

DIAL-IN FAILURE

Gender-based violence helpline cut off, survivors pay the price



The Gender-Based Violence Command Centre was established in 2013 and is supposed to be a 24-hour service. (Photo: iStock)



By [Nicola Amon](#)

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The national helpline service for gender-based violence is currently out of service. While the Department of Social Development attributes this to the restructuring of service providers, NGOs and civil organisations point out that survivors pay the price.

The National Gender-Based Violence Command Centre (GBVCC), serving as a national lifeline for GBV survivors, is currently out of service.

When the helpline's number (0800 428 428) is dialled, the call cuts off and delivers the message "the subscriber you have dialled is not available right now", says Mosaic, a non-government organisation advocating for women's rights

Mosaic verified that the line was not working when they checked it on 25 November, at the start of the 16 days of activism. Mosaic undertakes this verification process each year.

The last time Mosaic was aware that the number was “at least still ringing” was during last year’s rounds of checks.

Daily Maverick called the helpline on 9 and 10 December and can confirm that the number is still unavailable.

The Department of Social Development was unable to answer questions about when the service had been cut off.

‘Glaring failure’

According to the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, between 1 January 2023 and 31 December 2023, the GBV Command Centre received 65,311 calls, of which only 5,845 GBV survivors were assisted.

The spotlight on the service’s failure comes during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, and ahead of the festive season where GBV cases typically see an “alarming rise”, according to Lizwi Ncaluka, communications and stakeholder coordinator at Mosaic.

“Help-seeking is a problem. It takes a lot for someone to call. What if the person has just called, hears this, and goes back to their situation?” said Tarisai Mchuchu-MacMillan, executive director at Mosaic.

“We rely heavily on the GBV Command Centre for the times we are not available or can’t provide the service,” said Mchuchu-MacMillan. “We don’t have the same resources.”

“We don’t have the capacity to provide a 24/7 service,” said Caroline Peters, founder of the Callas Foundation. Most NGOs involved in support for gender-based violence survivors close during the festive season, with only essential services available at some NGOs. “There won’t be everyday psychosocial therapy available,” said Peters.

Most NGOs rely on the GBV Command Centre to fill the gaps during this time. “When we close for the festive season, on our answering service, we say please call 0800 428 428,” said Peters.

The GBV Command Centre is meant to provide psychosocial support for survivors and connect them with shelters, hospitals, clinics and police stations, for which it has the national reach.

Alison Tilley, advocacy specialist at Rape Crisis, said that for rape victims, the function of referral, which the GBVCC is meant to perform, is “incredibly important”. This

includes referral to Thuthuzela Care Centres (TCC), which provide containment counselling and treatment for STIs and pregnancy at hospitals and clinics, said Tilley.

Claude Naiker, the acting deputy general manager of the Public Servants' Association, said that the faulty helpline also hindered the collection of data about GBV in South Africa, a function which gave the government an indication of where resources should be directed.

“We know, as NGOs, this is the time of the year when women are most vulnerable,” said Caroline Peters, founder of Callas Foundation. “To have this service unavailable – this is a glaring failure.”

Victims pay the cost of bureaucracy

The Department of Social Development attributes the service cut-off to the current restructuring of service providers.

“We are now switching service providers and the service is unavailable as we are getting ready,” said Lumka Oliphant, acting deputy director-general for corporate support services.

“During the period that Vodacom was out of contract, a lot changed in the technology and service requirements for the running of the command centre and it is therefore logical that in line with our operating model and standards, we re-assess first before running the services,” Vodacom spokesperson Bongo Futuse told Daily Maverick.

“We also need to ensure that all compliance requirements with National Treasury are complied with. It’s not an easy task. As a result, Vodacom and the Department of Social Development are now working to resolve these matters before Vodacom assumes operation of the GBVCC,” said Futuse.

The most recent service provider at the GBVCC, Brilliantel, “could not perform as per contract”. The contract was formally terminated on 17 September 2024, said Oliphant.

The department appointed Vodacom as an “interim service provider” on 11 November 2024.

The department said that Vodacom would act as “a paid service provider and not a donor”, different from the GBVCC’s [previous arrangement](#) with Vodacom which functioned mostly free as a form of corporate social investment, according to Naiker.

A history of disputes

Vodacom was GBVCC’s service provider before the start of Brilliantel’s contract. Vodacom faced criticism for providing services at a far higher cost than other hotlines, handling each GBV case at a [cost of R3,000](#), compared with the R200 per case at

Childline and Lifeline, according to Lisa Vetten, a research associate at Wits University's Southern Centre for Inequality Studies.

After Vodacom pulled out of the service, the Department of Social Development went on tender, which was then awarded to Brilliantel (Brilliant Telecommunications).

“It was discovered that Brilliantel was not providing a suitable service,” said Naiker. This was the department's justification for terminating the contract. Brilliantel denied that they were in breach of contract and that the reason for the service's failure was the department's months-long non-payment for Brilliantel's service.

Now, a month after the end of this dispute and the start of a new contract with Vodacom, the GBVCC is still experiencing “limited functioning”, as described in a portfolio committee meeting on 4 December 2024.

“Victims cannot be left unassisted because the department and the service provider cannot find common ground,” said Naiker.

Alternative options unclear

In the meantime, Oliphant says that a National Emergency Response Team has been established in all nine provinces to intervene in GBV cases. Additionally, the department “used 12 community radio [stations] in the Eastern Cape to give that information to people”.

However, Mchuchu-MacMillan expressed concern that the faulty number was still on the [command centre's website](#), with no alternatives given other than the SAPS number.

Naiker said callers were now being directed to the department's switchboard, the operator of which he said was not qualified for dealing with GBV cases, and at such “voluminous” levels.

“Right now, we are referring people to the Lifeline number, but it doesn't have the same mechanisms as the GBV Command Centre,” said Mchuchu-Macmillan.

Daily Maverick tried to contact Brilliantel, but had not received a response to questions at the time of publication. **DM**

If you are experiencing or concerned about gender-based violence, you can contact:

- Lifeline South Africa: 0861 322 322/Crisis line: 011 728 1347
- Childline South Africa: 0800 055 555
- Tears Foundation: SMS *134*7355#
- National Shelter Movement: 0800 001 005 or SMS, WhatsApp or Please Call Me on 082 057 8600/082 058 2215/072 230 7147