



Commission for Gender Equality



**Men's Symposium Addressing Gender-Based
Violence, Promoting Gender Equality,
and Promoting Collaborative Solutions Across
Communities in KwaZulu-Natal**



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REPORT

Men's Symposium Addressing Gender-Based Violence, Promoting Gender Equality, and Promoting Collaborative Solutions Across Communities in KwaZulu-Natal

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Venue: Hilton Garden Inn, Umhlanga, KwaZulu-Natal

Partners: Commission for Gender Equality (CGE),
SANAC Men's Sector, KwaZulu-Natal Men's Forum

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Abbreviations and Acronym

AGYW	Adolescent girls and young women
APP	Annual performance plan
CBO	Community-based organisation
CGE	Commission for Gender Equality
CSO	Civil society organisation
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DoH	Department of Health
DSD	Department of Social Development
GBV	Gender-based violence
GBVF	Gender-based violence and femicide
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and other diverse identities
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
NPA	National Prosecuting Authority
NSP GBVF	National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide
PHTKL	Provincial House of Traditional and Khoisan Leaders
PEI	Public education and information
SANAC	South African National AIDS Council
SAPS	South African Police Service
SAHRC	South African Human Rights Commission

Executive summary

The burden of masculinity, shaped by control, silence, and emotional suppression, continues to manifest violently in the bodies, relationships, and institutions of South African society. While often normalised, this socialisation is a primary driver of gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF), affecting women, children, LGBTQIA+ persons, and men, who remain trapped in cycles of inherited harm. As GBVF statistics worsen, alongside rising male suicide, intimate partner homicide, and child abuse, the cost of inaction becomes clearer. It is within this context that the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE), in partnership with the SANAC Men's Sector and the KwaZulu-Natal Men's Forum, convened the Men's Symposium for Addressing Gender-Based Violence, Promoting Gender Equality, and Promoting Collaborative Solutions Across Communities in KwaZulu-Natal, which was held on 4 March 2025 at the Hilton Garden Inn, Umhlanga. The engagement was convened not as symbolism, but as a strategic intervention.

The gathering created a rare platform for cultural interrogation and collective accountability by bringing together traditional leaders, faith-based institutions, civil society organisations, government departments, LGBTQIA+ advocates, and youth. It challenged the notion that men's participation in ending GBVF is optional. Instead, it asked two questions: How do we build a society where men become allies in the fight against GBVF? Where is power localised? How do we create spaces for equality and shared responsibility in fighting the scourge of GBVF?

Through keynote addresses and three focused thematic sessions, the engagement uncovered stories and reflections often excluded from GBVF conversations, from men navigating suppressed trauma and discomfort with emotional expression, to leaders confronting their role in harmful norms. Participants engaged the social, emotional, and spiritual aspects of GBVF, recognising that transformation is not an event, but a practice rooted in everyday choices, which is a continuous process.

This report captures the engagement, including the legal and policy frameworks that inform this work, redefined roles for men as allies and change agents, and strategic, community-led recommendations. These recommendations include the development of a KwaZulu-Natal Men's Charter on Gender Equality, expanded healing spaces for men, and sustained engagement on gender justice with civil society organisations and with traditional and religious leadership.

The Men's Symposium confirmed what communities have long known: the fight for justice cannot be confronted alone. The fight for justice requires collaboration and respect for all people in all walks of life. To build a more equal South Africa, men must be engaged as participants and drivers of change. This report is not the end of the issues faced by our communities. Nonetheless, this report begins a process and a call to action, with the CGE leading transformation, accountability, and constitutional justice.

1 Introduction

Gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) continue to be an increasing crisis for South Africa, with KwaZulu-Natal standing out as one of the provinces hardest hit by this reality. The scale, brutality, and normalisation of violence against women, children, and gender-diverse individuals have exposed deep institutional and cultural systems, worsening the country's social identity. From the rising rates of child pregnancy and intimate partner homicide to high-profile cases of murder-suicides within families, the Province reflects a broader national failure to protect the most vulnerable. These incidents are not anomalies; they are symptoms of systemic inequalities and enduring patriarchal structures that continue to shape South Africa's social, legal, and cultural landscape.

