



Rural Women and Gender-Based Violence

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) has been declared a national disaster, with women in the rural areas carrying a disproportionate burden due to entrenched poverty, patriarchal norms, and systemic inequality. Deeply rooted gender norms, societal expectations, and historical trauma from apartheid reinforce power imbalances and perpetuate this violence. Gender-based violence is one of rural women's greatest challenges.¹ Their lives continue to be shaped by systems of inequality that are deeply gendered, and they experience multiple, often co-occurring forms of violence, such as physical, sexual, emotional, and financial, which compound their vulnerability. Studies indicate how women internalise their trauma, resulting in compounded psychological effects such as depression, anxiety, and emotional detachment.² Cultural norms, patriarchal beliefs, and limited community support intersect to shape women's experiences and responses to abuse.

2. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

CEDAW³ is the only international human rights treaty with a dedicated article focusing on the rights of rural women. Article 14 recognizes the crucial economic role of rural women and mandates that states eliminate discrimination against them. It requires equal access to land, healthcare, education, financial credit, and decision-making, while addressing the specific challenges of rural poverty, lack of infrastructure, and patriarchal restrictions.⁴ 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. CEDAW emphasizes equality in land ownership, management,

and inheritance, which are often restricted by patriarchal norms. The document clarifies state obligations to address the specific needs of rural women, particularly regarding land rights, climate change, and protection from violence.

3. Systemic Patriarchal Gender Norms

Many rural women are reliant on male family members to gain access to farming opportunities. Research conducted by the Women on Farms Project (WFP) found that women farm workers could not survive on their own; rather, their lives are dominated by a male partner and a farmer. Many women enter relationships with men in order to survive. "Within these patriarchal contexts, women working and living on farms remain one of the most marginalised groups of women and often face discrimination, exploitation, and unequal treatment in terms of wages, working conditions, and access to resources, infrastructure, law, and opportunities."⁵ Women are financially dependent on male partners who are the permanent employees, while women are used as casual workers employed for seasonal work only. Seasonal and informal labour systems often exclude women from essential social protections like the UIF and pension plans, and they also result in fluctuations in household income, which impacts on food security. In addition, women are often denied land ownership and control, which limits their independence and economic security.

Further research conducted by WFP found that more than two-thirds of women seasonal workers surveyed were not paid the legal minimum wage, did not have access to toilets in vineyards or orchards where they work, were exposed to dangerous pesticides within an hour after spraying, and were not provided with protective clothes by the farmer, as required by

law.⁶ Farm accommodation is often overcrowded, poorly maintained, and lacking in basic amenities. Women have no security of tenure and often face eviction, sometimes illegal, when their employment ends, leaving them homeless with their children. Women face high levels of gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and exploitation by farmers and supervisors. “Women in rural, remote, and severely underprivileged areas remain one of the most vulnerable groups to violence in their communities and their homes despite a commitment to improve the status of women in South Africa as espoused in various policies, legislation, and programmes.”⁷

4. Drivers of Gender-Based Violence

The lives of rural women are shaped by systems of inequality that are deeply gendered. Research conducted on women farm workers by the Commission for Gender Equality found that “women working on farms in South Africa navigate a complex and often challenging landscape characterised by a multitude of socio-economic, cultural, and labour-related dynamics. Agriculture serves as a cornerstone of employment in rural areas, and the resilient efforts of women are pivotal to its success across various subsectors, including crop production, livestock management, and processing. Despite their indispensable contributions, these women farm workers face systemic inequities that permeate their daily lives.”⁸

GBV is driven by intertwined social, cultural, economic, and systemic factors.⁹ Drug and alcohol abuse emerge as a catalyst of GBV, while economic dependence and financial exploitation further entrench abuse. This has impacts on the socialization of children. Evidence shows that there is a strong tendency towards the intergenerational transfer of systemic violence and socio-economic conditions. Thus, young farm women are highly likely to grow up and lead lives which are very similar to those of their mothers and other adult farm women. Research suggests that “many women are compelled into precarious survival strategies, including exploitative labour arrangements and transactional relationships, to provide food for their families. These practices not only perpetuate cycles of poverty and dependency but also erode women’s agency and ability to participate in local economies on equitable terms.”¹⁰

