Stories of Change Series: Story #6

‘We’re all just figuring it out, we don’t have all the answers. But we must do this work. We don’t have a choice.’

UBUNTU
Rural Women & Youth Movement

Masibambisane: *Creating GBVF-Free Zones*

creating GBVF free zones
Masibambisane

FOUNDATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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WHERE WE COME FROM

About the organisation

Ubuntu Rural Women and Youth Movement (Ubuntu) is a non-profit organisation registered in 2014, established in response to evictions on state-owned farms in the Stellenbosch area, in the Western Cape province. Since then, it has grown to work mainly in three provinces: the Western, Northern and Eastern Cape. Ubuntu is committed to empowering rural women and addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in the agricultural, mining and fishing sectors.

Its primary objective is to amplify women's voices, foster leadership and solidarity, and improve access to GBV services, particularly in underserved communities. Ubuntu aims to build women's leadership in farming, fishing and other marginalised communities, enabling them to access justice and participate actively to strengthen the social and political voice of their communities.

Through collaboration with various key stakeholders – including the South African Police Service (SAPS), the Department of Social Development (DSD), Thuthuzela Care Centres (TCCs), the National Prosecution Agency (NPA), the Department of Justice, the Department of Health, GBV first responders, the MOSAIC Training, Service & Healing Centre, the National Shelter Movement, Safe Moms and social clubs for elders, people with disabilities, schools and faith communities – Ubuntu works to create a safer and more equitable society. As a community-based advice office (CAO), it also provides vital support and guidance to marginalised and vulnerable groups.

Key focus areas

Building women's leadership through training and capacity building.

Providing advice, access to information and legal assistance to farm workers and others in vulnerable sectors experiencing human rights violations, unfair labour practices and hazardous working conditions.

Offering advice and information to fisher communities on issues such as prospect mining, fracking, environmental impact assessments and climate change education.

Serving as a referral and mediation organisation addressing occupational health and safety (including pesticides, injuries on duty, compensation), evictions and dismissals.

Running campaigns and engaging government and other relevant stakeholders to promote women's participation in decision making.

Fostering collaboration among community stakeholders for collective engagement with decision makers.