According to the National Strategic Plan on GBVF (2020-2030), South Africa experiences some of the highest rates of GBV globally, with women five times more likely to be killed by an intimate partner than anywhere else in the world (DSD et al., 2020: 14). In KwaZulu-Natal, these patterns have intensified, with public discourse frequently shaped by outrage, yet rarely followed by transformative systemic interventions. The urgent need to shift from reactive to proactive strategies became the foundation for convening a provincial platform aimed at mobilising men and boys in the fight against GBVF.

Against this backdrop, the men's symposium was a high-level engagement that brought together men from diverse sectors, including traditional leadership, religious institutions, civil society, and government, to confront the role of masculinity in perpetuating violence and to reimagine men's roles as allies in advancing gender justice. It responded to alarming trends and a call to moral and constitutional duty. The engagement served as both an acknowledgement of the problem and a strategic intervention to disrupt the cycles of silence, dormancy, religious and cultural denial that have enabled GBVF to flourish.

2 Collaborative partner profiles

The success of the men's symposium was made possible through the strategic collaboration of three key partners, each bringing a unique mandate, community reach, and area of expertise to the engagement. While the CGE was the lead initiator, its partnership with the SANAC Men's Sector and the KwaZulu-Natal Men's Forum ensured the engagement was diverse, culturally grounded, and community-responsive. Together, these organisations form a crucial alliance in addressing GBVF by challenging harmful gender norms, promoting inclusive leadership, and advancing rights-based approaches across diverse South African contexts.

2.1 Commission for Gender Equality (CGE)



Commission for Gender Equality

The CGE is a Chapter 9 institution established in terms of Section 187 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Mandated by the CGE Act No. 39 of 1996, the CGE's responsibility is to promote, protect, monitor, and evaluate gender equality across all sectors of society. It exercises oversight over implementing laws, policies, and practices that affect the rights of women, men, and gender-diverse individuals. The CGE holds public and private actors accountable for violations of constitutional gender obligations.

As the lead partner of the men's symposium, the CGE initiated this engagement in line with its public education and information (PEI) mandate, recognising that the crisis of GBVF cannot be solved without a deliberate and inclusive engagement with men. The CGE sought to create a platform where the cultural, religious, and societal underpinnings of male violence could be interrogated, not defensively, but constructively. The organisation's interest was moving beyond symbolic participation into accountability, care, and systemic transformation.

2.2 South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) Men's Sector



The South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) Men's Sector (KwaZulu-Natal Chapter) has played a central role in advocating for the transformation of harmful masculinities and promoting gender equality within the context of HIV prevention and public health. The sector actively engages men in processes of unlearning patriarchy, addressing stigma, and encouraging community health responses that are inclusive and rights-based. Their participation in the men's symposium was rooted in recognising that GBVF is linked to broader social issues of health, such as poverty, social exclusion, and unequal power relations. The SANAC Men's Sector brought a wealth of experience in mobilising community-level dialogues, developing faith and culture-based entry points for shifting behaviours, and advocating for access to psychosocial support for men, not as a justification for violence, but as a pathway to healing and prevention.

2.3 KwaZulu-Natal Men's Forum



The KwaZulu-Natal Men's Forum is a provincial network of men's organisations, community leaders, traditional councils, and faith-based actors committed to challenging the cultural and religious norms that reinforce patriarchal dominance. While acknowledging the crucial role of culture and religion in shaping identity, the forum also recognises the responsibility of leadership structures in correcting harmful teachings and promoting gender-equitable values. The forum offered the men's symposium a crucial link to rural contexts, where access to formal legal and psychosocial services is often limited. The

KwaZulu-Natal Men's Forum plays an important bridging role, translating constitutional rights into culturally understood messages that can disrupt gender hierarchies without alienating communities.

The KwaZulu-Natal Men's Forum and SANAC Men's Sector were represented by participants from eThekweni, iLembe, uThukela, Harry Gwala, uMzinyathi, uMgungundlovu, and Zululand, reflecting a united provincial commitment to gender justice through culturally grounded, community-based efforts.

3 Purpose and significance of the engagement



The men's symposium was convened with the urgent intention of repositioning men within both the national and provincial responses to GBVF, not as latent stakeholders, but as central actors in dismantling harmful gender norms, challenging institutionalised patriarchy, and promoting long-term behavioural change. For far too long, efforts to address GBVF have been framed as the responsibility of women and survivors, often overlooking the crucial need to engage those who are statistically more likely to be perpetrators. The exclusion, whether passive or structural, of men from sustained GBVF prevention efforts has left a gap in South Africa's collective response, reinforcing cycles of silence and fear.

