

Lived realities:

Empowerment gaps and opportunities
for women living in rural communities
in South Africa



Lived realities:

Empowerment gaps and
opportunities for women living in
rural communities in South Africa



© CSVR 2023 Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation

The content of this publication is protected by copyright. Readers are, however, invited to freely use the information as published here, subject to acknowledging the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.

The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the CSVR or FREF.

Authors contribute to CSVR publications in their personal capacity.

Designed and typeset by COMPRESS.dsl | 800750 | www.compressdsl.com

Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	v
<i>Acronyms and Abbreviations</i>	vi
1. Background and introduction	1
Purpose of study	2
Approach and methodology	2
2. Legislative and policy commitments for the empowerment of women in rural areas	3
Global commitments	4
Regional commitments	4
National legislation, policy frameworks and interventions	7
3. Factors that hinder the empowerment of women in rural areas	10
High levels of illiteracy	10
Lack of awareness of initiatives aimed at women empowerment in their communities	10
Difficulties in accessing formal employment	11
Restrictive socio-cultural norms	11
Effects of patriarchy	12
Exclusion of women in community decision-making and development initiatives	12
4. Overview of challenges faced by women in rural communities	14
Inequality, poverty and unemployment	14
Gender-based violence	15
Lack of access to technology	17
Climate change	17
5. Empowerment initiatives, innovations and resilience	19
Use of crop diversification to address climate change	19
Setting up small community businesses	20
Growing the agency of GBV survivors through farming	20
Supporting social enterprises for mothers of children with disabilities	20
Use of tech innovations to provide online support for survivors of GBV	20
Empowering women through social entrepreneurship and innovation	21
6. Recommendations	22
Recommendations to the government	22
Recommendations to NGOs and the private sector	23



THE CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF VIOLENCE AND RECONCILIATION

The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr) is a non-governmental organisation which envisions societies that are peaceful, equal and free from violence. CSVr aims to understand and prevent violence, heal its effects and build sustainable peace at the community, national and regional levels. We do this through collaboration with and learning from the lived and diverse experiences of communities affected by violence and conflict to inform innovative interventions, generate knowledge, shape public discourse, influence policy, hold states accountable and promote gender equality, social cohesion and active citizenship.



THE FIRSTRAND EMPOWERMENT FOUNDATION

The FirstRand Empowerment Foundation (FREF) was established in 2005 as part of the FirstRand Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) transaction, as a result FREF is a direct shareholder of FirstRand. The objective of FREF is to reduce poverty and inequality by undertaking and/or supporting public benefit activities that result in Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE).

FREF has identified gender-based violence/femicide (GBVF) as a strategic focus area, with the following key objectives:

- a) To promote prevention and mitigation of GBVF through supporting initiatives that facilitate increased understanding of GBVF, and address associated social, cultural, and/or traditional, religious, political and economic factors.
- b) To strengthen delivery of effective, accessible and responsive protection, care and support services to those affected by GBVF through integrating this response across this strategy's priority pillars.
- c) To support production of research to enhance timely and relevant GBVF information and knowledge to inform evidence-based interventions as well as foster sharing of best practices and innovation on GBVF responses, service planning and implementation.
- d) To facilitate women's empowerment and enhance their economic power as a strategy to curb GBVF and contribute to gender transformation.

CSVr is one of the strategic partners supported by FREF as part of the project: 'Addressing the shadow pandemic of SGBV (sexual gender-based violence) in South Africa'. Subsequently, CSVr is one of the strategic partners that is implementing FREF's GBVF strategy and its objectives.

Acknowledgements

This report was compiled by Nondumiso Nsibande and the Ingula Yesive team as the consultants. Special thanks are extended to the CSVR team that undertook this project: Lethabo Motloun, Lindokuhle Malambe, Athini Magodla, Esethu Njenjani, Naledi Joyi and Nandipha Mabindisa for the background and field research. We are thankful to Annah Moyo-Kupeta, Nonsikelelo Ncube, Liezelle Kumalo and Karen Pillay for their critical guidance.



Acronyms and abbreviations

BBBEE	Broad-Based Black Economic Employment Act
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CPF	Community Policing Forum
CSV	Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation
CWP	Community Working Programme
DoCS	Department of Community Safety
DoJ	Department of Justice
DSD	Department of Social Development
FREF	FirstRand Empowerment Foundation
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GBVF	Gender Based Violence and Femicide
IDP	Integrated Development Programme
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
LGBTIAQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*gender, Intersex, Asexual, Queer, Plus
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services
NDP	National Development Plan
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPO	Non-Profit Organisation
PLWD	People Living with Disabilities
SANCA	South African National Council on Alcoholism
SAPS	South African Police Service
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SGBV	Sexual and Gender Based Violence
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls

1. Background and introduction

Women in rural communities constitute a large share of the agricultural workforce and play a critical role in the economies of many countries. In most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, women play an essential role in ensuring food and nutrition security, eradicating rural poverty and improving the well-being of their families. Yet, women in rural areas continue to face serious constraints and challenges in engaging in economic activities because of gender-based discrimination and social norms, disproportionate involvement in unpaid work, and unequal access to education, healthcare, property and financial and other services.

South Africa is no exception to these realities. A 2021 report highlighted that women in rural communities are continually forced to grapple with inequalities, such as poor access to basic amenities, employment opportunities and quality education.¹ The interface between poverty and the environment cannot be ignored and underlines the precarious situation of women in rural areas and other marginalised groups. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has further added to these challenges, with increases in the percentage of women-headed households and those already vulnerable feeling the most impact. Despite the policy rhetoric in South Africa aimed at achieving a fair distribution of resources and redistribution of power and care responsibility, this has not yielded the desired results.

This study seeks to better understand the situation of women living in rural areas. The study aims to contribute to greater recognition of women's experiences and contributions to rural areas' social, economic and political development and recommends strategies to multiple stakeholders for supporting their empowerment. It raises critical issues for improving the situation of women in rural communities through strengthening their capabilities, increasing their access to and control over opportunities and resources, enhancing their agency and leadership, and ensuring their rights and security.

¹ Ngarava, S., Zhou, L., Ningi, T., Chari, M. M., & Mdiya, L. (2022). Gender and ethnic disparities in energy poverty: The case of South Africa. *Energy Policy*, 161, 112755.

