

# Seafarer's rape and murder

## Turning tragedy into international campaign

When the *Sunday Times* broke the story of a South African maritime trainee's rape and murder the whole nation gasped in horror. But as **Jane Barrett** tells sexual abuse at sea is common and trade unions have had enough of it.

**A**khona Geveza grew up in the Eastern Cape village of Nxarhuni, not far from East London. Born in 1991, she was the only child of unemployed and desperately poor parents. She was the pride and joy of Zenzile and Nokwakha Geveza, who were thrilled when their daughter was selected to be trained as a ship's navigation officer.

Akhona was one of 100 young women enrolled in the Transnet National Ports Authority's Maritime Studies Programme. The Programme was devised to promote seafaring amongst young South Africans generally, but also specifically to ensure that the Ports Authority was able to fill qualified vacancies for ship's officers in its port activities such as tug masters and navigation pilots. Supported by Satawu (South African Transport & Allied Workers Union), Transnet National Ports Authority deliberately targeted the recruitment of young women, particularly from rural areas, into the programme.

The training is part land-based, at technical colleges in Durban and Cape Town, but practical experience at sea is a prerequisite for full qualification. Geveza's 'sea time' was on a container ship

called *Kariba*. The ship is only two years old and is owned by Safmarine, which in turn is owned by the biggest ship owning company in the world, Danish AP Moller Maersk. *Kariba* was flagged in the United Kingdom and like most international trading ships, had a multinational crew.

On 24 June *Kariba* was heading for the port of Rijeka in Croatia when Geveza's young life ended, just two weeks before she was due to qualify. Around 2pm, her body was found at sea by local Croatian police after she had been reported missing.

The horrific circumstances of Geveza's disappearance and death soon came to light.

It emerged the Geveza had on the morning of 24 June reported to the Shipmaster, Klaudiusz Kolodziejczyk, that she had been repeatedly raped by a senior officer on board. She had previously confided in another South African cadet but stated that she was frightened to report the abuse, but on this day she found the courage. According to a *Sunday Times* report of 19 July, the shipmaster 'immediately confronted the officer and convened a conference with him and Geveza for 11am'. But Geveza

never arrived for the meeting. Instead, three hours later her body was found at sea.

Claims were soon made about a suspected suicide, as a bottle of pills and a bottle of thinners were found on deck. But Geveza's friends and family don't believe this. Her death is now the subject of an enquiry by the UK Maritime Accident and Investigation Branch, which has jurisdiction because *Kariba* is registered in the UK.

Collecting and consolidating evidence is not going to be an easy task however. Ensuring that justice is done and that the allegations of rape are at the very least investigated is going to be even more difficult. The alleged abuser, a Ukrainian, has since been discharged by Safmarine. A post mortem was conducted in Croatia, and a second one in South Africa before Geveza was buried.

Whatever the outcome of the investigation and possible charges however, Geveza's death has put the spotlight on abuses at sea. In investigating the circumstances of her death, the *Sunday Times* spoke to a number of cadets. One young woman described her experience: 'When we arrived on the vessel, there were ten women, and we were told that the captain is our



Danish AP Moeller-Maersk's, 'Kariba', the container ship where Geveza met her brutal fate.



Akhona Geveza

god; he can marry you, baptise you and even bury you without anybody's permission. We were told that the sea is no man's land and that what happens at sea, stays at sea.'

Another said, 'It was like we were dumped in the middle of a game park.' They reported knowledge of a female cadet who twice terminated pregnancies arising from her rape at sea. The alleged abuse was not confined to women either. A male cadet who reported that he and another male cadet had been raped by senior officers while at sea said: 'I really don't want to talk about it. Bad things are happening at sea and I am one of the victims.'

These published statements have resulted in a rash of similar allegations from seafarers of many other nationalities. Bullying at sea has previously been taken up by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and its seafaring affiliates, but sexual abuse is now the focus of an international campaign.

The ITF passed a motion at its 42nd Congress held in Mexico in early August which sends a strong message to the shipping industry in general and AP Moeller Maersk as the ship owner in particular, that the worldwide maritime trade union family 'will not tolerate this kind of treatment of any seafarer

on any ship, and that the ITF will redouble its efforts to support the eradication of harassment and bullying at sea and the promotion of mutual respect and equal opportunities in shipping.'

The Women's Section of the ITF has also agreed to name its activities on 25 November this year, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, after Akhona Geveza. A postcard campaign will be run, with transport workers from all over the world demanding that AP Moeller Maersk and other ship owners do everything in their power to break the practices of abuse.

Locally, Satawu has had talks with Transnet Ports Authority about the future of the training scheme. Having supported the scheme from its inception, Satawu is committed to ensuring that it continues, but that the necessary rights are put in place to ensure that trainees are protected against abuse. Encouraging trainees to know their rights, including the right to join a trade union, must be part of the curriculum.

Satawu will also continue to push government to introduce policies that encourage the development of a local ships register, and for the workers on board South African flagged ships to be fully covered by the Labour

Relations Act. The best protection for South African seafarers going forward will be employment on ships that are owned, controlled and regulated under South African law. (See SALB 25.1 Feb 2001 'Flags of Convenience international exploitation, international solidarity'.)

Satawu will also remain in close contact with Geveza's family in the Eastern Cape, assisting to make sure that they do not get lost and forgotten in between the myriad of authorities and companies dealing with her case.

Geveza will be remembered as a brave pioneer, who was part of breaking the gendered boundaries of seafaring. Satawu is determined that her death should not be turned against a future generation of women who want to go to sea. Her death must become the foundation of a solid and successful campaign to make seafaring safe for all workers. In the words of a contributor to a Facebook memorial page to Geveza, 'W'l 4ever b proud of u sisi, u broke da boundaries. showing dat even if u'r a village gel, da sky's da limit. U r da inspiration'.

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