



# 'FINISH THIS ELEPHANT'

## Rural Community Organisations' Strategic Approaches to Addressing Gender-Based Violence

SUMMARY OF A RESEARCH REPORT<sup>1</sup>

*"We won't be able to finish this elephant that is killing our women and children if you are working all alone, by yourself ... we need everyone to be on board to restore back the dignity in our communities."<sup>2</sup>*

### BACKGROUND

The Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT) commissioned a study to explore the strategies of local development agency (LDA) partners in tackling gender inequality and gender-based violence (GBV) in rural communities. The study aimed to identify and understand the strategic approaches of local LDAs in dealing with the multiple manifestations and impacts of gender-based violence (GBV) in the rural areas where they

are located.<sup>3</sup> The purpose is to inform SCAT's future grantmaking and programmatic activities that address gender inequality and GBV, and be a practical and strategic resource in support of the gender work of LDAs, and other organisations and donors working in this field. This document is a summary of the key findings and recommendations of the study. For a copy of the full research report, [click here](#).

### STRATEGIC PATHWAYS

LDAs follow a range of strategic pathways to bring about change and guide how GBV efforts are targeted, organised and implemented. These are detailed below.

#### GROUNDING IN COMMUNITY AND SURVIVOR AGENCY

*"We are grounded in the community... we are trying to be involved in as many matters as can be in the community to change policies and influence decisions that are important for our work - such as GBV and access to justice." Jonathan van der Westhuizen, Sandveld Local Development Agency*

An orientation towards community-centered interventions is a common feature of LDAs and is a distinctive

strength tied to their rootedness in the local community and the legitimacy and trust this fosters. At the centre of the approach is the notion that the community itself is able to generate, at least in part, the responses required, and that the LDA's role is then to support such actions. Important to this is recognition of the agency of GBV survivors, who the LDAs then seek to support in accessing legal recourse and social services. The solution-seeking strategies that LDAs advance are located firmly in the rural communities they serve, and are attuned to how survivors are impacted and able to respond to GBV.

## LEADING WITH WOMEN'S VOICES AND CHOICES

*"The women who have been abused are key, because I can't come with my suitcase and say, these are the solutions. Because they know how it feels to be a victim, and how to get out of that hole... Others are just supporting systems - partners, justice, police - but the key is that woman."*  
Nobuzwe Mofokeng, Interchurch Legal Development Agency

Facilitating the voice, empowerment and leadership of women is how LDAs challenge the unequal gender relations that underlie discrimination and abuse. They do this primarily through the creation of affirming spaces for survivors to voice the violations to which they have been subjected, and by providing legal and psychosocial support. This includes assisting women and other survivors to cope with the stigmatisation associated with being victims of GBV, often accompanied by community silencing and/or shaming. A driving rationale is that women themselves - armed with the necessary information, options and support - are best able to identify the courses of action to pursue.

## ENABLING ACCESS TO JUSTICE THROUGH ADVICE AND ACCOMPANIMENT

*"Especially women and children, because they are the ones who are the most affected by the implementing of the laws and they also experience secondary victimisation, and that is why I support them when they go and open the file and every time they go back to court I must be around to support them - to hear the outcome of the case and to see that they get justice."*  
Sophia Booysen, Kgatelopele Social Development Forum

A key function of LDAs is to offer legal assistance and accompaniment for GBV survivors to exercise their right to justice. Their role extends well beyond advice-giving, to include accompanying survivors in their interactions with the state, with service providers, and with community members and leaders in their quest for remedy. This role of accompaniment also facilitates access to victim support services. By assisting and accompanying survivors, and closely monitoring the criminal justice system's handling of their cases, LDAs seek to give their clients increased power and strengthen the probability of a positive case outcome.

## RALLYING THE ROLE-PLAYERS FOR RIGHTS AND RECOURSE

*"Our role is not just to leave it there, but to go all out. Whether it's getting in the social worker, or contacting the police to do their job, it's to get the role-players involved."*  
Wendy Pekeur, Ubuntu Ubuntu Rural Women and Youth movement

LDAs rally key role-players - both inside and outside the state - to proactively address incidents of GBV in a manner aligned to their respective mandates and authority. This includes holding role-players to account when they fail in their roles and obligations in respect of law, policies, procedures and protocols. Rallying the role-players requires that LDAs build collaborative networks to expand their reach, influence and impact. These grassroots organisations provide a pivotal link between rural communities and state and private institutions, in order to strengthen service delivery, governance and democratic participation.