Purpose of study

The research sought to explore the challenges and empowerment gaps women face in rural communities in South Africa and to make recommendations for improving their quality of life. Specifically, the study had the following objectives:

- Identify the main challenges women face in rural communities and how these can be addressed;
- Highlight the laws and policies that govern women's empowerment in rural communities in South Africa;
- Assess how women in rural communities are involved in development planning and implementation at local and national levels;
- Explore government-led initiatives aimed at rural communities in general and rural women in particular;
- Explore factors that affect rural women's agency and participation in empowerment initiatives in their communities;
- Identify opportunities and make recommendations for improving women's quality of life in rural communities.

The importance and significance of this study lies in the fact that its findings could be used to accelerate improvement of the conditions and circumstances of women in rural areas. It also highlights why the government's efforts may have failed, or at least may not have helped, to transform women's situation in rural areas.

Approach and methodology

To achieve the stated objectives, the study employed a qualitative research approach. This approach was based on the need to understand women's lived experiences in rural communities, as well as government interventions, from the perspectives of women themselves. Using a qualitative research approach also leads to a better understanding of the research problem. The researcher collects data face to face by interacting with selected research respondents in their community settings. Meanings and intentions that underlie human action are thus understood and interpreted in context.² Data collection was mainly through a desktop review, key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with women in the selected rural communities.

Scope: Data were collected from five provinces: Western Cape (Stellenbosch), Mpumalanga (Kabokweni), North West (Magogong), KwaZulu-Natal (Osizweni) and Eastern Cape (Lusikisiki). Two FGDs and five key informant interviews were conducted for each province.

² Schurink, E. (2009). Qualitative research design as a tool for trustworthy research. *Journal of Public Administration*, 44(si-2), 803–823.

2. Legislative and policy commitments for the empowerment of women in rural areas

Various resolutions of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly and the UN Economic and Social Council and its technical commissions have recognised the needs and highlighted the challenges of women in rural communities. In Resolution 64/140, the Assembly recognised its crucial role in promoting agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating rural poverty, and the critical contribution that rural women make to the prosperity and progress of their families and communities. The 2010 Economic and Social Council Ministerial Declaration emphasises women's vital role and contribution. It reaffirms that the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is part of a coherent framework that underpins the work being undertaken to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women.³ In addition, the UN Commission on the Status of Women, at its 56th session in 2012, critically reviewed women's progress in implementing agricultural programmes, further developed policy and made important recommendations in this crucial area.

South Africa, like other young democracies, has been active in women's empowerment, particularly in rural areas.⁴ This intentional focus comes from rural women being a marginalised group that suffers from poverty due to various contributing factors such as income inequality, lack of resources and limited literacy levels.⁵ Specifically, the *South African* government has introduced several *policies* and *legislative* instruments to address gender imbalances. In an attempt to protect the cause and rights of women as well as improve their livelihoods, South Africa has signed and ratified various international and regional legislative instruments.

³ Pavlic, B., Ruprecht, L., & Sam-Vargas, S. (2000). Gender equality and equity: A summary review of UNESCO's accomplishments since the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995).

⁴ Booyesen-Wolthers, A. (2007). The development status of women in South Africa: Patterns, progress and profiles (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Free State).

⁵ Motteux, N., Binns, T., Nel, E., & Rowntree, K. (1999). Empowerment for development: Taking participatory appraisal further in rural South Africa. *Development in Practice*, 9(3), 26–273.

Global commitments

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

South Africa endorsed the 1995 Beijing Declaration, which reaffirms that women's rights are human rights. All governments that signed the Beijing Declaration, including South Africa, are expected to prioritise five programmatic areas to advance women's causes. Women's empowerment has been identified as a key approach to reducing female poverty and eliminating inequality between women and men. The Declaration stresses the need to formulate and implement policies and programmes that improve the situation of rural women producers, increase their income and ensure household food security.⁶ Paragraph 25 of the Beijing Declaration encourages women to participate in all actions to achieve equality.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

South Africa is a signatory to and has ratified CEDAW. This is the only human rights instrument specifically addressing women's situation in rural areas. Article 14 calls on state parties to eliminate discrimination against rural women and to ensure that all provisions of the Convention are applied to rural women. Article 2(e) of CEDAW states that the South African government, as a participating member, has an obligation to protect all women in the country from all forms of discrimination by any person, organisation or company. In addition, Article 3 stipulates that the signatory country is obliged to take appropriate measures, including legislation, particularly in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres, to ensure that the advancement of women takes place. This will enhance their enjoyment of human rights and all freedoms based on equality with men.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The international development landscape transitioned from the Millennium Development Goals to the SDGs in 2015. All UN member states adopted the SDGs in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, advance food security, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. The 17 SDGs are integrated – that is, they recognise that action in one area will affect outcomes in others and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability. These goals confirm previous global commitments towards promoting gender equality and advancing women's rights by underlining zero hunger in SDG2 and gender equality in SDG5, and the elimination of all discrimination against women and girls everywhere. Gender equality is important for women's values and their documented role in achieving many of the SDGs.

SDG5 emphasises the necessity of integrating gender into all other SDGs, such as 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) (United Nations, 2021). SDG5 will not be realised fully unless the causes of women's uneven access to services and assets and their lack of voice are addressed, and we recognise and work on the underlying elements that generate inequality.

Regional commitments

At the regional and continental levels, several instruments deserve mention: Agenda 2063, the African Union (AU) Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan (2022–2032), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on Women's Rights (Maputo Protocol), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development (SADC Protocol).

⁶ UN Women. (1995). Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action-Beijing+ 5 Political Declaration and Outcome.

Agenda 2063

Enshrined in the Agenda are seven aspirations articulated by the people of Africa with respect to the Africa they want. These seven aspirations represent the AU goal for shared prosperity and well-being, for togetherness and integration, for a continent of free people and broadened horizons, where women and youth can reach their full potential, and where fear, disease and lack are eradicated. Of particular interest to this study is the aspiration that directly speaks to the empowerment of women, youth and children (African Union Commission, 2015). It states that by 2023, all barriers to women owning or inheriting property or businesses, executing contracts, and owning or managing bank accounts will be removed. At least one in every five women will be able to access and manage productive assets, and in all AU Organs and Regional Economic Communities (RECs), gender equity in control, representation and progression will be the norm. The Agenda further holds that by 2023, all types of violence against women will have decreased by a third, and all detrimental societal norms and traditional practices against women and children will be abolished (African Union Commission, 2015).

AU Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan (2022–2032)

This is a strategic framework for delivering Africa's goal of inclusive and sustainable development and sets out principles, priorities and action areas for enhanced climate cooperation and long-term, climate-resilient development. This Strategy also demonstrates action towards addressing gender inequalities in rural areas.



