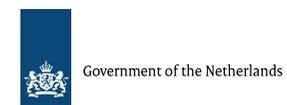
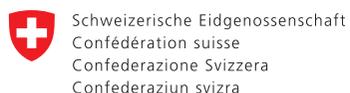


Report of the third Southern Africa Gender-Based
Violence Prevention Forum



Building bridges:
Strengthening
collaborative efforts
for GBV prevention
and response in
Southern Africa

19–21 August 2025
Johannesburg, South Africa



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Executive summary

The third Southern Africa GBV Prevention Forum, held in Johannesburg from 19 to 21 August 2025, brought together diverse stakeholders from across the region to reflect, share and co-create strategies for preventing and responding to gender-based violence (GBV). The Forum convened government representatives, civil society organisations (CSOs), police services, legal practitioners, youth leaders, survivors, faith and traditional leaders, private-sector actors and international partners under the theme, *Building Bridges: Strengthening Collaborative Efforts for GBV Prevention and Response in Southern Africa*. The Forum revealed both progress and persistent challenges in addressing GBV. Discussions highlighted systemic drivers such as patriarchy, harmful cultural norms, economic dependency, digital exclusion and weak implementation of existing policies. Participants underscored the need to shift from crisis response to prevention, to strengthen survivor-centred justice and to expand inclusive approaches that recognise the intersecting vulnerabilities of women, youth, LGBTQIA+ persons, people with disabilities and rural communities.

Five thematic pillars guided deliberations: access to justice, education systems, overcoming funding gaps, technology and digital tools, and men as partners in prevention. Central to all these was the call for structural transformation, collective accountability and long-term investment in community-driven solutions. As one participant reflected: 'Behind every statistic is a shattered life; [hence] prevention should be on all our agendas.'

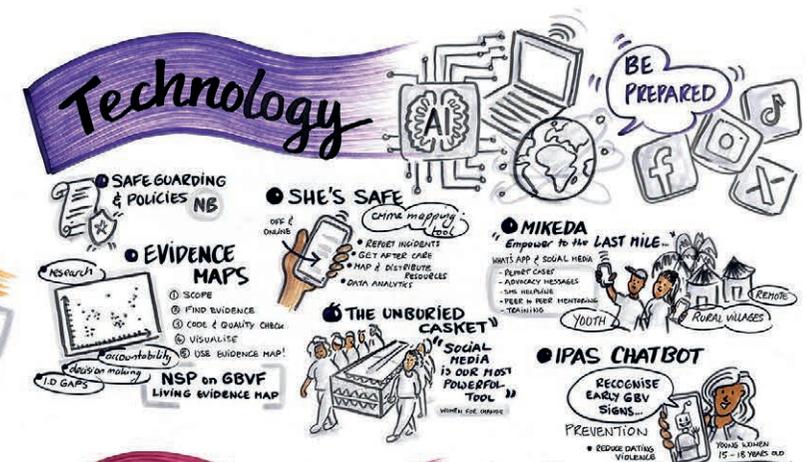
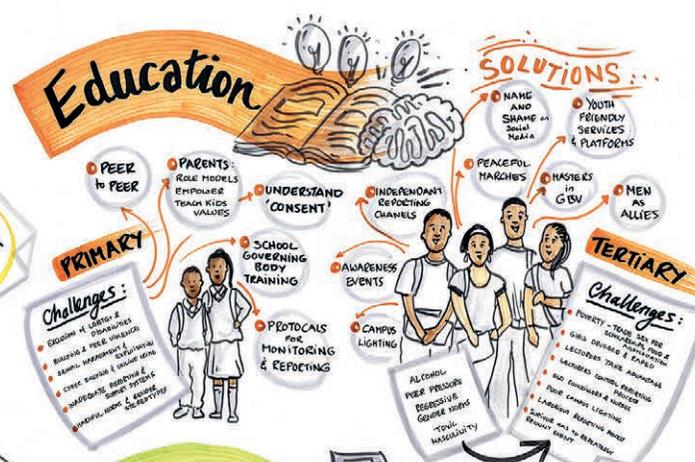
Good practices showcased during the Forum – from mobile courts and community paralegals to youth-led advocacy, survivor networks, faith-based partnerships and innovative digital tools – illustrated what is possible when responses are inclusive, well resourced and locally owned. Participants agreed that stronger regional collaboration, flexible funding models and political will are essential to scale such innovations and close persistent gaps.