## FACILITATING SUPPORT AND SOLIDARITY

*"It's better if we do it in groups. If you and I on our own tackle violence it will never work. If you stand alone, nothing works. But if you stand up in a group and you look over your shoulder and you see all these women who support you in this work, then we can go out together."*  
Deseree Brand, Witzenberg Rural Development Centre

LDAs also fill a critical gap, by enabling access to services that are provided by other NGOs, private institutions and government departments. Complementarity is key, allowing the leveraging of referral systems (both formal and informal), so that a range of legal and social services can be more available to rural communities - including health care, counselling, legal representation, support groups, and direct material support (such as social grants and shelter). LDAs are also concerned with building solidarity for those individuals who take up legal cases against their perpetrators. Solidarity-building includes leading or participating in marches and other forms of protest, linked either to a specific case, or to a wider campaign against GBV or related social issues.

## ENGAGING COMMUNITIES FOR CHANGE

*"You may have the law. If you do not attend to the practice, or the beliefs, or the structures that are in the community, you will not succeed in implementing that law. We cannot rely only on the law. We also have to rely on the practices of the communities and see how we can work within those to change the way that they do things."*  
Welekazi Stofile, Tshwaranang Legal Advocacy Centre

LDAs develop public literacy on rights, the law and legal processes, and through public education and awareness-raising, they aim to empower rural community members with information as a tool to act against violence and related injustices. By providing a civil society platform to amplify the voices of those who advocate for safety and equality for women and girls, and for people of different sexual orientations and gender identities, LDAs are building a rights-based culture and systems of accountability in local settings.

## ADVANCING ECONOMIES OF INDEPENDENCE

*"One of the biggest reasons why rape and abuse in the home has been normalised is because of economics. It's a survival question, literally. And without addressing that, you cannot address how a person continues to be exposed to that environment."* Tshenolo Tshoaedi, Community Advice Offices South Africa

LDAs pay particular attention to advancing the financial independence of women as a long-term strategy to correct gender power imbalances within local economies and social structures. Through development projects (such as food gardens and savings schemes), financial and livelihood prospects for women can be improved, making it easier for them to act against GBV or to leave a relationship because of it. By intersecting socio-economic rights with gender rights, LDAs attempt to promote economies of independence that can, in turn, increase women's decision-making powers within the household and the community.



## CRITICAL INTERSECTIONS

There are a number of critical intersections where LDAs encounter challenges and opportunities that have particular implications for their gender work.

### STRADDLING TRADITION

*"The combination of their [paralegals] indigenous knowledge system and their knowledge of the law helps them to holistically address the problem of GBV."*

Winnie Martins, Centre for Community Justice and Development

Traditional councils are often the first port of call for community members, and have been found lacking in how they handle the impact of GBV on victims and the accountability of perpetrators. LDAs navigate the traditional justice system as they do the formal justice system, in order to strengthen the rights and needs of survivors. They have the know-how to work in and across these dual systems and to understand the roles, limitations and channels of accountability of each. This is important, because people in rural areas make different choices in respect of where they take their complaints.

### SYSTEM FAILURES

*"If we refer the case to the social worker, we want things to happen. Counselling shouldn't come after three weeks. Immediate action should be taken. Stakeholders delaying their process makes our work very hard."*

Jeanette Mqomo, Kgatelopele Social Development Forum

Because rural populations are on the economic periphery, they depend heavily on government services to meet basic needs. Weak state capacity, under-resourcing, and poor infrastructure are acutely felt in GBV cases. From passive neglect and disinterest, through to secondary victimisation, there are also failures to implement the spirit and intent of law and policy. These systemic impediments to justice are deepened when people have to travel long distances, often without sufficient funds, in order to access the criminal justice system or legal assistance. "In many respects, the LDAs are standing in for government by shoring up crumbling services (without the necessary support), but victims still overwhelmingly do not get what they need from the systems that are meant to help them".<sup>4</sup>

### DISRUPTING HETERONORMATIVITY AND LGBTIQ EXCLUSION

*"Especially with gay people, it's almost seen like a 'corrective measure' - what the perpetrator did - so there's not much support for those who suffer from these incidents."*

Emmerentia Goliath, Witzenberg Rural Development Centre

Strict gender norms and roles obligate people to fulfilling certain functions within society, and support and entrench inequalities between men and women, and for LGBTIQ persons. Taking action against GBV requires organisations to critically question their own ideas and practises when it comes to gender. Some LDAs offer targeted support and encourage the participation of LGBTIQ community members in their activities. There is an understanding that this is an important matter, given the particular vulnerabilities of this community to violence and exclusion.