Maputo Protocol

The Maputo Protocol guarantees women a broad range of rights, including the right to social and political equality with men and the right to control their reproductive health. The Protocol came into force on 25 November 2005, after being ratified by the required number of member states, including South Africa. A critical document to protect women's rights in Africa, the Maputo Protocol calls on member states to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women through appropriate legal and institutional measures. A number of the Articles in the Protocol make reference to the plight of rural women and the importance of advancing their rights. For example, Article XIV(2) places an obligation on the state to provide adequate, affordable and accessible healthcare services, including information, communication and education programmes for women, especially those in rural areas. Article XIX mandates state parties to realise the right to sustainable development, which includes promoting women's access to and control over productive resources such as land and guaranteeing property rights. Article XI explicitly safeguards the rights of widows to inherit property and to be provided with an equitable share in parents' properties for both men and women. This is an important provision as various studies have shown that widows are extremely vulnerable to socio-economic, cultural and religious mistreatment/abuse within their families and communities.

SADC Protocol on Gender and Development

The SADC Protocol encompasses commitments made in all regional, global and continental instruments to achieve gender equality. It continues to improve these tools by filling gaps and setting specific, measurable targets where they do not exist. In addition, the Protocol provides a forum for member states to share best practices, peer support and review. The significance of the SADC Protocol is that it contains 28 critical goals to achieve gender equality within a set timeframe. This is considered a world first and has put the SADC community at the forefront of innovative strategies to make sense of global and continental commitments to achieving gender equality. Key provisions of the SADC Protocol include the requirement for equal representation of women in all areas of decision-making; equal access for women and men to quality education and training and their retention at all levels of education; and equal participation of women in the formulation and implementation of economic policy.

SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan

This Plan draws impetus from SADC Vision 2050, which envisions a peaceful, inclusive, competitive, middle- to high-income industrialised region where all citizens enjoy sustainable economic well-being, justice and freedom. This strategic framework recognises inequality between rural and urban areas. To be specific, the Plan seeks to foster regional integration and development and operationalises Vision 2050. A critical feature of this Plan is the recognition of gender as a cross-cutting issue and its inclusion among the six strategic priority areas: advancing industrial strategic development and market integration, investing in infrastructure development in support of regional integration, social and human capital development and gender, youth, environment and climate change, and disaster risk management.

Despite the attention given to rural women in international and regional frameworks, women in rural areas continue to face serious challenges in carrying out their multiple roles within their families and communities. The rights and priorities of rural women are often insufficiently addressed by gender equality policies and national development strategies.⁷

⁷ Kimbal, R. W. (2021). The practice of women's social capital as the pillar of the family economy in the rural area. *International Journal of Communication and Society*, 3(2), 140–151.

National legislation, policy frameworks and interventions

In South Africa, empowerment is based on observing and respecting the individual rights of women, men and gender non-conforming persons. Rights are contained in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 109 of 1996. Women's rights are enshrined in human rights, which include the right to human dignity, equality and freedom. Of particular note is the National Gender Policy Framework, formulated to guide the promotion of women's empowerment. The Framework recognises meeting the specific and diverse needs of different categories of women and men as central to realising true empowerment. It also highlights the importance of developing and implementing equality programmes based on a detailed understanding of women's specific and diverse needs.

The National Development Plan (NDP 2030) is the overall foundation for the Constitution, which ostensibly provides a range of social and environmental rights. While not explicit, it addresses the challenges that South African women face by prioritising a number of subsidiary goals that affect them, such as poverty and unemployment. The NDP reinforces the notion that women's empowerment and participation in the economy are critical for the country's economic transformation. The Plan's rural development approach is unique, with agricultural development premised on effective land reform, job creation and robust environmental safeguards.

Developmental matters have important intergovernmental dimensions, and thus require interaction among all spheres of government. Therefore, discussions between the spheres should move from general to more engagement with initiating, coordinating and implementing specific developmental programmes for gender and development. To be specific, local government has a constitutional mandate to advance socio-economic development, ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner and provide accountable governance. If no urgent action is taken, the sustainable empowerment of women in rural areas will remain an unattainable dream. In this context, local government has the opportunity to maximise and redress gender inequalities and inequities in South African communities.

Chapter 4 of the Municipal Systems Act requires municipalities to develop a culture that promotes participatory governance and creates enabling conditions to achieve this. In establishing mechanisms, processes and procedures for community participation, municipalities must take into account the circumstances of disadvantaged groups, including women. Chapter 5 of the Act focuses on integrated development planning (IDP) as a tool in local government and a platform for all government departments and other stakeholders to plan and implement together in delivering to communities. The IDP process and its relevance to gender and development are discussed in detail in the next subsection.

Furthermore, rural development, which includes empowering rural women, is one of the pillars of the Broad-Based Black Economic Employment Act (BBBEE). This Act aims to 'address inequalities and mobilise the energy of all South Africans to contribute to sustained economic growth, development and social transformation in South Africa.'⁸ In compliance with the Constitution, the Bill of rights and the BBBEE Act, there are Local Economic Development (LED) policies that stipulate plans towards employment equity and opportunities, skills development and rural development to change rural people's lives, including women's lives.

The table summarises some of the South African government's intervention strategies and support structures for women's empowerment since 1994.

8 Government Gazette No. 39818, 2016: 6.

South African government initiative	Comments on key features for women’s empowerment
Social grants	Safety net for poor men, women and children. The grants are not enough to cover all basic needs. It is necessary to equip women with knowledge and skills that help them acquire more resources.
Universal access to primary healthcare	Aims to provide children and pregnant mothers with access to state hospitals and clinics. Inadequate number of healthcare facilities as well as transport to access the facilities.
Affirmative action	A policy aimed at taking active steps to increase the representation of disadvantaged groups of people, especially women, in educational institutions and workplaces. Although designed to address disadvantaged women’s inability to be appointed, it has had little effect on rural women.
Victim Empowerment Programme	Seeks to make the justice system more responsive to the needs of women and children across rural and urban landscapes. However, access to victim empowerment services in poor communities and rural areas remains inequitable.
Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET)	Designed to assist adults with basic education and training to enable them to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. It does not cater to rural women’s needs since no programmes are designed to suit the circumstances surrounding them.
BBBEE Programme	Aims to reduce poverty among disadvantaged black people, especially women, youth and people with disabilities. Critics argue that BEE has created a clique of rich black South Africans at the expense of the more deserving poor.
Department of Women, Youth, Children and People with Disabilities	Established in June 2009 to ensure that disadvantaged and often marginalised groups of society have better access to development opportunities. It is still in its infancy stage and it is too early to objectively judge its effectiveness.
Township and rural economy	A dedicated fund that supports businesses in rural areas and townships. The businesses are in various sectors, including property (shopping malls), petroleum (petrol stations) and tourism. By 2020, the fund had disbursed over R2.1 billion to support entities in rural and township economies. More than 50% of support has gone to women-owned businesses. ⁹

9 Growing Gender Dividend, National Empowerment Fund □ Growing Black Economic Participation, August 2020.

Other initiatives targeted at women in rural areas include the Bavumile Skills Development Programme, the Isivande Women's Fund, the South African Women Entrepreneurs Network (SAWEN) and the Women Entrepreneurial Fund (WEF).

