngwenya’s father visited her and began sobbing upon seeing his broken daughter. The visit was transformative.

“He made me change my mind. Otherwise, I think I could have overdosed on pills,” she says. “No one knows about it. I didn’t tell anyone about it. I only discussed it when I was in South Africa. [My father doesn’t] know about it.”

Ngwenya decided to live, but figures began appearing who had other plans. These ZANU-PF supporters hovered over the bed where she lay. “They just would come there and stand, so I started to ask questions to my mom, ‘What is happening?’ I was so scared because in a hospital, those people can do anything. No one can stop them.”
What the men were doing, she would realize, was biding their time until they could finish what their collaborators had started. “I knew that those people were from that group [ZANU-PF]. I didn’t know their faces, but I knew,” she says. “If they find you, they kidnap you again and go and finish you, so I knew that if I stayed, that is going to happen to me. They were just waiting for the right time, I think.”

So after two months at the hospital, while the staff took a lunch break, Ngwenya snuck out to a car her mother and uncle had arranged and escaped to a rural area of Zimbabwe, where she lived with her grandmother.

Even here, danger abounded. Ngwenya would hear of tortures taking place nearby. She knew ZANU-PF supporters would find her again; she knew she had to leave.

Ngwenya remembers crying as she saw her older daughter for the last time in four years. When Ngwenya’s parents brought the 8-year-old to say goodbye, Ngwenya struggled to explain why she had to leave her again, not knowing when she would ever return. “She asked, ‘Why are you doing this? Why can’t you just leave MDC?…Why are they doing this?’” Ngwenya says. “I couldn’t answer her….At the time I was too emotional.”

Despite the trauma that ZANU-PF members have inflicted on her, Ngwenya says she would make the same decision, to join the MDC, in an instant. “Yeah, I still would have joined because I always tell people that I wish I wasn’t injured because…if there’s a time that they will say, ‘OK, here is the guns. We need you people to go in and fight for [Zimbabwe],’ I’m the first person who is going to stand up right now and say, ‘Give me that gun.’ I don’t regret anything about joining MDC.”
So in April 2004, again with her uncle’s help, Ngwenya left her home country a second time, hiring a driver to bribe officials and smuggle her across the border into a new life in South Africa.

**Struggling to start over**

No longer fearing for her life, Ngwenya now had to worry about making a living in South Africa. Unable to move quickly, she couldn’t work in a restaurant or hospitality job. She was hired as a maid but was fired after two days when her employer realized Ngwenya couldn’t crouch to clean.

Desperate, Ngwenya turned to the Southern African Women’s Migration Affairs, a non-governmental organization. Upon hearing her story, agency officials referred her to the South African Centre for Survivors of Torture (SACST), which provides legal, medical and psychological help to victims of Zimbabwe’s torture campaign.

The center pushed to get an operation for Ngwenya, but she says there weren’t specialists in Johannesburg who could fix her knee by fusing her leg bones together. Because knee replacements aren’t recommended for young patients, she was told she’d need to wait until she’s 40—a blow that still causes Ngwenya to weep.

“You know, sometimes it’s very painful to know you’re not born like that,” she says in slow, deliberate words through shaky gasps of air. Her hands are pressed so tightly against her face that the tears stream in rivulets between her clenched fingers and down her scarred arms. “I wasn’t born crippled.”
Ngwenya decided to apply for refugee status, which meant waiting and sleeping in line at the Johannesburg Home Affairs office for three days on her injured knee. In January 2005 she was granted refugee status, though she is still waiting for her government-issued ID card.

Ngwenya scraped by on vouchers from charitable organizations and through odd jobs like cooking and ironing until she eventually found a job with SACST. In December 2005 she was asked to help with the group’s Tree of Life rehabilitation program, which she had attended the month before. The program uses world philosophies and elements of transcendentalism to encourage dialogue and understanding among different segments of society.

Ngwenya began volunteering at the group’s rehabilitation retreats in northeastern South Africa, and in May 2007 she was hired as a group leader. She now works under a facilitator, though she says, with a smile, that she expects to be fully accredited soon. In her time at the center, she has led 10 workshops for about 100 torture survivors.

“It’s like I’m being counseled, like debriefing or something,” Ngwenya says. “You know sometimes if you’ll be thinking like, ‘I’m the only person who’s going through this torture,’ but listening to other people’s stories…they have gone through what has happened to me.”