This gathering sought to disrupt that exclusion pattern by creating a reflective and action-oriented space for men across KwaZulu-Natal to confront their roles in upholding or resisting violence. By intentionally convening male leaders from religious, traditional, political, higher education, and community sectors, the event created a rare opportunity for cross-sectoral dialogue grounded in accountability and healing. The engagement acknowledged that the transformation of harmful masculinities cannot be outsourced; it must be undertaken by men themselves, in dialogue with those most impacted by violence.

The engagement was therefore designed around three main goals that informed its structure and thematic focus:

1. Facilitate critical reflection on masculinity and power: By creating a space for honest dialogue on how dominant constructs fuel GBVF through masculinity shaped by early socialisation, family, religion, and culture, and particularly through norms of control, emotional repression, and patriarchal entitlement.
2. Promote transformative and inclusive masculinities: By encouraging a shift from harmful gender roles towards masculinities that reflect the constitutional values of dignity, equality, and non-violence. This shift includes redefining men not as 'protectors' but as co-creators of accountable, inclusive, and just communities.
3. Strengthen multisectoral, evidence-based responses to GBVF: By building sustainable partnerships between the government, civil society organisations, traditional leaders, and faith-based institutions towards co-development of GBVF interventions that are trauma-informed, contextually grounded, legally compliant, and owned by local communities.

Through this lens, the engagement became more than an event. The engagement marked a shift in strategy, signalling a broader provincial commitment to move from awareness to transformation, and from isolated interventions to coordinated, long-term solutions.

4 Legal and policy frameworks supporting this work

The men's symposium is grounded in a legal and policy framework that obliges state and societal actors to prevent and respond to GBVF in a rights-based, survivor-centred, and constitutionally compliant manner. The CGE, as a Chapter 9 oversight institution, is mandated not only to monitor compliance with gender equality provisions but also to catalyse public education, systemic change, and institutional reform where gender injustice persists.

Section 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa is at the centre of this legal foundation, which enshrines the right to equality and prohibits discrimination based on gender, sex, and other intersecting grounds. This constitutional imperative is realised through several legislative frameworks, each guiding the protection of vulnerable groups and holding perpetrators accountable. Yet despite their existence, implementation remains uneven, and GBVF continues to plague families, communities, and institutions across KwaZulu-Natal. The gathering served as a platform to interrogate this gap between policy, practice, and the lived realities of South African citizens; and to recommit stakeholders to transforming both laws and the social norms that undermine them.

Key legislative and policy frameworks include:

- Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act No. 32 of 2007: This Act strengthens the criminal justice response to sexual offences, particularly those committed against children and persons with disabilities. It reinforces the rights of victims to access justice and obliges the state to protect them from re-traumatisation during legal proceedings.
- Domestic Violence Act No. 116 of 1998: As a cornerstone of GBVF legislation, this Act provides victims with protection orders and empowers law enforcement to intervene in abusive domestic relationships. However, the men's symposium acknowledged ongoing failures in implementation, particularly in rural areas where social stigma, policing gaps, and patriarchal gatekeeping remain barriers to justice.
- Children's Act No. 38 of 2005: This Act safeguards the care, protection, and well-being of children, recognising their right to be free from abuse, neglect, and exploitative cultural practices. The engagement drew specific attention to the rise in statutory rape cases and child pregnancy in KwaZulu-Natal, calling for stricter enforcement and community-level awareness.
- National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSP GBVF) 2020 - 2030: This NSP GBVF outlines South Africa's national response to GBVF, focusing on key pillars such as accountability, prevention, care and support, and justice system reform (DSD, 2020). The men's symposium was aligned with Pillar 1 (accountability, coordination, and leadership) and Pillar 2 (prevention and rebuilding social cohesion) by strengthening male-centred engagements, addressing harmful gender norms, and facilitating intersectoral collaboration.

Despite the presence of these legal instruments, GBVF persists due to deeply entrenched systemic failures and the social normalisation of gender inequality. The legislation must accompany a shift in public attitudes, a rejection of harmful cultural and religious beliefs, and increased accountability among leaders. Engaging men in this legal, cultural, spiritual, and attitudinal transformation is strategic and necessary.