- *The Bavumile Skills Development Programme* targets women who want to pursue their own business by offering them 20 days of training in sewing, knitting, weaving and craft (DTI, 2011). The main objective of this programme is to advance women's skills and expertise in arts and crafts to produce better products.¹⁰
- *The Isivande Women's Fund* aims to enhance socio-economic development in rural, peri-urban and township areas by empowering South African women, especially black women, through providing financial assistance of between R30 000 and R2 million, as well as non-financial support. The Fund supports small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) with women ownership of more than 50% of the ordinary share capital and more than 30% in management positions.¹¹
- *The South African Women Entrepreneurs Network (SAWEN)* is a Section 21 registered company with the primary objective of facilitating access to business resources, information and opportunities for South African women entrepreneurs. This programme targets women who engage in informal income-generating activities and/or operate an SMME, or aspire to open businesses, particularly rural-based women-owned SMMEs.¹²

While many initiatives have been introduced in South Africa post-1994 to address the plight of women, the case for their empowerment continues to occupy space on the development agenda. These initiatives have not been able to reach or benefit the majority of women in rural communities. This can be attributed to the poor implementation of policies to empower women, especially rural women, inadequate budget allocations, lack of support from male peers and patriarchal attitudes.¹³ Development infrastructure remains insufficient to efficiently address the many challenges that will enhance women's empowerment. Women, particularly rural women, need urgent attention to ensure they have access to information and resources to improve their livelihoods. Ultimately, the state has a duty to promote, protect and advance women's development across social, economic and political spheres.¹⁴

¹⁰ Melton, D., Benting, S., Beyer, G., & Venables, J. (2019, April). Women entrepreneurs in Cape Town, South Africa: Challenges and opportunities. In *ICGR 2019: 2nd International Conference on Gender Research* (p. 392). Academic Conferences and Publishing Limited.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Witbooi, M., & Ukpere, W. (2011). Indigenous female entrepreneurship: Analytical study on access to finance for women entrepreneurs in South Africa. *African Journal of Business Management*, 5(14), 5646.

¹³ Moyo, C. S. (2014). Active participation of rural women in developmental issues: Poverty alleviation lessons for South Africa. *Gender and Behaviour*, 12(1), 5994-6001.

¹⁴ Ibid.

3. Factors that hinder the empowerment of women in rural areas

Rural women are arguably the most marginalised women in South Africa, and they have been for many years. A significant gap remains between the progressive legislation and the much more controversial reality. What factors prevent women's empowerment in rural areas?

High levels of illiteracy

Women comprise the largest segment of the rural population in South Africa and have the lowest levels of education and skills, with high illiteracy levels in information and communication technologies (ICT).¹⁵ Historically, the apartheid government did not provide training and skills opportunities for black people, who were relegated to the bantustans (black homelands). The majority of permanent bantustan residents were women, as black men worked in the mines and in towns in South Africa, providing cheap menial labour. This resulted in many unskilled and unemployable women predestined for perpetual poverty.¹⁶ For those unable to access the formal sector, the impact of the progressive measures introduced has proven to be very limited, if not non-existent.

Lack of awareness of initiatives aimed at women empowerment in their communities

Lack of awareness prevents women from engaging in development initiatives. Communication about such initiatives is via emails and social media and accessing these platforms requires access to a mobile telephone or other electronic gadgets. One respondent remarked:

We have to catch a taxi (which costs R20) to town (Hartswater in the Northern Cape or Taung) to gain access to services such as the internet to access emails, print out important information, apply for employment/school.

(FGD participant, Magogong, Northwest Province)

¹⁵ Sampson, T., & Tachie, S. (2022). Liberating women of South Africa through skills training for poverty alleviation. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362427158_LIBERATING_RURAL_WOMEN_OF_SOUTH_AFRICA_THROUGH_SKILLS_TRAINING_FOR_POVERTY_ALLEVIATION.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Another respondent had the following to say:

Women have no access to political power approximately 26 ward councillors are male while only 6 are female. Women are used as weapons to promote political parties and get votes, but they are not decision makers or change makers.

(KII, Lusikisiki, Eastern Cape province)

Girls from rural areas do not have access to information, even access to computers is a challenge because you must go town to an internet café and you can't go there unless you want something because it needs money, so this contributes to them staying at home. Because even when they finish school some can't go to university because they are not exposed to information that can better their lives.

(FGD, Lusikisiki, Eastern Cape province)

Youth empowerment at the municipality provided the youth with skills but the shortfall of this initiative is the transparency when it comes to access, people don't know where to get information relating to recruitment, instead people see others already within the programs. Barriers to access include lack of information, government departments are not visible to communities, people living in rural areas especially women are not aware of programs. "Public servants work to fulfil their own work targets and not the community's needs this impacts the community badly because they don't do research on the community needs and even when they do, they don't deliver community-based responses" Some of the barriers to access the lack of funding and lack of collaboration amongst service providers. This leaves community members without trust because that they do not have a model to see from.

(KII, Lusikisiki, Eastern Cape province)

Difficulties in accessing formal employment

The labour market in South Africa remains largely unbalanced. While women comprise 45% of the labour force, they comprise 51.3% of the total population.¹⁷ Younger women in particular experience a higher unemployment rate at 57%, compared to men at 49%.¹⁸ As a result, most women work in the informal sector. This means that women benefit less from all forms of social protection, such as maternity benefits or childcare. Rural areas are disproportionately affected by poverty. Due to a lack of job opportunities and cultural barriers to land ownership, rural women are the main victims of this situation. This is particularly the case with widowed women, who are often forced to leave their homes when their husbands die.¹⁹

Restrictive socio-cultural norms

Unpaid care work, unequal sharing of care work and other domestic responsibilities limit women's opportunities to take advantage of rural development initiatives and job creation programmes. In many countries, including South Africa, rural women and girls spend most of their time doing unpaid care work and household chores. In many rural areas, traditional gender norms continue to strongly influence people's daily lives, with women expected to do most of the housework and childcare.²⁰ This was emphasised by various respondents:

¹⁷ Ndlebe, A. (2022). The relationship between attaining matric and labour market outcomes in South Africa, <https://etd.uwc.ac.za/handle/11394/9519>.