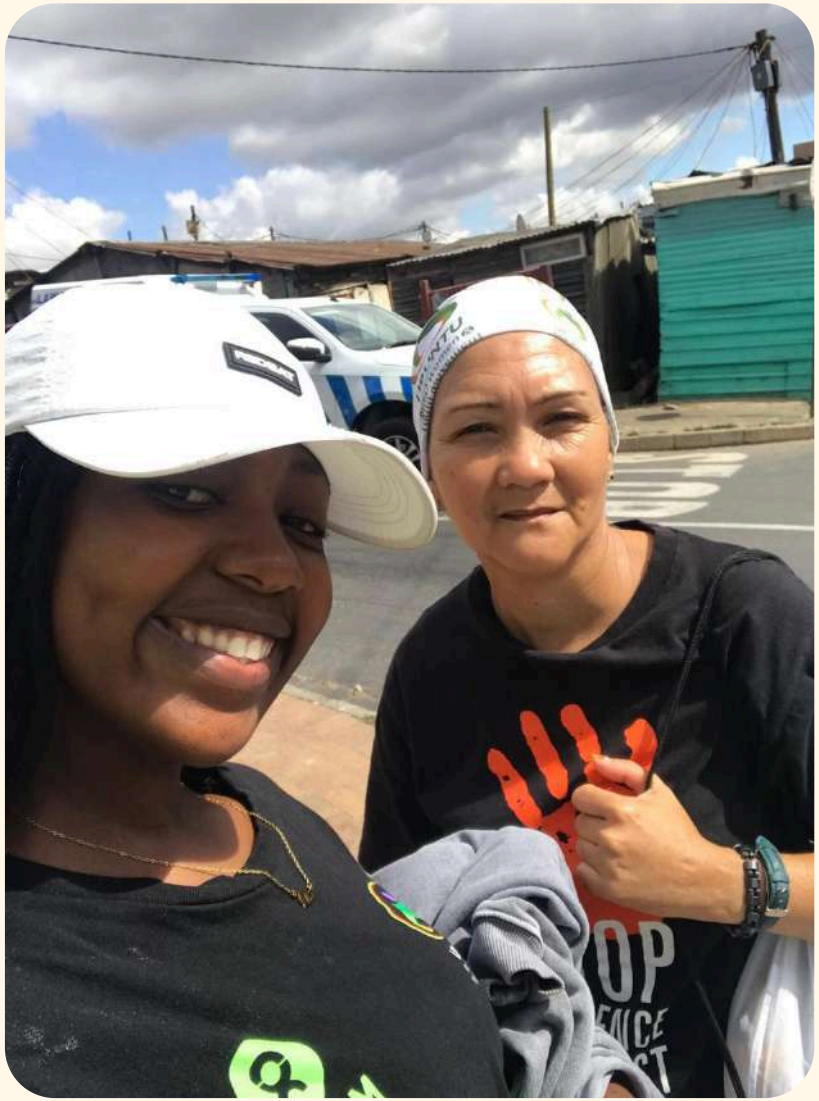
Impact and achievements

Ubuntu's work is at the heart of grassroots transformation, consistently supporting those who have been excluded and exploited, including farm women, the unemployed, fisher communities, and youth deprived of their voice and facing discrimination. At the core of Ubuntu's approach is a people-centred, intersectional focus across four main themes: land, food, environment and GBV.

From this mobilisation, local champions have emerged who lead change within their communities. The GBV prevention efforts have helped place many women and children in safe care, contributed to family restoration and supported interventions by social workers and schools.

Ubuntu's transformative work spans paralegal services, care work, advocacy, lobbying, building strategic partnerships and amplifying the voices of women and youth. The organisation has provided food relief to thousands of vulnerable individuals and families, assisted hundreds of unemployed people in accessing the R350 Covid relief grants and advocated for clean water access – improving living conditions for evicted communities and farm dwellers.

Ubuntu's tireless efforts have created a ripple effect, inspiring positive change and promoting a more just and equitable society.



This is our story

Ubuntu's GBVF monitors are trained community members, often survivors themselves, who work as first responders, case supporters, awareness campaigners and researchers. They operate on the ground, walking alongside survivors, documenting cases, making referrals and educating others about the forms and consequences of abuse. Their work is emotionally demanding and often dangerous, but rooted in a strong ethic of solidarity, healing and peer support.

Wendy Pekeur: Founder of the Ubuntu Rural Women and Youth Movement.
She supports GBVF monitors, facilitates stakeholder engagement and intervenes in complex cases.

Lauren Mandindi: Trained GBVF monitor and first responder.
Also involved in Ubuntu's kitchen and food agency work. Motivated by witnessing GBV in her family and community.

Annie Mitchel: Volunteer, board member and GBVF monitor.
Former treasurer of the Ubuntu board and part of the organisation's spiritual crime prevention and outreach teams.

Grizelda Isaacs: Trained GBVF monitor and first responder.
Also contributes to GBV-focused research within Ubuntu and supports community-based interventions.

Motivations for becoming a GBVF monitor

For the women of Ubuntu, becoming a GBVF monitor is not just a volunteer role; it is a personal commitment rooted in lived experience. Most were drawn to the work through witnessing abuse in their families or communities, and through a desire to educate others and support survivors.

"I was witnessing GBV in my community and also want to educate … pass on training and get people to see the need of GBV awareness and I wanted to educate people, my community, about it." – Grizelda Isaacs

"I really want to reach out to them – to my community – to make a difference. That's why I try to educate people more around GBV. Just to make them aware." – Annie Mitchel

"As a GBV monitor, my personal goals were centred around making a positive impact in the lives of survivors – like empowering and supporting the survivors in building relationships, and also to trust me to speak and open up." – Lauren Mandindi

These motivations reveal a recurring thread: the work begins with empathy and the drive to challenge silence and fear. It is not abstract advocacy, it is a calling grounded in painful realities and a hope for transformation.


WHERE WE
ARE NOW

The work of GBVF monitoring

GBVF monitors are on the frontlines of community-based responses, raising awareness, guiding survivors and supporting cases from first disclosure to formal legal steps. Their work combines public education with deeply personal, often hidden support.