Through this engagement, the CGE reaffirmed its role as a custodian of gender justice and an oversight body ensuring institutional performance. The CGE also challenged all attending stakeholders, from traditional leaders to provincial departments, to ensure that constitutional rights are not just texts but lived realities, particularly for those most vulnerable to gender-based harm.

5 Programme overview and thematic areas



The structure of the men's symposium programme was intentionally designed to reflect the depth and urgency of the GBVF crisis in KwaZulu-Natal. Drawing on the understanding that GBVF is not simply an individual act of harm but a symptom of structural inequality, the programme was built to confront both internalised beliefs and the pervasive system fuelling the scourge of GBVF. The programme moved beyond awareness-raising to enable honest reflection, shared learning, and co-creating context-specific responses. Each session intentionally linked personal accountability with institutional transformation, ensuring participants were informed and empowered to act.

Grounded in the strategic vision of the NSP GBVF (2020-2030), particularly Pillars 1 and 2, the day's proceedings aimed to deepen leadership accountability and rebuild social cohesion through inclusive, male-centred engagement (DSD, 2020). Recognising that policy alone cannot dismantle the patriarchy, the programme centred dialogue as both a healing tool and a catalyst for prevention. The centring of dialogue allowed men to question how their identities, socialisation, and silence may perpetuate harm while positioning them as essential actors in transforming masculine norms. Through keynote presentations, thematic sessions, and group discussions, the engagement offered a layered, solution-focused platform that challenged participants to move from passive awareness to active responsibility or further reinforce the need to act.

5.1 Programme structure

1. Opening and welcome: The day opened under the leadership of the CGE Deputy Chairperson, Prabashni Subrayan-Naidoo, whose welcome framed the engagement as a constitutional imperative. The presence of Deputy Mayor Councillor Zandile Myeni and Chairperson of the Provincial House of Traditional and Khoisan Leaders (PHTKL) Gender Committee, Inkosi MN Ngubane, further anchored the men's symposium in local leadership and community accountability. Their messages reinforced the urgency of political, traditional, and intergenerational cooperation in challenging the culture of normalised violence in the province.

2. Keynote address: A keynote address delivered by Deputy Director-General Nkosenye Zulu from the Office of the Premier placed the engagement within the broader landscape of state responsibility. His presence symbolised the need for coordinated, high-level commitment to shifting not only policies but also social norms that entrench gender inequity and silence.

3. CGE presentation on promoting men's work: CGE Spokesperson Javu Baloyi presented the institutional mandate for men's work in gender transformation. His input positioned the CGE as an oversight body and a strategic driver of community mobilisation, tasked with rethinking masculinities within legal, cultural, and faith-based environments. His contribution clarified that engaging men is not a parallel effort to the rights of vulnerable persons in this context but is integral to achieving them.

4. SANAC Men's Sector presentation: This was followed by a contribution from the Chairperson of the KZN SANAC Men's Sector, Dr Mfanozelwe Shoji, whose reflections on community mobilisation and faith-based advocacy highlighted the dual nature of culture: it can either entrench harm or be reinterpreted as a source of healing and resistance. His presentation situated GBVF prevention within a broader public health, social justice, and spiritual renewal landscape.

5. Contextual overview – current state of GBVF in KwaZulu-Natal: A contextual presentation from Advocate Mzoxolo Rusi, from the National Prosecuting Authority, who provided a vital intersection between data, justice system trends, and institutional performance. Their presence served as a reminder that while laws exist, their impact is blunted when culture, enforcement, and community trust remain fractured. The presentation also highlighted the nature of harmful traditional practices in KwaZulu-Natal that were informed by traditional misconceptions.

6. Breakout sessions and thematic dialogues: The heart of the men's symposium lies in its three breakout sessions, each offering participants a structured space to interrogate specific crisis sites.

– **Group 1 – Understanding the role of masculinity teachings in South Africa's GBVF crisis:** Facilitated by a representative of the KwaZulu-Natal Men's Forum and supported by the CGE's researcher, this session opened a conversation on the spiritual and cultural construction of masculinities, a necessary starting point for any re-education process that begins in childhood and is reproduced across generations.