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This report consolidates the key challenges, promising practices, and strategic recommendations from the Forum. It serves as both a record of collective insight and a roadmap for governments, civil society, donors, and communities to strengthen prevention and response to GBV in Southern Africa.



Graphic of Day 1 discussion (S Niederhumer)



Graphic of Day 2 and 3 discussions (S Niederhumer)

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) continues to undermine peace, justice and development across Southern Africa. Despite decades of advocacy and important legislative progress, the region still records unacceptably high rates of intimate-partner violence, femicide, child marriage, sexual violence and technology-facilitated abuse. These forms of violence are deeply rooted in structural inequalities, patriarchal norms and economic injustice affecting women, girls and marginalised groups disproportionately.

Against this backdrop, the third Southern Africa GBV Prevention Forum provided a critical platform for reflection and collective action. Co-hosted by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) and the Southern Africa Trust (SAT), the Embassies of Ireland, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Australia, as well as the Ford Foundation, the Forum built on the momentum of previous gatherings, with an explicit focus on strengthening survivor-led, multisector and cross-border collaboration.

The event brought together stakeholders from across the region, including policymakers, service providers, activists, academics, survivors and community leaders. It provided an opportunity to identify pressing challenges, exchange knowledge on innovative practices and chart a shared agenda for systemic transformation. The voices of youth, survivors and grassroots actors were particularly central, grounding discussions in lived realities and reminding stakeholders of the urgency of sustained action.

One participant emphasised: 'Condemnation alone is not enough, but broken systems have been allowed to fester for too long.' Another noted: 'Freedom cannot be achieved unless women are liberated from all forms of oppression.' These reflections capture the spirit of the Forum: a space that not only diagnosed the persistence of GBV but also articulated a vision for building bridges across sectors, communities and countries in order to end it.



2. Forum objectives and methodology

Building on prior forums, the 2025 GBV Forum aimed to:

- Explore cross-sectoral strategies for GBV prevention; Promote collaboration between governments, civil society and international partners;
- Advance the inclusion of men and boys in GBV-prevention programmes; Strengthen implementation of existing legal frameworks; and
- Promote community-led, bottom-up GBV-prevention strategies leveraging local knowledge.

Key outcomes sought included:

- Practical recommendations for improving coordination of GBV initiatives;
- An actionable road map to facilitate follow-up on agreed strategies; and
- A comprehensive report outlining strategies to scale successful GBV interventions.

The Forum employed a hybrid format, featuring interactive dialogue circles, thematic breakout sessions and a Tech Expo showcasing digital solutions. Wellness breaks and creative interludes provided reflective space, ensuring meaningful participation of survivors, youth and marginalised communities.

“Condemnation alone is not enough, but broken systems have been allowed to fester for too long.”



3. Key challenges identified

The third GBV Forum highlighted multiple interlinked challenges that continue to shape the landscape of GBV prevention and response across Southern Africa. While progress has been made in raising awareness and developing legal frameworks, persistent systemic barriers and implementation gaps undermine efforts to reduce violence. The challenges identified will be grouped into the following thematic areas:

3.1 Limited focus on prevention and on root causes

A recurring concern was the persistent prioritisation of reactive interventions over preventative measures. While services such as shelters, legal aid and psychosocial support are critical, they consume the majority of resources, leaving structural drivers of GBV such as patriarchal norms, economic inequality and social power imbalances insufficiently addressed.

Participants emphasised that investments in education, community norm transformation and economic empowerment are chronically underfunded. Without a deliberate shift toward prevention-focused interventions, efforts to reduce GBV remain reactive and unsustainable, perpetuating cycles of violence in affected communities.

3.2 Gaps in policy implementation and in accountability

Despite the presence of robust legal frameworks, their translation into meaningful justice remains inconsistent. Policies often exist in principle but fail to protect survivors effectively due to weak implementation, fragmented coordination across government departments, and limited accountability mechanisms.