“Everyone is traumatized”

Just how many Zimbabwe emigrants in South Africa have been tortured is difficult to calculate. The numbers that have been confirmed, though, are staggering.

In a study of egregious human rights violations in Zimbabwe between 2001 and 2007, the Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum established that nearly 30,000 violations had taken place. Of these violations, 3,800 were considered torture, including 497 in 2003, when Ngwenya was
kidnapped. These numbers include only those reported to the forum, so true amounts are likely much higher.

Frances Spencer, the clinical manager of SACST, has seen the human side of this brutality firsthand in the faces of the more than 500 torture survivors who’ve come to her organization for help, and she’s gained a better understanding of how and why violence is used. “Torture is to break the individual down, psychologically, physically. [It’s] to destroy that individual’s life, to destroy the individual’s family, to destroy the society as well,” Spencer says. “It’s a means to maintain control and power.”

One-third of SACST’s clients are women, and within this group, about one in seven have been raped. Spencer, who co-authored a 2006 report about female torture survivors, says social perceptions and mores encourage the sexual victimization of women and dissuade them from seeking treatment.

“Women and children are seen as more vulnerable…and because women don’t have a voice, they’re going to keep silent about the experiences of rape. And should they verbalize that they’ve been raped, there’s that stigma attached to it,” she says. “A woman would then find that a man or a husband would then say, ‘You were violated, and I don’t want to have anything to do with you.’ So women keep silent about it.”

She found that sexual torture also results in serious health ramifications. Rape survivors have to worry about being infected with AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases, with some reports showing that infection has been deliberate. Psychological problems are much higher among rape victims as well, Spencer found.
“It has got to do with a woman’s sexual identity,” Spencer says. “If you’re forced into having sexual relationships with a male or a female, it’s a crossing of boundaries. It’s a violation of that person as a being.”

Ngwenya says she has dealt with psychological issues since her experiences, though she has never sought professional treatment. “No, no…myself, I’m not OK. I don’t want to lie to you,” she says, adding that she always faces anxiety over the daily news from Zimbabwe.

Spencer’s study also found that rape acted as something of a gateway act: Those willing to commit rape were more willing to do just about anything to their victims. For example, women who were raped were much more likely to be beaten, electrocuted or psychologically tortured through methods like sleep deprivation, solitary confinement and sensory deprivation or overstimulation.

But rape is certainly not the only torture inflicted on Zimbabwean victims, and likely tens of thousands of these survivors have come to South Africa suffering. And many others still live with their pain in Zimbabwe or wait for their time to come.

“Many people at home, they are traumatized,” Ngwenya says. “Even if they’re not involved in politic, everyone is traumatized.”

A search for answers

For now, Ngwenya sits in this office in this high-rise building, miles and lifetimes away from her existence in Zimbabwe. She has lost track of her former fellow captives, though she has heard that one was killed by ZANU-PF supporters in Zimbabwe a few years ago.

In a few hours, she’ll ride buses back to her Rosettenville home, buses with seats too low to accommodate her mangled, unbendable leg. Seats that will force her, yet again, to remember.
But Ngwenya still smiles—a vibrant, jutting smile she never thought she’d wear again after what happened in that house—and she smiles especially large when she talks about her daughters. The girls are now 8 and 12, and neither really understands why, after four long years, their mother can’t come home. Ngwenya says her older daughter is studious and bright. Her younger daughter, Ngwenya worries, doesn’t even remember her mother’s face.

It’s for the future of these girls, who still live with her parents in Zimbabwe, that Ngwenya fears the most. She fears that what happened to her in that white Bulawayo house years ago could one day happen to them.

Ngwenya also fears for the future of her homeland. Zimbabwe is a country where she says she “went through hell,” but one she still wants to return to. It’s a country she says she would still be willing to fight for, to give her life for—a country for which she already almost did.

And Ngwenya wonders if she’ll ever see a reckoning for what happened to her, to the hundreds of other survivors that stream into this office and to the thousands upon thousands of others who never will. She says she doesn’t want revenge—“No, no, no, no, no,” she says at the suggestion, because “it won’t help, it won’t help.”

What she wants is some measure of justice and, if there could possibly be any, some answers as to how this could happen to her country, her fellow Zimbabweans and her. “What happened, we’re going to talk about it,” she says. “Not revenging. Just talk about it. Getting clarification as to why, why, why, why they did it.”