5. Working Conditions

Research conducted by WFP in the Northern Cape and Western Cape found that farm workers’ rights are routinely violated by farmers. Recent reports and parliamentary submissions, often supported by investigations from the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) and complaints to the Public Protector (PPSA) by bodies like Corruption Watch, highlight that women farm workers in South Africa face persistent, systemic abuse and neglect, largely due to weak enforcement of labour laws.¹¹ More than two-thirds of surveyed women seasonal workers do not receive the minimum wage¹² and work without employment contracts. This impacts on household food security. GBV undermines the realisation of constitutionally protected rights to equality, dignity, and access to sufficient food. “Due to the precarious nature of their seasonal employment and their insecure tenure on farms, farmwomen endure the worst conditions of employment, which includes pesticide exposure coupled with no access to toilets or drinking water during the workday”.¹³ Workers report a chronic absence of Department of Employment and Labour inspectors, with 69 per cent stating that their farms have never been inspected. Furthermore, the SA Police Service has been cited for failing to investigate illegal evictions and for not responding promptly to violent incidents on farms. Regulations regarding appropriate protective clothing when handling chemicals and pesticide are continuously flouted by farmers.¹⁴ The Commission for Gender Equality found that “basic services like healthcare, water, and sanitation are determined not by human need, but by gendered social norms, cultural expectations, and systemic neglect”.¹⁵ WFP co-director Carmen Louw points out that “even with changes to legislation to support farmworkers, working in remote areas, a culture of patriarchal systems, job precariousness and the lack of monitoring of the treatment of farmworkers also excludes women on farms from access to better lives”.¹⁶

Furthermore, in April 2022 the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development gave notice that certain pesticides, including chemicals linked to cancer, genetic mutations, and harmful to reproductive health, would be phased out and banned by June 2024; and that the Department intended to conform to an international assessment of risks to human health from pesticides. However, the deadline has come

and gone, and farm workers' health is still under threat, because the intended prohibition has not happened. Rather, the department is advocating for exemptions to the use of these poisons, while the farm women say that they have been excluded from the very decision-making processes that affect their health directly.¹⁷

6. Accessing Protection and Social Services

There are complex issues that rural communities face in preventing GBV, which includes access to resources, cultural norms, and weak institutional support.¹⁸ Women may be reluctant to report GBV because of the stigma associated with it. The 'density of acquaintanceship' in isolated areas means that everyone knows everyone, which can lead to social ostracization or community pressure to 'keep the peace' rather than reporting abuse. Most integrated support centres (like Thuthuzela Care Centres) are located in urban areas, leaving rural women with little to no immediate help. There is a lack of institutional support, with many survivors reporting a lack of faith in the police and judiciary due to slow case conclusions, high travel costs for court dates, and sometimes secondary victimisation by officials. There is limited support for organizations that are the first responders to GBV, and a lack of victim support throughout the court process. Conviction rates are low and there are few safe houses in rural areas. And there is a lack of trained staff in police stations, schools and clinics.

7. The Need for Multi-faceted Interventions

There is an urgent need for context-specific interventions that address both the systemic and subtle aspects of GBV, including social, cultural, and economic reforms, improved substance regulation, and expanded employment opportunities.¹⁹ SAPS needs to provide education and staff training in GBV management, as well as allocating resources and funding to support first responders. One-stop centres, Thuthuzela centres and safe houses need to be established in rural areas, and special courts for GBV in rural areas could fast-track GBV cases. The implementation of policies regarding GBV on local levels should be a priority, and there is a need for trained counsellors at schools, clinics, and churches. Women and girls have rights, and it is important that they are aware of them and that those they turn to for help know how to

assist them in realizing their rights to corporal integrity and dignity.

8. Women Claiming Their Rights

Organizations such as WFP and the Rural Women's Assembly are helping women to claim their rights in various ways. WFP promotes "self-reliance, accountability and sustainability of organisations so that women organise themselves, speak for themselves and mobilise resources to support their needs and dreams. We believe that self-organisation counteracts the marginalisation, abuse and vulnerability experienced by women in the workplace, home and farming community and ensures their leading role in accessing services and securing employment, land and housing".²⁰ The project uses participatory and transformative methodologies, such as popular education, drama, role-playing, and writing. These provide safe spaces "where women have found invaluable and unique opportunities to share the most painful aspects of their lives, where they have found support, love and empathy. For most women, such spaces are often their first and only opportunity to talk and share deeply buried insults, abuse and humiliations".²¹ WFP now also has an Empowerment Programme for adolescent girls which seeks to prevent the intergenerational cycle of abuse.²²

9. Healing Circles

The Rural Women's Assembly (RWA) builds structures called 'healing circles' in communities. 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".²³ The group also liaises with the local clinics and health workers, as well as providing a safe house when necessary. This need is particularly critical in under-resourced rural communities.