– **Group 2 – Barriers men face in speaking up about their rights, well-being, and experiences of violence:** Led by a representative of the SANAC Men's Sector and supported by a representative from the KwaZulu-Natal Men's Forum, this group centred the often-ignored emotional and psychological realities of men, linking suppressed pain to externalised violence, and demanding a psychosocial response to prevention.

– **Group 3 – Men as allies in addressing GBVF in KwaZulu-Natal:** Facilitated by representatives from the CGE, this session emphasised everyday allyship and the visibility of men in spaces where silence has allowed harm to fester. This group brought practical, community-level solutions captured for forward implementation.

The programme was intentionally co-created, with its shared direction visibly embodied in the co-facilitation by Tshepang Mokgokong (CGE) and Thabani Panda (SANAC Men's Sector). This deliberate pairing represented a commitment to collaborative leadership between a constitutional body and grassroots sectoral leadership. The pairing ensured that power and process were not centralised, but distributed, allowing for institutional mandate and community knowledge to shape the flow of the day.

The programme set the tone for a gathering where no voice was positioned above another, and facilitation was not about control but about making space for honesty, discomfort, and reimagining. This partnership reminded participants that transformation is not delivered from the top down, but built through trust, shared ownership, and a commitment to holding the process as carefully as the outcomes.

In a context where many dialogues remain symbolic, this approach made a tangible difference. The dialogues reflected the principles the men's symposium sought to promote: equity in leadership and collective responsibility. The dialogues reminded all in attendance that how we do this work is as important as what we say, and that co-creation is not only a method, but a mandate.

6 Key highlights and outcomes



The gathering brought together diverse participants working towards solutions: traditional and faith-based leaders, community organisers, local government officials, civil society organisations, youth, LGBTQIA+ advocates, academic students, and activists. This diversity was intentional as it echoed what the CGE has long asserted, that gender justice cannot be achieved in silos, nor can it be the burden of vulnerable populations alone. Everyone has a role, and every voice matters.

From the start, there was an atmosphere of introspection and responsibility. Delegates came with the weight of their contexts, some with grief, some with anger, and others with a quiet hope that this space would be different. There were no long-winded monologues or rehearsed apologies. Instead, the day unfolded with honesty, courage, and discomfort. Participants were asked to listen and reflect, and in that process, a renewed understanding of masculinity, accountability, and collective power emerged.

6.1 Reframing masculinity from power to partnership

The CGE, through its opening message, did not waste time on pleasantries. The call was direct: "Men cannot continue to claim ignorance while violence is tearing our communities apart". The CGE's presentation reasserted that the roots of GBVF lie in how power is distributed and normalised in homes, schools, cultural teachings, and religious spaces. It is not enough to condemn violence when it happens. The work lies in disrupting the thinking that allows it in the first place.

The SANAC Men's Sector brought lived experience and the cumulative lessons from campaigns like Brothers for Life, Takuwani Riime, and Better Men for Tomorrow. These were not abstract ideas, but reflections from men who had spent years engaging other men in spaces of pain, shame, and silence. The sector highlighted the power of men's forums when they are grounded in care and honesty, not posturing. There was a recognition that healthy masculinities are built through accountability, visibility, and the recognition of harmful systems entrenched in South Africa.

6.2 Listening to leadership from the ground

Voices from the ground were not sidelined. Traditional leaders challenged one another not to cling to outdated customs, but to evolve them. As the PHTKL Gender Committee Chairperson Inkosi Ngubane remarked, "We cannot lead people we are afraid to challenge. Culture must live, but not at the cost of our daughters' lives". There was a powerful sense that traditional and faith-based leadership must stop positioning itself as neutral because neutrality has never protected the vulnerable.

The rejection of neutral responses was echoed in the address by the Premier's representative, Deputy Director-General Nkosenye Zulu, when he shared the shameful provincial statistic that more than 1,200 domestic violence assaults were reported in a single reporting cycle. He reminded the gathering that leadership cannot operate solely on paper. The work must happen in wards, homes, churches, and how we raise boys. The Deputy Mayor of eThekweni, Councillor Zandile Myeni, added her voice to the call for inclusion, stating that gender equality is not a favour for women and vulnerable populations, but a structural necessity for any society that intends to heal, grow, and thrive. She stated that:

"Gender equality is not simply a women's issue; it is a societal necessity that benefits everyone. By advocating for equal rights, opportunities, and respect for all genders, we unleash the full potential of our communities, bolster our economies, and foster a safer and more just world for future generations".