### INADEQUATE AND INSECURE RESOURCING

*"You will find out they don't have a proper office space to assist the community. Sometimes the phones are not working because of finance problems. So, it's more about resourcing the NGOs, because the information is there, the encouragement and dedication is there, but it is the resources they don't have."*

Nontuthuzelo Sibaca, South African Police Services

The needs of vulnerable communities are multiple, and so the demands on LDAs are great. Insecure and inadequate funding is a significant limitation for LDAs. The community advice office (CAO) sector as a whole faces significant resource constraints, including a lack of human capacity such that community volunteers do much of the gender outreach work. Exacerbated by general material deprivation in the areas where LDAs are located, organisational capacities to expand the range, reach and impact of interventions are limited.

### LACK OF RECOGNITION AND REGULATION

Rural communities are heavily reliant on LDAs to access rights and justice, however their role remains formally unrecognised and unregulated. It is anticipated that formal regulation will consolidate the impact and role of CAOs and community-based paralegals; enable access to justice; contribute to sustainability and growth of the sector; professionalise and formalise the sector; provide accountability mechanisms, both vertically and horizontally; develop systems and solutions for communal learning; and facilitate interaction with government and other stakeholders.<sup>5</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The report makes recommendations on how SCAT can further assist the gender work of LDA partners by supporting:

- **Strategic and systemic approaches** that ensure the strategic direction of local gender programming is driven by the LDAs themselves.
- **Visibility and influence of the CAO sector** in localised action to hold power structures to account; advance a rights-based culture; and facilitate access to services and legal redress in relation to gender discrimination and violence.
- Capacity development to grow LDA communities of practice and peer learning; facilitate access to information, training, and peer leadership and mentorship programmes; assist the development of locally-appropriate standards of practice that guide LDA processes and interactions; and strength case management systems as an evidence-based tool for LDA services and advocacy.
- **Networking and collaboration for collective action** across rural-urban and local-district-national divides. This includes enhancing LDAs' relationships with key provincial actors; facilitate rural women's participation in decision-making forums at all levels; increase rural participation in wider GBV campaigns for access to justice and to tackle state inefficiencies; and amplify rural realities in the national discourse on GBV.
- **Sustainable resourcing for LDAs**, who contribute significantly to social and economic development and assist rural communities in proactively responding to gender discrimination and GBV

- **Institutionalisation of SCAT's gender focus** by revising its programmatic objectives to integrate gender across all areas of activity and functions; enhance internal gender expertise and capacity; and incorporate gender more fully into programme design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

## MORE ABOUT LDAs

- They are **multi-purpose** organisations that are locally-led, and are frequently a driving force in the community on a range of development issues, and can be catalysts for social change.
- They **work in close partnership with others operating in the local area in the public, private and civil society sectors, and navigate complex relationships with multiple stakeholders.**
- Their relationships with key role-players are both cooperative and adversarial, depending on what circumstances dictate, and they **hold state service providers to account** at the same time as directly assisting them to do their jobs.
- Through rights education and legal advice, and by accompanying survivors in their encounters with the criminal justice system, together with advocating against system failings, LDAs **play an essential role in enabling access to justice in rural communities.**
- They develop **innovative ways of supporting those who are the hardest to reach** i.e. the most vulnerable members within their communities, in contextually relevant and responsive ways.

## ENDNOTES

1. Researched and written by Melanie Judge, adjunct associate professor and research associate at the Centre for Law and Society, University of Cape Town. The research received ethics clearance from the university's Faculty of Law Research Ethics Committee.
2. Misiwe Ngqondela, Langa Kwanobuhle Self Help and Resource Exchange.
3. The research focused on eight LDAs that are currently implementing gender-focused projects in the rural areas of the Northern Cape, Western Cape and Eastern Cape. For more information on the methodology see the full research report.
4. Karimakwenda, N., Moul, K., Jefthas, D. & Teele, T. 2020. Striving for Change from Within: A Study of Rural Community-based Organisations' Engagement with Gender Based Violence. Cape Town: Social Change Assistance Trust & Centre for Law & Society, p49.
5. Foundation for Human Rights and Department of Justice and Constitutional Development. 2020. Consolidated Report from the CAO National Consultative Workshop held on 9 March 2020 at the Protea by Marriott Hotel in Hatfield, Pretoria, South Africa, 30 March 2020, p3.



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