Judicial and frontline justice actors are often excluded from the policy development process, complicating interpretation and enforcement in practice. Weak institutional accountability, insufficient resources and siloed government responses further widen the gap between policy intent and lived outcomes. There is a strong need for monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in order to ensure that legal frameworks lead to survivor-centred protections rather than symbolic commitments.

3.3 Limited integration of GBV prevention in education systems

Education is a critical platform for early intervention and norm change, yet its potential remains largely untapped. Schools frequently lack trained personnel, safe reporting mechanisms or survivor-support services, leading to mishandling or neglect of abuse cases.

At tertiary education institutions, students often experience limited representation in decision-making structures and insufficient support for reporting and responding to harassment. The absence of consistent, age-appropriate and survivor-sensitive education weakens young people's capacity to challenge inequality and fosters environments in which harmful gender norms are perpetuated.



High-level representatives from Embassies, the Trust and TikTok (Image: I Haffejee)

3.4 Resource constraints and funding gaps

Chronic underfunding remains a critical challenge. Grassroots and community-led initiatives, often closest to survivors, operate with limited, short-term and highly restricted funding, undermining sustainability.

Government allocations remain inconsistent, and donor funding often avoids core support, leaving essential services vulnerable. This lack of stable and flexible financing restricts innovation and the expansion of prevention programmes, especially in rural and marginalised areas. Without long-term, locally led investment, GBV interventions risk remaining fragmented and unsustainable.



3.5 Data and evidence gaps

Reliable, disaggregated and accessible data is essential for evidence-based GBV programming. Yet, major gaps persist. Existing data is often fragmented, inconsistently collected and inaccessible to stakeholders, undermining accountability, planning and learning.

Even where data exists, inconsistencies across reporting mechanisms make it difficult to track commitments or assess the impact of interventions. While innovative tools exist to visualise and analyse patterns of violence, their potential is limited if institutions fail to provide or share data systematically. Without comprehensive and accessible evidence, GBV interventions cannot be effectively targeted or scaled.



3.6 Technology-facilitated violence and the digital divide

Technology presents both opportunities and risks in addressing GBV. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), including cyberharassment, online stalking and digital surveillance, is a growing threat to survivors, activists and community leaders.

At the same time, the digital divide restricts access to prevention, awareness and support tools, particularly for rural women and marginalised communities. Barriers such as low digital literacy, high data costs and limited infrastructure constrain equitable access. Strategic partnerships are needed to expand digital-safety initiatives, ensuring that technology empowers communities rather than exposing them to further harm.

A Kanengoni providing opening remarks on behalf of CSVR and the Trust (Image: I Haffejee)



3.7 Survivor-centred response limitations

Access to survivor-centred services remains uneven. Survivors often experience re-traumatisation, systemic delays and limited accountability within response systems. Critical civil processes such as maintenance, custody, protection orders and asset distribution are often under-prioritised compared with criminal proceedings, leaving survivors without comprehensive support.

Persons with disabilities face additional barriers, including inaccessible facilities and insufficiently trained personnel. Weak institutional accountability and fragmented service delivery erode trust in justice systems, underscoring the need for accessible, survivor-focused and responsive interventions.

3.8 Engaging men as partners

Patriarchal norms and cultural expectations continue to hinder meaningful engagement of men in GBV prevention. While men are often viewed primarily as perpetrators, they can also be active allies in promoting positive masculinities and challenging harmful behaviours.

Current interventions often remain small-scale, tokenistic or short-term, limiting their effectiveness. Sustainable strategies are needed to foster reflective engagement with men, address male victimisation and promote co-responsibility in prevention efforts.

3.9 Language and communication challenges

Language plays a critical role in shaping societal attitudes to GBV. Words can reinforce stigma, blame or shame, or, conversely, empower and validate survivors' experiences.

The language used when addressing survivors and engaging men must be inclusive, sensitive and transformative. Shifting communication strategies to challenge harmful norms, promote empathy and foster accountability is critical to building supportive communities and effective prevention programmes.



4. Good practices and innovative solutions

Across Southern Africa, innovative practices have been developed to bring justice closer to communities, strengthen survivor support and create systemic pathways for prevention and accountability. These practices illustrate that, while challenges remain, there are promising approaches that can be scaled and adapted across the region.