6.3 Thematic breakout sessions: Grounding dialogue in reality

The centre of the men's symposium was in the breakout rooms, where participants sat in circles of honesty and discomfort. These were sites of shared vulnerability. Men of different ages, professions, faith traditions, and sexual identities came together not to debate abstract policies but to confront the roots of violence embedded in their lives, homes, and cultures. These sessions were designed to break silences that cost lives, challenge inherited ways of being that have left generations emotionally scarred, and uproot new care practices, justice, and reflection.

Each group wrestled with one of the core questions posed by the men's symposium, not just in theory, but in presence and memory. They named what needed to be unlearned and imagined what could be reclaimed. And while each conversation was unique, they shared one truth: the work of transforming masculinity must be deliberate, public, and sustained.

6.3.1 Group 1: "I didn't learn violence on my own" – Reflections of masculinity and socialisation

Group 1 traced the origins of violence back to early childhood, to the lessons passed down in kitchens, classrooms, pulpits, initiation schools, and playgrounds. Participants spoke of growing up in environments where domination was celebrated, empathy was seen as weakness for male bodies, and emotional expression was punished or met with humiliation. One participant said:

"When I cried, I was told I was soft. When I fought, I was called strong. And now we are surprised that we hit before we speak".

That reflection set the tone for the session in being an honest disclosure about how boys are shaped at an early age, before they become violent men.

Cultural teachings must be subject to critical interrogation for their potential to perpetuate gender based violence and femicide, rather than being romanticised as inherently virtuous or idealised as beyond critique. While many cultural rites carry dignity and depth, others have become entangled with power, patriarchy, and fear. Participants called for a crucial renewal of practices, not to erase tradition, but to re-root the practices in humanity and justice. There was a vision shared of initiation ceremonies that no longer equate manhood with endurance of pain alone, but with responsibility, emotional intelligence, and relational integrity. One elder proposed:

"What if becoming a man meant learning how to apologise, cook, and care for a child, not just how to survive?"

This session concluded with a collective commitment to collaborate with faith leaders, traditional custodians, educators, and parents to develop gender-conscious curricula and mentorship programmes. The session's message was clear: we cannot raise boys on shame and expect peace.

6.3.2 Group 2: "We carry things we cannot name" – When men cannot speak

The second group turned inward to name and confront what they had been socialised to silence: sexual abuse, emotional abandonment, anxiety, addiction, depression, and suicidal thoughts. When reflecting, one participant said:

"We carry things we cannot name, and when it gets too heavy, we pass it on, not in words, but in bruises".

Against this reality, this group identified how organisations systemically fail to support men in distress, including clinics, religious institutions, institutions of higher learning, traditional houses, and workplaces. Either men are turned away, or they are humiliated in the process of seeking help. The group called for transforming community support structures to ensure inclusive practices, language, and approach to distressed persons. The lack of support pushes men and boys to self-harm or harm others, as evidenced by the statistics of GBVF and male suicide reports. Men and boys need safe spaces to share the harm done and process the harm experienced.

The discussion led to concrete suggestions, including integrating mental health education into GBVF dialogues, establishing healing circles for men and boys in churches and cultural forums, and training male facilitators to support trauma-informed discussions among peers. Importantly, participants emphasised that these spaces must lead to greater accountability, emotional literacy, and the rebuilding of self. One attendee said:

“Before we can become better fathers, partners, or leaders, we need to become honest men. That means facing what we've buried and refusing to pass it on to the next generation”.

6.3.3 Group 3: “Being a man cannot mean being silent” – Men as everyday allies

Group 3 participants were interested in understanding GBVF and wanted to know how to interrupt it. One participant said:

“Being a man cannot mean being silent. Silence is how the violence survives”.

The session began by calling out the normalisation of sexism in everyday spaces: in WhatsApp groups, staff rooms, community meetings, schools, and even on pulpits. Many shared stories of knowing perpetrators who were protected by status or silence, men who continued to serve in leadership positions while survivors were seen as dishonest, were discredited, or disappeared.

The group called for a new definition of allyship. The definition should not be based on protection but on presence, practice, and participation. Allyship must be realised in everyday life. Allyship should be evident in how one speaks, who one interrupts, what one challenges, and how one shows up, especially in moments when no one is watching.

