https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article9132

South Africa

Tackling GBV in the rural areas

- Features - Feminism -

Publication date: Saturday 18 October 2025

Amandla! interviewed Denia Jansen, Co-ordinator of the GBV programme for the Rural Women's Assembly (RWA)

Denia Jansen: RWA was formed in 2009 in Limpopo. It is a self-organised network for rural women, where we strive to hold the voices of rural women. We champion the struggle for access to land, seeds, water and many other resources, and protect the rights of women, including the right to freedom and independence from their counterparts who are men. It now exists in 11 SADC countries.

Amandla!: So why women? Aren't rural people in general suffering? What particular issues do women have?

DJ: When it comes to access to land and water and seeds and many other things, it's women who are not getting it. In many countries, even in South Africa, your connection to land as a woman is through your partner. The land stays in the hands of the men while women are doing the hard work, harvesting, and making sure that there's food on the table.

And there's the issue of patriarchy that women are dealing with on a daily basis, where men are over us. And we've suffered to break down that patriarchal system.

A!: Are you talking about women in traditional areas, communal land, or areas of capitalist land relations, where people own land?

DJ: We're dealing with women in all circumstances. Women who live in communal areas, especially with the traditional authorities, have to go and beg for those authorities to give them land. And the first thing they want to know is, where's your husband? In other areas, in the Western Cape, for example, we deal with commercial farmers. The housing contract of the farmhouse is in the name of the man and not the woman. On many farms, if a single woman goes to ask for a house or ask for work, then again, the first question is, who is your husband?

A!: So I suppose from this work with RWA, something must have emerged around GBV, which caused you within RWA to set up this programme. Can you explain what happened and how it started and what it is?

DJ: RWA itself is not a GBV organisation. But we realised while we were working with rural women, that this is the issue that constantly comes up. So, as RWA, we can't stay silent. We have to add our voice, and our energy, and some of our resources. These issues are also coming out of our feminist perspective on society, which sees it as structured in a way that there will always be violence against women and children.

Women and children are the vulnerable side of the community. And it has always been like this. Violence is structural: its purpose is to make sure that women stay subservient to men. Violence, I think, is used to keep women in our place and make sure that we don't gain power, so that we can be safe and free.

A!: What form does this violence take?

DJ: For us, violence is not just physical violence. For example, when we look at the issue of climate change, it's always women who lose, who are more vulnerable than men when there's a climate crisis. Losing your seeds and

losing your livelihood through your crops and being displaced: women are in the centre of that. Land grabs are violence, and it's always the land of women which is under threat. If you look at the issue of hunger and food insecurity, it's women that have to make sure that there's food on the table. It's women and children who are hungry. We have to explain to our children: there's no food tonight. It's violent to go hungry to bed.

And then it's the physical violence and other kinds of violence that women have to face. And we include children, of course. And we don't say just girl children. We say children. Because there are also young boys who are molested and are part of GBV.

A!: Faced with this huge issue for the members of RWA and for women in the rural areas, what have you, as the GBV programme, done to try and counter that?

DJ: We tell the government to declare this a crisis, because it is a crisis. It's a never-ending story for women and children.

Our campaign is regional in the SADC countries. It focuses on looking at what happens to a survivor at the grassroots level. Many complain about the role of the stakeholders—the police, the government departments responsible for women's rights, the churches, the schools, the community itself, and the survivors themselves. What role do these stakeholders play, and how can we hold them accountable for the safety of women and children? We realised, when we started this campaign, that women, especially rural women, have started to see GBV as normal. It happens to us, and we have to live with it.

When you are raped, you first have to go to the police station to lay a charge. When you get to the police station, there's a male figure over the counter. I have to explain to a man what happened to me. In many police stations, there's no single dedicated person who is trained on the issue of GBV. Even if there is one, when I go in the middle of the night, I will find a very ignorant staff member who says, go back, you're drunk, come back tomorrow.

And then there's the corruption. The perpetrator might be the principal of the school, be well known in the community, be the church leader, or a political leader. The corruption is deep. You can go and look for your docket. It's not there. Some survivors say our case never hit the local court. And what happens if it does reach the local court? Is the investigator experienced to make sure that they get the relevant information, to make sure the case stays in the court? And then the long wait to get justice makes survivors later give up.

We have a national command centre for GBV, where you can call in. But is it used? What is the use of it? We have different GBV organisations, hundreds of GBV organisations. We have corporates who are also fighting GBV. Look at Spar. They play a big part in the GBV campaign. But the numbers are growing every day, and our question is, why?

A!: What is your campaign, and what are you trying to achieve with it?

