



Photos by Kate Truscott

Shanaaz Majiet represents Disabled People South Africa in the Western Cape Women's National Coalition. She has just completed a law degree at the University of Cape Town

I had a choice...

At the time of the accident, I had just passed Standard 9. I spent only three months in hospital: most people with my injuries spend at least eight months. But I was in a rush to get on with my life.

I said to myself: "Don't waste time, Shanaaz. You've got a choice. Either you can sit here and rot or you can get on with your life." So I went back to school.

Shanaaz Majiet was a young girl of 17 when she was paralysed in an accidental shooting. Now in her early 20s, she talked to *Kate Truscott* about her life since the accident...

That year, I failed matric. This was a big blow because I had always done well at school. It was hard to come to terms with failure. People asked me: "Wouldn't you be better off with your own kind in a disabled school?" I said: "No way."

I swallowed my pride and went back to my old school. This was tough but I persisted, and passed my matric the next year.

I am the eldest child and my parents are divorced, so I was used to having responsibilities. But after the accident, the reaction of my family was confusing. We went through months of arguments.

They wanted to do everything for me. The flat we lived in was very small. I couldn't get into the kitchen in my wheelchair. I thought I was the only one who had to adapt to the situation. I didn't realise my family had to adapt too. I had to create space for them.

coming to terms with myself as a woman. I didn't know how to see myself. Was I a woman, or was I a girl? I had to think about what a woman is.

Women are often presented as sexy in magazines and on television. Their ability to have babies is also stressed. I had to struggle to find out where I fit in.

I wondered if I would have a boyfriend. I came to the conclusion you can't depend on what other people expect of you. I had to establish my own identity and my own sexuality.

men, but their families as well. They want to know if I can cook and clean.

Well, I'm not going to be subjected to this! I'm going to call the shots. I can see my own womanhood clearly. I'm going to fall in love and fall out of love like anyone else. I won't allow anyone to think of me as less than a woman.

I became a peer counsellor for the disabled in 1989 to advise other people with similar difficulties. This helped me see gender and disability more clearly. I'd like to say to women



Shanaaz Majiet with other delegates at a conference on women and government in Durban, December 1992

with disabilities: we have a right to control our own lives. We have a right to a place to live, a job and to decide our own sexuality.

We want the freedom to choose what lives we want for ourselves. We want to decide our own destiny. It does not have to be a husband and housework. We have allowed our voices to be

It had always been my dream to be independent. So when I passed matric and went to university, I moved out of home.

My mother thinks I'm too aggressive. But I have to be, otherwise I am treated like a child. For example, some people don't speak to me directly, but ask my mother what is wrong with me. I refuse to allow this.

The hardest struggle was

After I sorted this out for myself, I felt more confident about talking about it with other disabled people and also with men who are not disabled.

This is important because men often see me as asexual - as if I'm not really a woman. They don't see me as a partner in bed. They want to know if I can have sex and whether I can have children. And it's not just the

taken away. We must reclaim our collective voice. ☪

For information about organisations for disabled people in your area, contact: Disabled People South Africa PO Box 39008 Booyens 2016 Telephone: (011) 982 1130