Concrete recommendations from the group included the development of a Men's GBVF Pledge to be used in schools, churches, and traditional gatherings; peer-to-peer education models in taverns and sports clubs; and the support of male-led forums that champion respectful relationships, shared parenting, and consent. There was also a strong call to raise new community leaders from boys and young men who model transformative examples of fatherhood, walk away from toxic masculinity, and understand that leadership begins at home.

These three sessions did more than reflect. They reminded all in attendance that monsters do not sustain GBVF. Instead, GBVF is sustained by ordinary people who do not speak up, do not intervene, and do not examine their own beliefs. To end this crisis, the unlearning must be as public as the harm has been. As one young participant quietly said while closing the group session:

"We were not born like this. We were made like this. That means we can be remade".

7 Strategic recommendations for the collaborating partners



The engagement reaffirmed that ending GBVF and promoting equality cannot be sustained by once-off events. Real change demands continuous, multi-layered, and community-founded engagement. The following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the CGE's programming, advocacy, and oversight functions, while ensuring partners are mobilised meaningfully to uphold the constitutional mandate of gender justice and equality.

These recommendations are not additions to the CGE's mandate. Rather, the recommendations are an expansion of its constitutional obligation to confront gender inequality at its source.

7.1 Institutionalise men's engagement within CGE programming

The men's symposium highlighted that men's inclusion in gender equality work must go beyond mobilisation and become a core pillar of the CGE's provincial engagement strategy. This core pillar should include:

- Developing the CGE Men's Engagement Framework, integrating research, education, advocacy, and legal monitoring tools.
- Monitoring the province in establishing quarterly men's forums across rural and urban districts, ensuring these are safe and structured spaces for reflection, accountability, and dialogue. Embedding masculinity-focused analysis into GBVF research reports, public education campaigns, and community intervention models.

7.2 Co-create a KwaZulu-Natal Men's Charter on gender equality

Building on the momentum of the men's symposium, the CGE will support SANAC Men's Sector and the KwaZulu-Natal Men's Forum in the co-development of a KwaZulu-Natal Men's Charter on Gender Equality and GBVF Prevention. The Charter will be developed with the participation of traditional leaders, youth formations, LGBTQIA+ organisations, organisations led by people with disabilities, and broader civil society. Our role is to provide support in line with the PEI mandate and to monitor the Office of the Premier in its coordination of activities of the Men's Forum.

The KwaZulu-Natal Men's Charter on Gender Equality and GBVF Prevention should:

- Outline shared commitments for men across sectors and identities to uphold gender justice
- Include practical actions, accountability mechanisms, and public reporting tools at the ward and municipal levels
- Be adopted in traditional councils, faith-based institutions, and public schools as a tool for culture shift.

7.3 Expand male-centred mental health support

The gathering revealed an urgent need for emotional healing and psychosocial services for men and boys, not only as a preventative measure but as a restorative justice approach. The CGE and partners should:

- Collaborate with the Department of Health, faith-based networks, and local clinics to establish community-based healing spaces for men and boys
- Support the training of male peer facilitators who can host dialogues on grief, trauma, and non-violent emotional expression
- Advocate for the integration of mental health screening and support into public education sessions, correctional centres, and substance use programmes
- Strengthen allyship and accountability in institutions.

Symbolic support is not enough. Institutions must be held to account for how they enable or challenge GBVF. In this regard, the CGE will provide support through the Office of the Premier by:

- Contributing to the development of a men's allyship resource for workplaces, traditional councils, schools, and municipal structures that outlines behavioural expectations, conflict response protocols, and survivor support
- Supporting the facilitation of leadership dialogues with male councillors, educators, and religious leaders on how their platforms can be used to model gender-equitable behaviour
- Monitoring the piloting of a gender-responsive code of conduct for community leaders, including allyship indicators and public commitments

7.4 Amplify intergenerational and intersectional dialogue

Transformation cannot be achieved without hearing from those often left out of GBVF dialogues: young people, LGBTQIA+ persons, informal workers, and persons with disabilities. The CGE and its partners should:

- Host annual intergenerational roundtables on gender justice and masculinities, focusing on rural, faith-based, and youth-led perspectives
- Document and publish community stories of locally led change initiatives

- All partners should ensure that future outreach and education materials reflect inclusive language, portray diverse expressions of manhood, and highlight real-life stories of accountability and change.