¹⁸ See Stats SA, Quarterly Labour Force Survey, second quarter 2021 and second quarter 2022.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Louw, E. (2019). Unpaid care work: A comparison between older adults in urban and rural areas of South Africa (Doctoral dissertation, North-West University, South Africa, Vanderbijlpark Campus).

Unemployment is an issue, women want to work using their hands, 'bafuna imisebenzi yezandla'. Kids are doing drugs. We need food vouchers. Being dependent on a man is an issue, they tend to abuse women if they can tell that they are economic reliant on them. This is economic violence. Shelters are flooded. We have disabled women that are left unattended in most cases.

(KII, Osizweni, KwaZulu-Natal province)

Men also tend to control women and deny them access to a better life. Some women are not allowed to work but are forced to remain as housewives because it is believed that an empowered woman becomes disrespectful and uncontrollable.

(FGD participant, Kabokweni, Mpumalanga province)

Limited access to services: Lack of access to financial, government and other services was identified by research respondents as one of the common obstacles that women face in rural areas in South Africa. Gender inequalities, rooted in discriminatory patriarchal and social norms, mean women have less access to agricultural extension services, markets, land and formal financial services, despite their higher participation rates in the agricultural sector.

Effects of patriarchy

Despite official commitments to promote gender equality, and advances in certain areas, for example access to education and political representation, South Africa still has a very strong patriarchal culture, particularly in rural areas. During a visit to South Africa in December 2015, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Dubravka Šimonović, pointed to the intricate links between the culture that prevails in parts of the country and the crimes perpetrated against women. She declared:

The violence inherited from the apartheid still resonates profoundly in today's South African society dominated by deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes towards the role of women in society which makes violence against women and children an almost accepted social phenomenon.²¹

Exclusion of women in community decision-making and development initiatives

Women participating in this study reported feeling excluded from community decision-making processes and development initiatives. As a result, they were unaware of empowerment programmes in place in their communities. This exclusion is reflected in comments from some respondents:

We miss development opportunities in the Greater Taung area due to being made aware of certain developments later (for example, on the day of closure/submission) or when a person from outside Magogong arrives and has been given the opportunity to work in Magogong.

(FGD participant, Magogong, Northwest province)

²¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 15 December 2015. See <https://news.un.org/en/story/2015/12/518202-despite-progressive-laws-gender-based-violence-pervasive-south-africa-un-expert>.

We are not asked for our opinion on what needs to be done. If anything happens, it comes from the local government. They don't ask us to guide them on what is important and what we need.

(FGD participant, Kabokweni, Mpumalanga province)

Due to the patriarchal structures that exist in the community, women are not involved in any development planning and technological advancements. Even if some development projects are implemented in the community, men dominate and occupy positions.

(KII, Osisweni, KwaZulu-Natal province)

These reflections highlight how women in rural areas are often excluded or under-represented in decision-making processes that directly affect them. Their views are also seldom taken into account in development initiatives and budget allocations. This is largely due to structural barriers and discriminatory social norms in society at large.



4. Overview of challenges faced by women in rural communities

Women in rural areas are key actors in achieving the transformative economic, environmental and social changes needed for sustainable development. Despite South Africa's progressive political development, most South African women remain unable to access their existing constitutionally guaranteed socio-economic rights. Moreover, constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination remain theoretical rights, lacking practical implementation, especially for women in rural communities. The everyday reality of women remains characterised by a genuine struggle for survival, exacerbated by deteriorating socio-economic conditions and lack of development.

This section discusses some of the main challenges identified by research participants in this study.

Inequality, poverty and unemployment

South Africans face the triple challenge of high levels of inequality, unemployment and poverty, with rural women being hit hardest. The official unemployment rate for women is 47% and 35.6% for men. In South Africa, the labour force participation rate for women in Q2:2022 was 53% compared to 64.4% for men, a gap of 11.4 percentage points.²² Moreover, poverty remains a major challenge and retains its apartheid traits. Most of the poor (regardless of the measure used) live in rural areas dominated by historically disadvantaged population groups (black, coloured and Indian). A recent estimate suggests that the region's rural poverty rate is around 81.3%, while the urban poverty rate is around 0.7%.²³

These statistics indicate that the majority of women continue to live under extremely poor conditions in rural areas. These areas are characterised by a lack of socio-economic development, infrastructure and opportunities for employment and income generation. Additionally, women in rural areas have limited access to education and skills training, further contributing to a life below the poverty line. Respondents had the following to say about this challenge:

Poverty is a big challenge in our community. Poverty and peer pressure has pushed most women into adopting unhealthy lifestyle of drinking compulsively which often leads them to be victims of violence in drinking places, some just make babies and receive grant money as a way of surviving.

(FGD participant, Lusikisiki, Eastern Cape)

²² Stats SA, Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Quarter 2, 2022, retrieved from <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15668>.

²³ Ibid.

Poverty and financial dependency are subjecting many women to abuse because most women tolerate and endure abuse because their perpetrators provide them with basic needs. Financial dependency takes away most women's sense of urgency, and victims tend to get used to that form of abuse. They do not want any intervention; instead, they say as long as he has not killed me because he is taking care of my needs.

(KII, Kabokweni, Mpumalanga province)

Women depend on men for survival so if a man gives you everything, he will feel he has the right to do whatever he wants to you because you are nothing without him.

(KII Lusikisiki Eastern Cape province)

When you apply for land, you need to have your brother or your uncle to present you as a woman otherwise you'll not get the land.

(KII, Lusikisiki, Eastern Cape province)

These quotes demonstrate the *relationship between poverty* levels, risky *sexual* behaviour and lack of opportunities. Studies have also found that rural women are less likely than urban women to have secure employment, are often unable to own or inherit land, and disproportionately head households as single parents.²⁴ As at 2021, some 42% of the households in South Africa were female-headed.²⁵ Provinces with larger portions of rural areas, such as the Eastern Cape (50.6%) and KwaZulu-Natal (48.3%), were more likely to share large numbers of female-headed households. In contrast, more urbanised provinces, such as Gauteng (33.9%), which includes Johannesburg, were less likely to have families headed by women.²⁶

Gender-based violence

Women in rural and severely underprivileged areas remain most vulnerable to violence in their communities and homes. Respondents indicated that gender-based violence (GBV) is one of rural women's greatest challenges. Women are especially vulnerable to domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape and femicide. For some, these are infrequent events, but for others they are everyday experiences, as reported by a respondent:

Other respondents shared similar sentiments:

One big challenge women face here is GBVF; this is very prevalent in the community. Women are being killed; we are being sexually abused. The LGBTIAQ+ community has challenges because they are not accepted by their families and also by the community. I'll give you an example there was a young boy at home who was different from the other boys like things that you'd say are more for girls and as he grew he told us he was gay, so community and family need to understand that being gay or lesbian is natural.