DJ: First of all, we really try to see how we can assist the survivors. But also to raise awareness on the issue. Not just the physical violence, but also the deeper, structural violence. We also put pressure on the government. If you look at Treasury, if you look at our budget now, there's just nothing for GBV. There is a ministry of women and children, but they are fucking useless. The whole fucking ministry is useless.

A!: What would they be doing if they weren't useless?

DJ: First of all, they would have long ago declared GBV to be a crisis. It has to be handled like a crisis. It should be

funded like a crisis. But there is nothing. You know, I always think, why should there be laws and regulations and policies to prevent gender based violence? The policies are there, on paper, but they don't prevent GBV.

For example, there's no safe house in the rural areas. In the urban areas, they exist, but they are very poorly funded. We need safe houses where women and children can go for six months or three months, or during a trial. But there is just nothing.

A!: You said that you do work to look after the survivors. Can you talk about what you do.

DJ: When we did our research on GBV, we met with the stakeholders. And this church said to us: look, GBV is a private issue. We don't get involved in that, it's private. We met with the schools. There's no policies in the schools. No one is trained. There's not enough social workers who come to the schools. And out of our campaign came the idea of the rollout scorecard, because we found that there's no structures in communities that can support survivors.

So, for example, we did a scorecard in the Langeberg municipality. And the municipality said: look, we do some 'here-and-there' work on GBV, but it's not our priority. When the 16 days of activism are there, we will have a one-day programme, and that's that, that's all that we do. And that is why we had to put up structures in communities where survivors could have a space, a safe space to come together and talk about the issues. But also to offer them a chance to heal in their own way, in their own space, no pressure, nothing. You heal in your own time.

A!: So you provide these spaces.

DJ: Yes. As RWA we call them healing circles. It's an informal space. But we also bring in the local clinics and the health workers: the church is welcome; the police are welcome. So when we find that one of the survivors needs counselling, then we know there is a clinic where we can refer the person to. If they need to go to a safe house, then we can organise and see where you can go to be safe.

But the circles are not funded by government. They are funded with the little resources of Ruwa. They are an informal space where survivors come who have been through GBV or are still experiencing GBV. It's a space to help and to heal and to find a common way to heal together, even if healing takes ten years. But at least we know there's a structure, there's a place for survivors to come to.

And I must say, it's working. If I look at the healing circle in Montagu, for example, it's amazing to see how some of the women have grown out of their fears, how they are now able to speak in front of others. And it's run by community members. We would like to open more healing circles, but we don't have funds.

And in RWA, we have looked and asked why the numbers are growing while we have all these campaigns and this big command centre. We have policies, but it's growing. And we look at the issue of unemployment among men. It seems like men think they've lost their capability to look after a family, because now it's the woman who's working, and men are sitting and doing nothing. And now it's about issues of ego: I was used to looking after my family, but now I am unemployed. I can't look after my family, so I express my frustration in violence against my partner.

I was just looking at the case of someone I know. His daughter, a young, beautiful doctor, was killed by her partner because she is now a doctor, a medical doctor, and he's just nothing. And he killed her brutally. With unemployment, men have lost their reason for being.

A!: Going back to the Montagu healing circle, can you give us a feel of how that works, how often it comes

together, what happens in meetings. Just some idea of what it feels like.

DJ: We come together once a month. We are now 25, although not all women manage to come to every session. We give people an opportunity to talk, because a whole month has passed. Craft is one of the tools that we use to heal. Writing is also one – people writing letters to their daughters, and daughters writing letters to their mothers, but also just writing about your life. Reading is another thing, and training and education. If there's a new law, we will train the healing circle on that new law. Then we train on how to fill in a protection order. It's difficult because firstly, it's in English. Then it's long, and there's no one who will sit with you and fill it in. When I go to the police station, they will say: here's the form. But maybe I can't read and write. They just leave you there, and then the survivor walks out and says leave it. They can rather kill me, or I just have to protect myself, or I have to move out of this relationship. But in some cases, that never happens. It's very difficult to move out of a relationship. You have nothing, you're unemployed, and you have children with this man. This is the only house that you have.

And we make sure that people have something to eat and something to drink; people are so poor. Young people just come there to ask if there's a pack of sanitary towels, or a bar of soap, or toothpaste. We always make sure we have these things.

From the government's point of view, it's not a lot of money that's needed for a healing circle. But they are constantly cutting budgets and that ends up meaning nothing for GBV. Even the little money needed for local programmes just isn't available.

Source: Amandla 24 June 2025

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: Donate then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of this article for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.