7.5 Monitor, evaluate, and share learnings

Sustainable transformation requires that we reflect, adapt, and learn. To this end:

- The CGE should commission a process evaluation of men's engagement activities in the province, tracking behavioural change, institutional responses, and community feedback.
- Partner organisations should be supported in adopting monitoring tools that capture shifts in language, practice, and relational dynamics at the community level.
- An impact report of the men's symposium should be published annually, with shared indicators and commitments revisited yearly.

7.6 Final word

The work of transforming masculinity is central to the work of attaining gender justice. The engagement reinforced the understanding that GBVF is not a momentary lapse in judgment but the result of long-standing systems that reward control, emotional suppression, and silence among men. Siwakhile Ngcobo and Charlene Van der Walt (2024, p. 33) assert that masculinity in South Africa is not neutral. Rather, “hegemonic masculinity in religious landscape and the patriarchal framework that informs masculinity construction – women and children vulnerable to experiencing violence”.

The engagement was called for present men. For men who will stay in the room when accountability and honesty become uncomfortable, and who understand that allyship is not a title, but a commitment to disrupt violence at its root. Zethu Mathebani (2019, p. 30) reminds us that undoing harm must be “more than legal redress, it must become a culture of care, reparation, and responsibility”. This gathering affirmed that such a culture is only possible when men join the call for transformation, both relationally, socially, spiritually, and institutionally.

As Charlene Van der Walt (2021, p. 77) writes, “Justice must be embodied in who we listen to, how we lead, and what we are willing to surrender”. GBVF interventions have spoken around men or about them. The men's symposium challenged this pattern and instead opened the space for men to do the deeper work of challenging patriarchy

and the systems that maintain it, reimagining a society in which these patriarchal systems are dismantled through the realisation of transformed masculinities that create space for all bodies to be treated equally, with respect, and without harm.

This process will require sustained effort, shared leadership, and a willingness to be changed by the work. These recommendations are not the destination; they are starting points. The recommendations must now be carried into schools, homes, churches, clinics, correctional centres, and initiation rites. Carried by leaders, but also by neighbours, fathers, brothers, and sons who believe dignity must be taught, protected, and lived.

8 Conclusion

The 2025 Men's Symposium for Addressing Gender-Based Violence, Promoting Gender Equality, and Promoting Collaborative Solutions Across Communities in KwaZulu-Natal marked a crucial shift in how gender transformation must be approached: with urgency, inclusion, and collective responsibility. The engagement reaffirmed that meaningful change does not emerge from compliance alone, but from the courage to reflect, speak honestly, shift behaviours, and hold each other accountable in our spheres of influence. What emerged from this gathering were layered insights, grounded in pain, resilience, strategy, and a deep resolve to do better. The dialogues highlighted what is often left unsaid: that while not all men are perpetrators, the social norms that enable GBVF require all men, in their diversity, to be part of the solution.

The men's symposium affirmed that addressing GBVF cannot rest solely on the shoulders of women and vulnerable populations, nor can it remain bound to solutions that overlook the social and cultural roots of harm. The presence of a broad spectrum of voices, across age, gender identity, race, sector, and cultural authority, modelled what true, community-rooted transformation can look like. This spirit of collaboration must now be deepened and embedded into institutional, religious, cultural, and local systems.

The outcomes and recommendations outlined in this report are grounded in lived realities and shaped by people working at the intersections of policy, community mobilisation, public education, and legal accountability. These are strategic tools meant to guide the CGE and its partners as they strengthen their efforts to build safer, more just communities. This report calls for meaningful, active participation as accountable, reflective, and contributing members of a more equitable and peaceful society.

The gathering laid a foundation for deeper institutional learning, long-term partnerships, and grounded community engagement. It showed that new possibilities emerge toward solidarity, healing, and collective action when people come together. The challenge is consistently carrying this work forward to turn commitment into action, dialogue into accountability, and partnership into sustained change. The CGE, in its constitutional role, must continue to lead this charge so that dignity, equality, and safety are not aspirations but guarantees for all.

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Notes

This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 20 evenly spaced horizontal grey lines across its entire width, providing a guide for handwriting or typing. The paper itself is a clean, off-white color.



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