In the area of legal interventions, several countries have pioneered models that reduce barriers to justice for survivors. In Malawi, normative guidelines and the use of mobile courts have been instrumental in ensuring that communities, particularly rural ones, can access justice without the burden of traveling long distances. Similarly, Zambia has introduced GBV Fast Track Courts which expedite cases and reduce the trauma of long, drawn-out legal processes for survivors. In Zimbabwe, a justice perception survey entitled *Why I Did Not Report* provided critical insight into the barriers survivors face when engaging with formal systems, while, in South Africa, initiatives such as the Sakhimpilo and Masibambisane projects have combined court support with community monitoring, creating survivor-centred mechanisms that build trust in justice pathways.

Survivor care and victim support have also been strengthened through creative partnerships. In South Africa, the expansion of support teams by local organisations, alongside the training of first responders, has significantly improved the quality of frontline care. Partnerships such as DeafSA's work to improve access for the hearing-impaired highlight the importance of inclusivity in GBV responses. Equally, collaborations between organisations and private-sector actors have addressed practical barriers. In Eswatini, the establishment of one-stop centres and specialist police units has offered an integrated approach, allowing survivors to receive psychosocial, legal and medical care under one roof.

Capacity building remains a cornerstone of sustainable change. In Zimbabwe, the Women Against Violence through Empowerment (WAVE) initiative has paired economic empowerment with skills training, enabling women to break cycles of dependency. In South Africa, Masifunde Learner Development has invested in peer-to-peer networks that foster youth agency



and encourage students to challenge harmful norms in their schools and communities. The Department of Basic Education has further advanced inclusivity through the introduction of sexual orientation, gender identity, expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) guidelines and value-clarification courses, equipping educators with the tools to create safer learning environments for all students.

The engagement of men and boys emerged as a key area of innovation across multiple contexts. In Eswatini, the Men as Partners programme has facilitated dialogue on, and awareness of, men's role in prevention. In South Africa, counselling models such as Mosaic, along with initiatives like Bro Code and Cornerstone Family forums, provide safe spaces for men to unpack toxic masculinity and redefine relationships. Botswana has demonstrated the value of community-driven approaches through programmes such as Monna Tiya, men's conferences and the use of sports clubs as spaces for reflection and dialogue.

Faith and traditional leaders have also been central in shifting norms. Zimbabwe's No GBV in My Community campaign, Mozambique's Muleide programme and Kenya's Mkutano wa Jadi dialogues have mobilised traditional leadership in reshaping cultural practices that silence survivors. In South Africa, faith-based interventions such as Father a Nation (FAN) and Women Impacting a Nation have integrated GBV awareness into religious spaces, ensuring that sermons and community rituals reflect survivor-centred messages. These efforts demonstrate that cultural and spiritual institutions can be powerful allies in dismantling harmful beliefs.

The digital space has increasingly become a site of both advocacy and innovation. CSOs such as Women for Change have harnessed social media for campaigns, petitions and survivor storytelling, amplifying voices that are often excluded from mainstream platforms. Regional campaigns such as #EndViolenceAgainstWomen, run in collaboration with digital platforms like TikTok and global partners, have broadened awareness and accountability. Youth-focused innovations, including the ChattyCuz chatbot, are equipping adolescents with tools to recognise and resist dating violence. At a systems level, the NSP-GBVF Living Evidence Map in South Africa has provided an evidence-based tool that makes data accessible for decision-makers and communities, ensuring that programming is guided by real-time evidence.

Youth-led models have also been critical to prevention efforts. Peer-to-peer interventions within schools and tertiary institutions are equipping learners with tools to challenge violence and support survivors. Student-activist networks in countries such as Botswana, Eswatini, Malawi and South Africa have been particularly vocal in advocating for survivor-centred policies within education systems, proving that youth leadership is not only possible but also transformative in addressing GBV at its roots.



Evidence-based research continues to play an important role in shaping interventions. The Afrobarometer survey has captured regional attitudes to GBV, highlighting trends that inform advocacy and programming. In South Africa, the GBVF Index developed by the Commission for Gender Equality has combined participatory and intersectional approaches, providing a model for data collection that centres the voices of those most affected by violence.

