

# South Africa's youth can lead the charge against GBV if they are empowered and informed

The B-Wise WhatsApp platform is a revolutionary initiative by the National Department of Health and its partners to help young people tackle complex questions about love, mental health, sexuality, and relationships.



Source: Supplied.

The chatbot creates a private and non-judgmental space where vital information and advice are readily available to support young people to make informed decision-making on their physical and mental well-being.

With over 80,000 users already using the chatbot, the potential to drive substantial change is hopeful. Foster Mohale, spokesperson of the National Department of Health, emphasises, "These issues are urgent. With this bot, we can empower young boys and girls, men and women. We believe we can help create a path towards a wiser and more informed future."

Creating an open and relaxed service specifically for young people is a priority. By 2030, young Africans will make up 42% of the global youth population. Already, over 60% of Africa's population is under the age of 25. These statistics underscore the immense potential and influence held by African youth in shaping the future. However, alongside the incredible growth in mobile and internet penetration rates, this demographic also faces a multitude of challenges, GBV not least among them.

In South Africa, GBV has reached crisis levels, leading President Cyril Ramaphosa to declare it a pandemic. Recent crime statistics reveal a grim reality: in the first three months of 2023 alone, 1,0512 women were raped, 1,485 attempted murders

of women were reported, 969 women were killed, and over 15,000 women were assaulted.

To grasp the context in which GBV perpetuates, various underlying factors must be considered: upbringing, belief systems, social structures, economic challenges, and mental-health issues. By acknowledging the complexity of these challenges, we can begin to effectively address them.

## **B-Wise chatbot sparks transformation**

GBV affects us all, regardless of gender, age, or social background. It is not an isolated problem; rather, it is a systemic issue that demands collective action. Only by recognising the far-reaching impact of GBV can we alter the narrative and work towards meaningful change.

The B-wise chatbot initiative doesn't attempt to address GBV as an issue on its own. Rather, the programme focuses on topics of clear interest to young people and brings in important GBV messaging along the journey. Whether through fun memes, a mini-drama, a relationship quiz, or tips on how to have open conversations with health professionals, the service keeps young people engaged, and delivers information that matches their personal needs.

"While GBV may seem daunting, initiatives like B-Wise and the power of South Africa's youth bring forth hope and transformation from the shadows. Through open dialogue, shared knowledge, and proactive interventions, we can cultivate a society that upholds respect, equality, and compassion.

"Let us join forces to drive societal and behavioural change, forging a brighter path for South Africa's future together," Mohale concludes.

To explore the chatbot, South Africans between 15 and 24 can send 'Hi' to +27 60 071 7844 on WhatsApp and follow the prompts to sign up.

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