



Photos: Rosalee Telela, SPEAK

Taking control. Moutse women attend a health forum meeting

Moutse's battle for health care

Most people in our country, especially women and the poor, have little control or say over health care. But one community has decided to get involved in running its health services. Rosalee Telela visited Moutse

The people of Moutse in the Eastern Transvaal, especially women, have a long history of resistance. This 700 000-strong community resisted being part of KwaNdebele. They also fought for land, water, schools, clinics and better education.

Faced with a lack of good health services, they are determined to fight for change.

"There is only one hospital, called Philadelphia, which has 600 beds and serves the 1.4 million people who live in Moutse and KwaNdebele. There are only two clinics and some mobile units which visit once a month," said

Martha Matlala, chairperson of the newly formed Moutse Health Forum (MHF).

"The hospital cannot cope with the number of patients. There is a shortage of beds, food, medicine and doctors," she added.

This situation forced the women of Moutse to write a letter, and later to meet with, former health minister Dr Rina Venter.

"We met with her, but nothing concrete came out of that meeting. Later we met with people from the national health department and the Philadelphia hospital board.

"This time, the civics were part



Lack of access to clean water is one of the problems the Moutse Health Forum plans to deal with

of the negotiating team. We went there to make our demands as women and rural people," said Matlala.

When their demands were not met, they decided to form the Moutse Health Forum (MHF).

The forum consists of the Rural Women's Movement, the National Education and Health Workers Union (Nehawu), Moutse Civic, the Congress of Traditional Leaders of SA (Contralesa), the Youth Development Forum and local health committees.

"We decided to approach the Philadelphia hospital board, who are responsible for the running of the hospital. We demanded that the board be changed to include elected members from the community," Matlala said.

After negotiations, it was agreed that half the board mem-

bers would be people from the Moutse community.

"Our membership on the board will be useful only if we unite on issues and solutions to problems," said Matlala.

Although the Moutse community now have representatives on the board, a lot has still to be changed.

"There is still a shortage of doctors and medicine. The new board has met only once. At that meeting, only one member of the old board attended. But we are lucky because there are members of Nehawu on the board who are willing to help solve the existing problems."

The MHF, together with the new board, plan to train community health workers. They also want to promote community health care.

"Through health education, people will be empowered to deal with health issues.

Community health workers will be based in communities, so women will not have to walk long distances with children on their backs to get to the nearest hospital."

By focusing on prevention rather than the cure of illnesses, community health will reduce the cost of health services and transport, Matlala said.

"Education around family planning, pregnancy, childbirth and contraception is important. Many women die during childbirth and pregnancy. This problem is worse in rural areas because of the lack of health care services. The number of deaths can be reduced through community health care.

"When women are empowered to deal with their own health, they can participate more actively in the social, political and economic life of the community," she added.

Water also plays an important role in a community's well-being.

"You cannot expect people to be in good health if they do not have a supply of clean water. At the moment we don't have enough water taps. Women, even those who are pregnant and old, have to walk long distances to fetch water," said Matlala.

Other issues that the forum and the board deal with include nutrition, sanitation, immunisation, general illness and injuries.

"It is women and children who suffer the most when the health care system is bad. We want to raise the health status of people in Moutse, especially that of the woman and child," Matlala said. ☉