(KII, Lusikisiki, Eastern Cape province)

²⁴ Patel, J. (2020). Despite perceptions of gender equality, Africa's rural women bear brunt of economic exclusion, <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/despite-perceptions-gender-equality-africas-rural-women-bear-brunt-economic-exclusion/>.

²⁵ See Stats SA, General Household Survey, 2021, retrieved from <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15473>.

²⁶ Stats SA, Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Quarter 2, 2022, retrieved from <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15668>.

One of the challenges faced by women is that of VAW [violence against women]. Toxic cultural practices are also contributing to the challenges faced by women, and they birthed patriarchal structures that oppress women.

(KII, Lusikisiki, Eastern Cape province)

Financial dependency due to poverty exposes many women to abuse. Most women tolerate and endure abuse because their abusers provide for their basic needs.

In addition, under-resourcing in rural areas often makes it difficult for women to access GBV support services, including the criminal justice system. Several respondents shared rural women's difficulties when seeking help with GBV: lack of support for abused women, long travel distances to public facilities to access care, and the general lack of childcare facilities, which means survivors of GBV may not be able to access redress because they have to care for their children. Bus and taxi services are limited or, when available, are not affordable for many rural women. Slow response times when police and emergency services are called is another challenge. Telecommunications services are of poor quality and expensive.

In addition, respondents shared their frustration at the lack of police capacity to deal with cases of GBV and the lack of legal aid offices to provide legal aid to the poor and marginalised, among others. To a large extent, laws and policies have not translated into significant changes in people's lives within communities. Laws are not being implemented quickly enough to ensure that rights become a reality in people's daily experiences. Respondents had this to say about this challenge:

We have very little trust in the policing and public health system. For example, in Greater Taung (North West), the police is located approximately 25 minutes away by car from Magogong Village. This distance makes it hard for SAPS to arrive at the village on time when a crime has been committed or when a case needs to be opened because Magogong Village has only been assigned one police van.

(FGD participant, Mogogong, Northwest province)

When a person has fallen victim to rape, families/community members often cannot take the survivor to the nearest Thuthuzela Centre as it is far away. This means that both SAPS and the Department of Health let down survivors of crimes such as sexual assault and rape.

(FGD participant, Magogong, North West province)

We don't even trust the police because when someone is raped they report, next thing the rapist is back again the community. Like the case of this man who raped a 6-year-old 3 years back, even the president came to Lusikisiki for this, next thing he was out and raped another child and he only was sentenced now we don't even know he might come back.

(FGD, Lusikisiki, Eastern Cape province)

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges. For example, some women reportedly experienced abuse from their partners because the pandemic came with restrictions that forced people and families to be confined in one place. One respondent stated:

COVID-19 has negatively impacted women's lives; most of them lost their jobs and closed down their small businesses, and opening them is now a challenge. This pandemic also increased the prevalence of GBV because families were forced to stay together.

(KII, Kabokweni, Mpumalanga province)

Lack of access to technology

Poverty is a major obstacle to digital inclusion and participation in South Africa.²⁷ While race has historically been a factor in economic inequality, traditional socio-cultural biases have been barriers to women's labour market and financial and digital inclusion. Respondents reported a shortage of computer skills among women in rural areas. There is a need to increase computer skills among women to end poverty and improve economic standards. Telecentres are ICT initiatives set up in disadvantaged communities to enable people to access the digital world.

Regarding technological initiatives, respondents indicated that while some women in rural areas may have access to smartphones, they sometimes do not know how to use them, and some cannot afford to buy data bundles to access the internet. The following was highlighted by the respondents:

While some women in our communities may have smartphones, they don't know how to use them.
(FGD participant, Kabokweni, Mpumalanga province)

Some women have internet access, but it's mostly those who are working. For those who are not working, it's very difficult to have access to tech advancements
(KII, Kabokweni, Mpumalanga province)

So, technological advancements are the internet café we currently have in the community, and we can access that. Even when our kids have homework, they can still go there to do their work. However, load-shedding is making it very difficult for us to access it.
(KII, Stellenbosch, Western Cape province)

Women in rural communities do not have access to most forms of technological devices due to poverty and, where they are available, low ICT literacy rates prevent their usage. They often resort to traditional media such as radio. The digital divide is gendered, and there are clear geographic disparities relating to access and control of technologies. Similarly, women remain under-represented in the ICT industry and are underpaid; this is far worse for women in rural communities where there is limited technological infrastructure.

Climate change

The climate crisis undermines the health and stability of ecosystems and livelihoods worldwide. Recent weather patterns across South Africa, such as the 2019 droughts, which were the worst in 35 years in some regions of the country, have sparked interest in the impacts of climate change, including gender-differentiated impacts. These events are part of more extreme weather patterns worldwide, largely shaped by human-caused climate change.²⁸

Respondents indicated that changes in weather patterns and extreme weather events as a result of climate change are having serious consequences, especially for rural populations, many of whom are women. Rainfall patterns have changed, causing extreme droughts and flash floods. Forest fires destroy vast tracts of land. Soil erosion exacerbates the crisis, and summers are hot. Crops that once produced reliable food security no longer thrive. Families go

²⁷ Adedokun, T. A., & Zulu, S. P. (2022). Towards digital inclusion in South Africa: The role of public libraries and the way forward. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Economics and Business Law*, 11(4), 127-154.

²⁸ Vogel, C., & Olivier, D. (2019). Re-imagining the potential of effective drought responses in South Africa. *Regional Environmental Change*, 19, 1561-1570.

hungry or are forced get by with less. All of this affects women's ability to provide for the health and nutrition of their families. It makes subsistence and communal farming much more difficult than it was before.

Respondents indicated that climate change and its impacts on women's livelihoods in rural areas are daunting:

Climate change is one of the challenges that women face because subsistence farming is what they depend on, but there are disasters like right now there's this flooding which damages crops; the community is not aware of climate change, and they are not curious to find out about weather conditions and the effect it has on farming, so I think there is still a lot of education around climate change that needs to be done, municipalities and NGOs need to come in here.