Innovative funding models are beginning to address the long-standing resource gaps in GBV programming. Partnerships with the private sector, such as in-kind support from companies that reduce operational costs, demonstrate how non-financial contributions can still strengthen responses. At a structural level, pooled approaches such as the GBVF Fund, which integrates contributions from government, donors and the private sector, are moving towards more sustainable financing mechanisms that ensure continuity beyond donor cycles.

Building on these practices, participants identified several opportunities for deeper collaboration. Regional networks through the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU) offer pathways for harmonised laws and accountability mechanisms, while global platforms provide opportunities to elevate GBV as a shared priority. Survivor and youth leadership must be institutionalised through formal advisory structures, ensuring that those most affected directly inform decision-making and donor consultations.

Faith and traditional institutions remain critical actors in reshaping community narratives, while digital-advocacy coalitions offer potential for scaling literacy, inclusivity and protection for marginalised groups. Men and boys can be engaged as allies through peer-to-peer dialogue, mentorship and reflective spaces that drive behaviour change. Finally, cross-sector collaborations, bringing together educators, law enforcement, social workers, lawyers and civil society, were highlighted as key to creating harmonised standards and avoiding duplication of efforts.



Network of Young People against GBV in Tertiary Institutions (Image: I Haffejee)



Taken together, these good practices and opportunities for collaboration highlight the creativity, resilience and determination across Southern Africa to build systems that are survivor-centred, inclusive and sustainable. They illustrate that the tools to disrupt GBV already exist within communities, and that the challenge now lies in scaling them, sustaining them and ensuring that they are backed by political will and adequate resources.



Panel discussions on various forms of access to justice (Image: I Haffejee)



5. Strategic recommendations

The Forum underscored that ending GBV requires multi-level, multi-stakeholder action. Building on the discussions and insights shared, a set of strategic recommendations emerged, directed at governments, civil society, donors, the private sector, faith and traditional leaders, as well as youth and men. These recommendations aim to strengthen coordination, ensure accountability and drive systemic transformation across the region.

For governments, participants highlighted the urgent need to move beyond policy development to robust implementation. Strong laws already exist in many countries but their impact is weakened by inconsistent enforcement, fragmented accountability and limited resourcing. Governments were therefore urged to allocate sustainable and transparent funding for GBV prevention and response, while also ensuring that interventions are inclusive of marginalised groups such as LGBTQIA+ individuals, persons with disabilities, rural women and migrants. Education systems were identified as critical spaces for early prevention, and governments were encouraged to integrate comprehensive GBV-prevention strategies into both basic and tertiary curricula, alongside safeguarding mechanisms and survivor-support services.

For CSOs, the Forum emphasised the importance of scaling community-led initiatives that are grounded in local realities. CSOs remain on the frontlines of prevention and response, often providing the first point of contact for survivors. Participants called for CSOs to expand survivor engagement in programme design and monitoring to ensure that interventions reflect lived realities. Furthermore, CSOs were encouraged to strengthen evidence-based advocacy by collecting, analysing and sharing data that can influence policy, funding decisions and accountability mechanisms.

For donors and development partners, sustainability and flexibility in funding were identified as decisive factors in strengthening GBV prevention. Short-term, project-based funding cycles often undermine continuity and innovation. Donors were urged to commit to long-term, core funding that supports institutional strengthening for grassroots organisations, particularly women-



and youth-led initiatives. The Forum further recommended that donors prioritise survivor-centred initiatives and invest in innovative approaches, including technology-enabled solutions, restorative justice and cross-border collaborations.

The private sector and technology platforms were recognised as important actors in both prevention and response. With digital spaces increasingly becoming sites of both harm and resistance, private-sector partners, particularly technology companies, were urged to collaborate with civil society to develop digital-safety tools that protect survivors, counter cyberharassment and promote ethical use of technology. Beyond the digital sphere, private companies can also contribute by supporting youth-led advocacy campaigns, funding survivor-support services and embedding GBV prevention in workplace policies and supply chains.