“We do awareness campaigns around GBV. If we don’t have any activities planned, then our focus is on going to people and educating them. A lot of the activities we do is to teach on the forms of GBV, what types there are, and we also give them information on where to go in different situations.” – *Annie Mitchel*

“We first collect the person’s information … then we ask them how we can assist, what the problem is … we explain to them the different types of abuse … so we’re able to say whether it’s economic, physical or something else. Once we understand the situation, we help them take the next step – like getting a protection order if they feel threatened.” – *Grizelda Isaacs*

Monitors offer emotional support, build trust and ‘walk the path’ with survivors, often returning to check in or follow up on unresolved issues. Their knowledge of local dynamics and the trust they’ve built over time allows them to work where formal systems often fall short.

“The monitors make sure they walk alongside the person, giving support … They ask: how often is this happening? Do you want to be helped? If she says yes, then they explain all the steps … They will even help fill in the protection order form if needed.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

This is time-consuming, emotionally intense work that often happens without formal resources or institutional backing, but it is at the heart of Ubuntu’s approach to building GBVF-free zones from the ground up.


NEIGHBOURHOOD
WATCH

Challenges in reporting and community fear

One of the most persistent challenges GBVF monitors face is fear, survivors are often too afraid or ashamed to speak out. The threat of retaliation, social stigma and economic dependence all play a role in keeping cases hidden.

“People are scared to talk … and they are ashamed of it. Fear.” – *Grizelda Isaacs*

“People don’t want to talk … the perpetrator intimidates, so people end up not wanting to make the abusive relationships worse. And then the abuse escalates.” – *Annie Mitchel*

Grizelda explains that many women stay silent because they live with the perpetrator or rely on him financially. This silence prevents healing and intervention.

“They’re scared to speak out … scared they won’t have any income. They’re scared they won’t have anywhere to go.” – *Grizelda Isaacs*

“GBV is a big issue in my community … the statistics in Kraaifontein are very high.” – *Lauren Mandindi*

Even when monitors are present and ready to help, silence remains a barrier. Grizelda describes the emotional toll of trying to support people who cannot open up.

“If they don’t talk, they can’t be helped. I was challenged … how can I help them if they’re not open? How do I make them feel more comfortable?” – *Grizelda Isaacs*

Wendy underscores this difficulty. Monitors often know abuse is happening but feel powerless until someone speaks.
“If somebody doesn’t come and say, ‘I need help,’ how do we help them? That’s what Grizelda is saying, she asks herself: how do I put them at ease?” – *Wendy Pekeur*

The fear is not only emotional; it’s often physical and real. Survivors may be intimidated or threatened by abusers, and in some cases, monitors themselves have been targeted for supporting survivors. This adds a layer of risk to the already difficult work.

Despite these challenges, Ubuntu monitors persist, creating small spaces of safety, trust and solidarity in communities where silence often rules.

Court support and accountability successes

For Ubuntu monitors, the courtroom is not a distant institution, it is a battleground for justice, where presence, visibility and community pressure can make the difference between impunity and consequence. The monitors' role doesn't end when a case is reported; in many instances, they walk with survivors and their families through long, traumatic court processes, advocating for accountability at every step.

"We've been very successful when it comes to supporting women to get protection orders – and our court support … I think our biggest success is the court support. If it wasn't for that, some of the cases would have fallen through the cracks." – *Wendy Pekeur*

Ubuntu collaborates with several other organisations, including the Callas Foundation, the 1000 Women Trust and the Women's Legal Centre, to gather petitions, mobilise communities and pressure courts to deny bail and enforce strong sentencing.

"At every court we have a petition … we have online petitions with community signatures. Community, it doesn't matter where they are, they sign, saying: no bail and the harshest sentence that fits the crime." – *Wendy Pekeur*

Lauren highlights the emotional and moral drive behind these efforts:

"Perpetrator accountability … that the perpetrator be held accountable for what he did. For instance, someone was raped, then he must be put behind bars for the deed, and no bail, because a perpetrator shouldn't be getting bail for abusing a woman or a child." – *Lauren Mandindi*

She describes a case where a woman in Kraaifontein was murdered by her boyfriend. The monitors supported the family throughout the long legal process, which eventually led to a 25-year sentence.

But success comes at a cost. In one high-profile case, Ubuntu monitors were threatened at court by the family and supporters of the accused, young men charged with gang-raping a 23-year-old woman in Klapmuts.

“They were almost attacking our monitors for being in court, supporting the survivor… Often your life can be in danger as well as a monitor.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

Despite these threats, the monitors continued to attend hearings, oppose bail and stand by the survivor. Their visible solidarity sent a message; that the community would not stay silent.