(KII, Lusikisiki Eastern Cape province)

Due to continuous rainfalls and flooding, our houses are getting damaged, as most of us live in shacks. The rivers sometimes get full, making it difficult to travel to town or check up on our neighbours. Most people have died because of floods. I remember a while back, a young girl died due to floods ... the young lady had no family members present at that moment, and her body was discovered days later.

(KII, Osizweni, KwaZulu-Natal province)

The lack of empowerment programmes and any initiatives specifically targeting rural women constitutes a key challenge for rural women of Osizweni, and most importantly, climate change which has resulted in floods in most regions of KwaZulu-Natal, with no exception of Osizweni. Rural women of Osizweni indicated that due to continuous rainfalls and flooding, their houses were getting damaged.

(KII, Osizweni, KwaZulu-Natal province)

Women in rural areas are largely not consulted by authorities, such as local community and traditional leaders, regarding ways in which floods severely affect their livelihoods. While authorities have asked those who live close to rivers to relocate, this has not happened. As a result, some people have succumbed to diseases associated with living on wetlands and persistent flooding.



5. Empowerment initiatives, innovations and resilience

Despite the challenges that women in rural areas continue to face in relation to high rates of GBV and the gender-differentiated impacts of climate and poverty, they have demonstrated resilience through leading and actively participating in a number of initiatives supported by different partners. Some of these are highlighted below.

Use of crop diversification to address climate change

This study revealed how rural women are responding to the effects of climate change by diversifying their range of crops and migrating to drought-resistant crops such as finger millet and sorghum. It also emerged in this study that some participants are resorting to planting early maturing crops given the long dry spells experienced, which are not suitable for maize crops. The following narrations confirm this:

We struggle when we do monitoring because we find that some plants have died due to floods or other disasters and you find that now it's a waste because nothing will grow.

(KII, Lusikisiki, Eastern Cape province)

We should have projects like farming crops, selling chickens, and breeding pigs. For example myself I have planted potatoes, and will package them soon to sell them to community, imagine if we did this as a group of women, more money and we would all be independent.

(FGD, Lusikisiki, Eastern Cape province)

Setting up small community businesses

In communities such as Mokgareng in North West province and Osizweni in KwaZulu-Natal province, women have set up food gardens and soup kitchens and some are volunteering in local community-based organisations. These initiatives are not receiving any government support yet women are trying to support their communities with the little they have. A participant noted:

Women are more than willing to do more for their communities. You can imagine if government provided communal land for women to engage in agricultural initiatives – they would go very far!

(Kll, Osizweni, KwaZulu-Natal province)

Growing the agency of GBV survivors through farming

In 2021, People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA), a South African women's rights organisation dedicated to assisting GBV survivors, embarked on a partnership with the Embassy of France in South Africa. The pilot project is aimed at empowering women in the Klipgat community, Winterveld, who have experienced violence and abuse, with sustainable farming (permaculture) and entrepreneurial skills. These skills are meant to assist them in becoming more food secure, self-sufficient and self-reliant – and, ultimately, to break the intricate cycle of violence and abuse. The initiative helps uplift the general well-being and agency of these women and reduce their social, economic and emotional vulnerability. About 25 participants (including three men) have been co-opted into this project, where they work together to establish and maintain the communal vegetable garden, honing their permaculture farming skills as they go. The project is helping to remotivate them and enhance their farming skills, to better manage their home food garden and possibly generate an income out of these skills.²⁹

Supporting social enterprises for mothers of children with disabilities

Ford Motor Company and its philanthropic arm, the Ford Motor Company Fund, have launched a grants programme to support social enterprises that benefit women and children while developing sustainable mobility solutions globally. SHE-MOVES (Strengthen Her: Mobilising Ventures for Social Innovation) is designed to provide 'Whole-Person Leadership' development and promote access to mobility. In South Africa, SHE-MOVES has partnered with the Uhambo Foundation in Cape Town, a woman-led non-profit organisation (NPO) that seeks to enable children with mobility and other disabilities to live full and satisfying lives in their communities. It also supports parents and caregivers with skills training and empowerment opportunities. The Uhambo Foundation received a grant to assist mothers of children with disabilities in rural farming communities with skills development and the creation of essential support networks.³⁰

Use of tech innovations to provide online support for survivors of GBV

Supported by the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies, the Department of Social Development and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Women in ICT Forum has launched an online GBV engagement platform, which is housed on GovChat. It is a zero-rated progressive web-based application that can be accessed from any

²⁹ <https://frenchinstitute.org.za/governance-and-human-rights/civil-society/growing-the-agency-of-gbv-survivors-through-farming/>

³⁰ <https://media.ford.com/content/fordmedia/img/za/en/news/2019/07/17/ford-launches-she-moves-empowerment-programme-in-south-africa-an.html>

browser and is linked to the government's GBV Command Centre. The platform uses the power of data and analytics to curb GBV and allows users to anonymously access support facilities. It provides interactive real-time reporting. This online GBV interactive engagement platform demonstrates how technology can be used to drive social change in real-time. It allows people affected by GBV and their families to access information on key social agencies. It provides the government with visibility into GBV's high-risk areas by location, time zone and peak period, using this data-driven platform. While this platform is designed to function in any part of the country, the extent to which it has been utilised or is effective in rural communities is yet to be established.³¹

Empowering women through social entrepreneurship and innovation

The Hillcrest Aids Centre Trust (HACT), an NGO situated in the eThekweni Municipality, KwaZulu-Natal province, is implementing various economic empowerment programmes to cater to the needs of rural communities. One of these programmes is the *Woza Moya* project. The project accommodates over 350 traditional artisans involved in traditional crafts like wood carving, ceramics, sewing and basket weaving, among others, from rural Zulu communities. Notably, the project primarily attracts Zulu women bead workers, who comprise more than 80% of the traditional crafters under the *Woza Moya* project. The project aims to transform the lives of women bead workers living in rural areas to small business owners with zero start-up capital. To this end, the project is administered as a social enterprise with the economic and social well-being of women as the core objective. In empowering the women bead workers, the *Woza Moya* project adopts open and inclusive innovative approaches which preserve the traditional Zulu bead-work culture, and builds on it to create contemporary jewellery and other fashion and artistic pieces. The bead workers participate in the planning, designing and producing of the bead works.³²

While the initiatives above are not exhaustive, they demonstrate the agency and resilience of women in rural areas, working in collaboration with civil society actors, development partners and NGOs to advance their empowerment and improve their quality of life.