Faith and traditional leaders were acknowledged as powerful influencers in shaping community norms and practices. Their role is essential in dismantling patriarchal structures, challenging harmful cultural practices and fostering accountability within communities. Participants urged these leaders to adopt survivor-centred messaging in their teachings and community engagements, while actively promoting positive masculinity and equality. Faith and traditional structures were also encouraged to collaborate with CSOs and governments to create safe spaces for dialogue and accountability at the community level.

Finally, the role of youth and men emerged as central to shifting harmful norms and preventing violence. Young people were called upon to actively engage in advocacy, peer education and community mobilisation, ensuring that their voices are not only included but also drive innovation and norm change. Men, in particular, must be engaged not solely as perpetrators but as allies and advocates for gender equality. This requires investing in sustained behaviour-change programmes, peer-to-peer dialogue initiatives and reflective spaces where men can critically interrogate harmful masculinities and redefine their roles as partners in prevention.



Panel discussion on GBV in education systems (Image: I Haffejee)



6. Conclusion and way forward

The Forum reaffirmed that, while progress has been made across the region, the persistence and scale of GBV demand nothing less than bold, coordinated and sustained action. The deliberations over the three days revealed that the fight against GBV cannot be won through fragmented interventions or symbolic commitments. It requires an integrated and survivor-centred approach that addresses both immediate needs and the structural drivers of violence.

At the heart of the Forum's reflections was the recognition that policies, no matter how progressive, remain hollow if they are not translated into accessible, inclusive and survivor-sensitive implementation. Survivors consistently called for systems that restore dignity, offer justice without re-traumatisation and provide pathways for healing. Their voices reminded all stakeholders that survivor-centred approaches are not optional but foundational to meaningful change.

The way forward must therefore be grounded in locally driven and sustainable interventions that reflect the realities of diverse communities. Grassroots organisations, particularly women- and youth-led initiatives, continue to demonstrate creativity, resilience and deep contextual knowledge. Their leadership must be elevated and adequately resourced if prevention is to take root and responses are to remain relevant. Similarly, youth engagement cannot be treated as symbolic inclusion; rather, young people must be given a seat at the table as co-creators of solutions, advocates for justice and torchbearers of innovation.

Sustainable progress will also depend on flexible and long-term investments. Participants cautioned against the cycles of short-term funding that undermine continuity and weaken grassroots momentum. Donors and governments alike must commit to financing that is responsive, adaptable and anchored in survivor needs. Equally, the role of the private sector and innovative financing mechanisms emerged as critical in bridging resource gaps, underscoring the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration.



Political will remains a decisive factor. Without strong leadership, accountability structures and enforcement, even the most ambitious strategies will falter. Governments must move beyond rhetoric and act decisively to strengthen laws, ensure their implementation and invest in prevention as a national priority. Regional bodies such as the SADC and the AU were also called upon to play a stronger role in harmonising laws, monitoring commitments and supporting cross-border collaboration.

Equally important is the recognition that GBV cannot be addressed in isolation. Cross-sector collaborations among governments, civil society, faith and traditional leaders, the private sector and communities are essential to build coordinated and holistic responses. This includes integrating digital tools for prevention and protection, engaging men and boys as partners, transforming education systems into safe spaces, and ensuring that marginalised groups such as LGBTQIA+ individuals, persons with disabilities, rural women and migrants are fully included.

Ultimately, the Forum concluded that the shift must be from fragmented, crisis-driven interventions to a regional movement that tackles GBV at its roots. This requires a systemic transformation anchored in survivor-centred justice, grassroots leadership, inclusive governance and collective accountability. By centring survivors and embracing locally grounded, innovative and collaborative solutions, Southern Africa can move closer to a future where safety, dignity and equality are not aspirations but lived realities for all.

The challenge ahead is immense but so too is the collective will demonstrated at the Forum. The voices in the room from survivors, the youth, leaders and communities affirmed that change is possible if commitments are matched with courage, resources and action. The way forward is clear: to transform the fight against GBV from a patchwork of responses into a united regional movement that not only responds to violence but also prevents it before it begins.



Breakout discussion showcasing the use of technology to prevent GBV (Image: I Haffejee)





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