Grizelda describes how even wearing an Ubuntu t-shirt now carries weight inside state institutions:

“By the prosecutors … if I walk in there with my Ubuntu t-shirt, you can see for yourself, they’re quickly on their feet to help. They are very keen. They’re now more aware of the work we do … that we’re not there to criticise them but to stand with them.” – *Grizelda Isaacs*

Wendy confirms this shift:

“They can see we’re not there to criticise, but to lend a hand. And they also know we’re keeping an eye. We’re watching the cases.”

Still, the monitors encounter inconsistent treatment. Some police officers cooperate immediately. Others only act when Ubuntu intervenes.

“I went with the survivor to the police station, they weren’t giving her any information. But when I went with her and said we were taking up the case as supporters, they sprang up. They react now when Ubuntu enters and takes part in cases.” – *Annie Mitchel*

“I took another survivor to the police station and suddenly they came out and warned the perpetrators. My question was: why only now? Because I came with her?” – *Wendy Pekeur*

Ubuntu’s advocacy doesn’t stop at the local level. Wendy describes attending a high-level parliamentary briefing where she directly challenged senior politicians about the failures of the justice system, from parolees committing new crimes, to the backlog in DNA processing, to the lack of special offences courts.

“They celebrate a 72% conviction rate, but that’s only of the cases the state decides to prosecute. There are many rape and GBV cases that never get prosecuted. So our work is very localised, but our lobbying goes up to the highest office. That’s what’s needed.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

In Ubuntu’s approach, justice means more than a court ruling, it’s about being seen, being supported and having others walk beside you when the system would rather look away.

Support for survivors and self-care for GBVF monitors

For Ubuntu monitors, supporting survivors is not just a process, it's a relationship. It involves earning trust, walking alongside someone in crisis and remaining present long after others have stepped away. But this care for others also takes a toll. Many monitors are themselves survivors, and the emotional intensity of the work can leave them overwhelmed and unsupported.

"As monitors we are also emotional people. We have our own issues … I know I need to give more attention to self-care. You also need someone you can speak to about how you feel." – *Grizelda Isaacs*

Annie echoes this need, linking it to her desire to help others more effectively:

"For myself, I wanted the same thing, the self-care. Another thing is, for the survivors … if I could share more knowledge around GBV so they're empowered and they're able to learn more. If I could educate them more, give more hope to them." – *Annie Mitchel*

Wendy acknowledges this gap. While reflection meetings are sometimes held, proper debriefing and psychological support remain limited:

“I think our monitors are very traumatised … Through this whole thing we didn’t get the debriefing right. We would have meetings and talk through things, but they need to speak to somebody else. I also get triggered. I can’t be the person who hears all these things also.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

Despite this, the monitors continue to provide essential support to survivors; listening, advising, accompanying them to court and explaining legal processes in plain language.

“One really effective step was the follow-ups we did, so that people feel there’s someone who cares. Us forming a support system around the people we help.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

Lauren emphasises that caring for survivors also means being mindful of one’s own capacity:

“For me, it’s the engagement, when supporting the survivors. But you can’t just work when your health is being pulled down.” – *Lauren Mandindi*

Wendy shares examples of how Ubuntu has stepped in to ensure survivors receive not only justice but dignity and care. She points to the Thuthuzela Care Centre (TCC) model as an example of survivor-centred support:

“Survivors come into a space where maybe for a moment they can forget about what has happened … it’s about protecting the dignity of the survivor. You go in there as one person and come out as a new person.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

She recounts how a young rape survivor from Zimbabwe was treated with care, offered counselling, given a care pack and supported through the court process:

“She didn’t have to go to three different places; police, doctor, counselling. It all happened at the TCC. For me, some of her dignity was restored there, in the privacy, in the care.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

But not all systems function this well. Monitors often have to fight for survivors to be heard or protected. They face inconsistent responses from trauma centres, social workers and school authorities. Sometimes, even principals fail to act, or worse, endanger families by mishandling reports of abuse.

In the absence of systemic care, the Ubuntu team often absorbs the emotional burden, without adequate tools for their own recovery.

“There’s a mother who saw her daughter being killed. A little boy who saw his mother being killed. We make sure the psychosocial support is there… but that kind of trauma, it affects all of us.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

Through all of this, the monitors continue their work, offering their presence, knowledge and hope. But they know that in order to keep supporting others, they need space to rest, reflect and heal themselves.