There is a need to build capacity by training more GBV advocates and councillors in rural communities, as well as securing local funding for ongoing and sustainable GBV work. A comprehensive media strategy would increase awareness of women's rights.²⁴ RWA is demanding accountability in a failing court system in which GBV cases routinely collapse

due to a lack of evidence. Strong community advocacy is often the only way to influence sentencing outcomes and enforce stricter bail conditions. The organization is advocating for life imprisonment without parole for perpetrators of femicide and abuse; a publicly accessible register of all convicted GBV convicted offenders; the immediate upgrading of dilapidated courts in order to accelerate outstanding cases; and the appointment of a commission of inquiry into corruption surrounding high-profile GBV cases.²⁵

It is critical to make the link between land rights and GBV, as access to land empowers women experiencing GBV by providing the economic and social resources necessary to challenge power imbalances and escape abusive environments. WFP is campaigning for immediate land reform, specifically calling for women farm workers to be given at least one hectare of land for independent farming. The opportunity to grow their own food would impact on food security which, in turn, would improve the health of farm workers and

– very importantly – that of their children. South Africa is experiencing an epidemic of stunting in young children below the age of five, and many of these children live in rural areas. WFP is also continuing to call for the government to ban specific, dangerous pesticides and to enforce strict compliance with labour standards.

10. Conclusion

Research conducted in rural Limpopo underscores the need for multi-faceted interventions, including social, cultural, and economic reforms, improved substance regulation, and expanded employment opportunities. “Effective strategies require collaboration among stakeholders, community programs challenging harmful gender norms, and holistic policies that integrate social, cultural, economic, and systemic approaches. Strengthening responsive and accessible support services can rebuild trust, encourage reporting, and foster resilience.”²⁶

Lois Law

Project Co-ordinator

lois@cplo.org.za

¹ On 11th March the SACBC Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office hosted a Webinar on ‘Rural Women and Gender Based Violence’. The Webinar was addressed by Lenishia Frank from the Women on Farms Project and Sherriff Ramoabi from the Rural Women’s Assembly. This BP owes much to their presentations.

² <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/22/6/887>

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw#:~:text=>

⁴ <https://www.wo-men.nl/kb-bestanden/1565183173.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.parliament.gov.za/storage/app/media/Docs/tpap/5789921d-c931-43fd-b45a-d8921a7ff2bc.pdf>

⁶ <https://groundup.org.za/article/farm-workers-let-down-politicians-face-new-threats-their-security/>

⁷ <https://www.parliament.gov.za/storage/app/media/Docs/tpap/5789921d-c931-43fd-b45a-d8921a7ff2bc.pdf>

⁸ <https://cge.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Women-Farmworkers-Report-Final-1.pdf>

⁹ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12147-025-09389-1>

¹⁰ <https://socialjustice.sun.ac.za/downloads/events/2025-10-zitha-thabiso.pdf>

¹¹ <https://cge.org.za/rural-women-gender-equality-and-the-gendered-nature-of-service-delivery-in-south-africa/>

¹² The new National Minimum Wage is R30.25 per hour

¹³ <https://acbio.org.za/corporate-expansion/stop-chemical-war-on-bodies-of-farm-workers-farm-dwellers-and-their-children/>

¹⁴ <https://acbio.org.za/corporate-expansion/stop-chemical-war-on-bodies-of-farm-workers-farm-dwellers-and-their-children/>

- ¹⁵ <https://cge.org.za/rural-women-gender-equality-and-the-gendered-nature-of-service-delivery-in-south-africa/>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.ewn.co.za/2025/02/18/wc-farmworkers-call-for-stricter-implementation-of-legislation-to-protect-them>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/protesting-farm-women-dodge-stun-grenades-outside-parliament/>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.bussecon.com/ojs/index.php/ijbes/article/view/568>
- ¹⁹ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12147-025-09389-1>
- ²⁰ <https://www.fos.ngo/womenonfarms/>
- ²¹ <https://www.fos.ngo/womenonfarms/>
- ²² <https://www.fos.ngo/womenonfarms/>
- ²³ <https://www.amandla.org.za/tackling-gbv-in-the-rural-areas/>
- ²⁴ Presentation by the Rural Women's Assembly at the CPLO Webinar
- ²⁵ Presentation by the Rural Women's Assembly at the CPLO Webinar
- ²⁶ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12147-025-09389-1>

This Briefing Paper, or parts thereof, may be reproduced with acknowledgement.