³¹ <https://dialogue.co.za/tech-innovations-addressing-the-scourge-of-gender-based-violence/>

³² <https://openair.africa/empowering-rural-craft-women-through-social-entrepreneurship-and-open-inclusive-innovation/>



6. Recommendations

Evidence has been presented showing that rural women want to be heard to ensure their concerns are taken into account. The information presented in this study underscores the importance of involving communities in solving problems that affect them. Drawn from the research respondents and existing literature, the following recommendations are key to ensuring the sustainable empowerment of women in rural areas in South Africa.

Recommendations to the government

Raise awareness of women's human rights and opportunities

There is a need to increase women's awareness of their rights and the opportunities they can use for empowerment. This would help women become independent and instil a sense of togetherness in solving challenges. Communities feel motivated when they are directly involved in solving their problems and understand the power of their development agenda. Organising workshops, seminars and conferences can help educate women on where and how to get information on many daily life issues, such as how to start, run and grow their business; their rights; access to credit; and basic nutrition. Brochures, resource books, magazines, radio talk shows, television, state newspapers, policy letters, media letters and community contests are some possible avenues through which information can be disseminated.

Mainstream women's involvement in decision-making

Mainstreaming women's involvement in sustainable rural development requires changing attitudes and behaviours towards women and girls of all ages. For women and girls to be leaders of change, they must be seen as valuable contributors to sustainable development, and their contributions must be seen as equal. They should not simply be viewed as 'beneficiaries' or 'at risk'. Rural women and girls can empower communities at the grassroots by leading effective community-based sustainable development actions that contribute to achieving the SDGs.³³ These actions should demonstrate expertise on the ground to improve the lives of women and girls through agriculture, the environment, water and sanitation or health.

³³ Azcona, G., & Bhatt, A. (2020). Inequality, gender, and sustainable development: Measuring feminist progress. *Gender & Development*, 28(2), 337–355.

Integrate gender equality principles into climate action

Integrating gender equality principles into climate protection in South Africa requires far-reaching systemic changes, including gender mainstreaming and the transformation of unequal gender relations and social structures. Structural barriers to gender equality must be addressed, such as patriarchal social norms and discriminatory laws and practices that disempower women and exclude them from meaningful participation and equal contribution to climate change solutions.³⁴

Recommendations to NGOs and the private sector

Transform norms around unpaid care work

There is a growing consensus that development policies must seriously address women's unvalued or undervalued contribution to the economy to successfully alleviate women's disproportionate poverty.³⁵ Agricultural activity in South Africa is on the verge of survival, and the economic empowerment of women and smallholder farmers is essential.

Partnerships with financial institutions and other non-banking partners should be established to help develop small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and lending products (to finance SMEs) specifically tailored to the needs of women. South Africa needs to develop its programmes for women's economic empowerment with a focus on intersectionality, leadership and the place of women in diverse communities.³⁶

Women's empowerment through NGOs

The recent shrinking of the civil society space and the restrictions imposed on NGOs³⁷ further disempower rural women and girls. Without the support of non-governmental and civil society organisations, many rural women and girls lack access to basic services to protect their rights and empower themselves, such as legal representation, education and healthcare. For women and girls to be empowered through the effective implementation of sustainable development principles, NGOs, including women's organisations, must be involved. Through NGOs, women and girls are equal partners, not just participating in development agendas that do not meet their needs.

³⁴ Soergel, B., Kriegler, E., Weindl, I., Rauner, S., Dirnaichner, A., Ruhe, C., ... & Popp, A. (2021). A sustainable development pathway for climate action within the UN 2030 Agenda. *Nature Climate Change*, 11(8), 656–664.

³⁵ Rai, S. M., Brown, B. D., & Ruwanpura, K. N. (2019). SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth – A gendered analysis. *World Development*, 113, 368–380.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Della Porta, D., & Steinhilper, E. (2021). Shrinking spaces and civil society contestation: An introduction. In *Contentious migrant solidarity* (pp. 1–18). Routledge.

Addressing the specific challenges identified in this study requires the following efforts to empower women and girls in rural areas:

Rural women as agents of transformative change	Enhancing participation and representation of rural women in decision-making will significantly reduce poverty and enhance food security and climate resilience. Women understand the nutritional and cultural needs of their families and communities. They are thus better able to identify the challenges and solutions needed to improve their lives and those of their families and communities.
Decent work and social protection	The government should ensure and expand equal access to employment opportunities and decent work in the agricultural and non-farm sectors. It needs to facilitate the transition from the informal to the formal sector, including promoting and empowering women’s economic opportunities in micro-enterprises, small enterprises, sustainable social enterprises and cooperatives.
Gender-based violence	Strengthen measures in place to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against rural women and girls, including harmful practices.
Unpaid care work, infrastructure and service delivery	Unpaid care work needs to be valued and made visible to policymakers to attract political attention and investment in rural areas. Measures are also needed to improve access to health facilities, education, training and other support services.
Investments in infrastructure, new technologies	Increase investment in infrastructure, essential services, new technologies and productive capacity in rural areas to reduce unpaid care work and improve sustainable livelihoods for rural women.
Women as actors in climate change adaptation	Recognise and support women as actors in climate change adaptation, mitigation, disaster risk reduction and resilience strategies (protection of water, food, fuel energy, and livelihoods).
Technology	Making technology and skills accessible to women improves their quality of life by allowing them to communicate with midwives, send and receive money via mobile phones, and open a bank account.

This study has identified the major obstacles women in rural areas face in their quest for empowerment and self-determination. Despite attempts to improve their quality of life, women are largely left out of development initiatives. The study concludes that the government and other development partners need to improve the way they engage with grassroots communities in the design of interventions to achieve real women’s empowerment in rural areas. Improved engagement should accelerate the unlocking of women’s potential, boost their self-esteem and effectively mobilise support from key stakeholders within and outside their communities.

More must be done to improve rural women's access to productive resources and opportunities and ensure their leadership and participation in household and community decision-making. Equal priority must be given to recognising their contribution and providing good working conditions, social benefits and equal pay. To achieve this, we must work together to address inequalities rooted in gender bias, social and cultural beliefs and practices while ensuring effective policies and programmes and increased investment in the agricultural sector.

In conclusion, women and girls in rural areas make up most of those living in poverty and experience multidimensional inequalities. Persistent and chronic underinvestment in gender equality and women's empowerment exacerbates development constraints. These mistakes should not be repeated. Sustainable development initiatives should therefore strengthen consideration of rural women and girls, who are at high risk of being left behind. To achieve SDG5 and mainstream all other SDGs, the voices and perspectives of rural women and girls must be included in policy formulation, implementation and monitoring of all issues. This approach will promote the participation of women and girls as leaders and decision-makers.