WHERE WE
ARE GOING
JUSTICE
JUSTICE
JUSTICE

Lessons learned from our GBVF monitoring

Working as a GBVF monitor has not only changed the lives of survivors – it has changed the monitors themselves. Over time, they have witnessed deep shifts in community awareness, growing trust in their role and a better understanding of what gender-based violence really is.

“Now people know what GBV is. People understand better what it is, how they can address it, and where they can go for help … We’re there as a support system, from when the problem begins until it’s solved.” – *Grizelda Isaacs*

Grizelda notes how this ongoing presence has allowed monitors to earn the confidence of those who once stayed silent.

“We’ve gained trust from people; people who never wanted to open up have grown more trust in us.” – *Grizelda Isaacs*

Annie reflects on how the programme not only empowered survivors, it also empowered the monitors themselves. Simply talking about GBV in public spaces has shifted norms and opened up previously unspoken realities.

“Before we started the programme … we weren’t always aware of the abuse some survivors were experiencing. But as we brought people together and spread information, we were able to give them courage, to empower them and ourselves. It’s made a difference for me, and for the community.” – *Annie Mitchel*

Wendy echoes this:

“There were a lot of people who were not aware, but by doing the programme, and when we approached people, they became more aware of abuse. That helped the survivors and helped us to make a difference.”

Lauren brings the focus back to the importance of balance, not just in caring for others, but in learning to care for oneself in the process:

“For me, it’s prioritising self-care and stress management, because you can’t just work while your health is being pulled down. Also, empowering the survivors, and making sure their needs and their safety are prioritised.” – *Lauren Mandindi*

The monitors have learned that change is not just about dramatic interventions, it’s about sustained presence, small acts of education and the gradual rebuilding of trust between people and the systems meant to protect them.

“It’s about giving people information … so they understand they can be helped, and that we are here to walk with them.”– *Wendy Pekeur*

Collaboration with stakeholders

Over time, Ubuntu's GBVF monitoring programme has developed from informal, community-driven support into a recognised player in local stakeholder networks. This evolution has brought both opportunities and tensions, as monitors begin to hold institutions accountable, and institutions begin to recognise Ubuntu's legitimacy and reach.

Wendy describes this shift clearly:

"There's more sincerity from the stakeholders. It's almost like they see the extent of the problem now. Before, we had to fight all the time. But now, there's a space of coming together. A new kind of respect." – *Wendy Pekeur*

This change has taken work. Ubuntu has hosted joint events with SAPS, municipal departments, trauma centres, schools and other partners. Monitors have participated in public awareness drives, high school outreach and neighbourhood forums. These relationships are built case by case, sometimes one crisis at a time.

"Some of our monitors attended municipality GBVF events and outreaches in Kayamandi and other places … There's a new form of engagement happening now." – *Wendy Pekeur*

“If the monitor takes the case up to a certain point and they don’t know how to go further, then I step in. If SAPS doesn’t do a proper job, we go to the GBV Western Cape person in SAPS. If that doesn’t work, we speak to the NPA. It’s the referral pathway, that’s what makes the work effective.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

Grizelda confirms this shift from the ground:

“When I walk in there with my Ubuntu t-shirt, the prosecutors are quickly on their feet to help. They now know we’re not there to criticise, but to stand with them, to keep an eye when they do their work.” – *Grizelda Isaacs*

Annie shares how visible presence changes institutional behaviour:

“I went to the police station with a survivor during 16 Days of Activism. The case had been opened, but she wasn’t getting information. When I said Ubuntu is taking over the case as supporters, they reacted. They sprang up. That’s what makes a difference now.” – *Annie Mitchel*

At the school level, monitors are increasingly involved in identifying vulnerable children and coordinating follow-ups.
“We’re able to identify children, speak to them, do follow-ups. There’s improvement in how we work with the schools. There’s improvement in the children too.” – *Annie Mitchel*

But collaboration hasn’t always been easy. Many stakeholders were initially suspicious of Ubuntu, especially when monitors raised concerns about poor service delivery or mishandled cases.

“There’s been a misperception by these organisations about who we are. When we hold them accountable, immediately there’s some issue. It’s like they think we’re trying to make them lose their jobs. But we’re here for the child who can’t fight for themselves.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

Even so, the work is shifting the culture. Annie affirms that teamwork is now possible in ways it wasn’t before:

“There is collaboration. We work together well with the different stakeholders.” – *Annie Mitchel*

Lauren and Grizelda both emphasise that more structured, frequent meetings with stakeholders would strengthen this collaboration further.

“For me, it’s workplace training, encouraging more men and boys, and supporting research and development.” – *Lauren Mandindi*

“For me, it’s holding more meetings with stakeholders – so we can stand together, work together, and find solutions for the problem. GBV is a big issue in our community.” – *Grizelda Isaacs*

Wendy is clear-eyed about where the gaps still lie. Many churches, youth groups, sports clubs, and community networks are still not actively engaged in GBV work. She stresses that new partners must be brought on board, including men.

“You can train the girl and she can be empowered, but if he is not, she’s still going to have a problem. We’re now working with a group of men in Scottsdene who want to start a Men Against Abuse programme, and we’re bringing them on board.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

Collaboration, for Ubuntu, is not just a principle, it is a strategy. It is how they expand their reach, share responsibility and build the kind of systemic accountability that can’t be sustained by a single organisation alone.

Looking ahead: Prevention, protection and Ubuntu's vision for the future

As Ubuntu continues its work in the Western Cape, the focus is expanding, from reactive case support to proactive prevention. The organisation is piloting new ways to intervene early: in schools, in households and in the lives of those most vulnerable to violence and neglect.

"We have further plans in terms of that programme … if we start having our engagements where the schools are, we need to know every child where there's a problem at home, broken homes, parents on drugs, neglect. We want to make interventions just there." – *Wendy Pekeur*

Ubuntu's 'eye on the child' (and on elders and people with disabilities) programme aims to identify early warning signs, a child who's not attending school, an elder who's been abandoned, a person whose South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) money is being taken, and act before the situation escalates into crisis.

“If we know there’s an elder whose SASSA money has been taken, we can make an intervention just there … It’s going to be more work, but it’s also prevention work.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

Wendy recalls how, during COVID, Ubuntu ensured food and care reached the most isolated elders and homes. That ethos continues: caring for the unseen, the neglected and the left-behind.

Ubuntu also plans to strengthen partnerships with local stakeholders, but in more focused ways. Upcoming stakeholder meetings will bring together specific departments – like SAPS or Social Development, for targeted problem-solving.

“You can’t discuss everything in big meetings. If we want to pinpoint something to them: this is our issue, we must meet with them alone.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

Education remains central. Monitors are advocating for better public information on sexual violence, emergency responses and survivor rights. Many women still don’t know the steps to take after being raped, or that their clothing must be kept for evidence.

“Women don’t know these things … That you must get Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), the morning-after pill, put your clothes in a paper bag, don’t wash yourself … We must do more work. Even little children are going through these things.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

New initiatives are also targeting prevention among boys and men. As mentioned earlier, Ubuntu is supporting a group of young men in Scottsdene who are working to establish a local Men Against Abuse programme.

“We mustn’t leave the boys behind. We must help them deal with anger, trauma and the root causes. There’s many organisations with money, we must bring them in to help us establish groups that can support men too.” – *Wendy Pekeur*

Ubuntu’s monitors continue to respond to crises, but they are also looking further upstream, to the patterns, systems and silences that allow GBVF to persist. Their vision is not just to manage violence, but to interrupt it with care, with clarity and with community.

Closing reflections: Building GBVF-free zones, one relationship at a time

Ubuntu's GBVF monitoring work shows what is possible when care and accountability are brought together, when grassroots activists, many of them survivors themselves, step in to do what institutions so often fail to do: listen, walk alongside and refuse to give up.

The strength of this model lies not just in how many cases are reported, or how many protection orders are granted, but in how it changes the relationships between people, communities, and power. From trauma centres to police stations, from playgrounds to courtrooms, Ubuntu's monitors are shifting what justice looks like, and for whom it is made real.

"We're all just figuring it out, we don't have all the answers. But we must do this work. We don't have a choice." – *Wendy Pekeur*

Their efforts continue, often unseen, often unpaid, but with deep commitment. With every petition signed, every case followed up and every survivor believed, Ubuntu's team is building what they call a 'GBVF-Free Zone', not just as an aspiration, but as a daily act of resistance and care.

"If I can just win the trust of our community members … then I'll know they can talk to me about GBV. That's what I'd like the most." – *Annie Mitchel*

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