

INTERVIEW

Where Rainbows Meet: Addressing Community Challenges and Inspiring Change

An Interview with Mymoena Scholtz

Introduction

Established in about 1900, Vrygrond – near Muizenberg and roughly 20 kilometres from the city of Cape Town – is the oldest informal settlement in the Western Cape in South Africa, and has a population of almost 40,000.

Where Rainbows Meet is a non-profit organisation (NPO) founded in 2008 and led by Mymoena Scholtz with the aim of empowering women in the Vrygrond community. With many community members themselves working for the organisation, Where Rainbows Meet demonstrates how people in general, and women in particular, are engaged in addressing community challenges and working towards uplifting themselves. It is an example of a grassroots organisation that has been able to gain the trust of, and work with, different community members. This it does by responding to the needs and challenges of the people who live there, and providing support to people who have difficulty in accessing services, infrastructure, and safe spaces.

Personal background

Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how you became a community leader?

After my children left home, I sought new responsibilities and opportunities, embarking on a 10-week course to acquire job skills related to business administration at the New World Foundation (a not-profit organisation which was founded in 1980 in Lavender Hill in Cape Town). This path led me to an internship with the Foundation, which later offered me a position as a life skills trainer. Over the 12 years that I worked at the Foundation, my passion for community work deepened. Upon resigning, community members, mainly older women from Vrygrond, urged me to continue my efforts within the community. Inspired, I founded the non-profit organisation, Where Rainbows Meet, over 15 years ago, dedicated to serving and uplifting the community.

What motivated you to engage within your community?

My primary motivation stemmed from my love and respect for the people and women of Vrygrond, with

whom I had previously engaged. Despite the anticipated challenges, my determination to transform community life and create a space for change remained steadfast.

Challenges and housing issues for women

What are the main housing challenges faced by residents, and especially women, in your community?

The social history of women in Vrygrond, Cape Town, is deeply rooted in the area's persistent socio-economic inequalities, where poverty, housing challenges and gender-based violence intersect. Vrygrond, one of the oldest settlements in the Western Cape, was originally built during apartheid, with 1,600 housing units. Since then, the community has grown beyond the capacity of its infrastructure, resulting in poor housing conditions, including overcrowding and inadequate access to water, services and facilities.

Women in Vrygrond disproportionately bear the burden of these harsh realities, managing households

and caring for children and the elderly in difficult living conditions, exacerbated by an unsafe, fire-prone environment. In addition, poor water and sanitation facilities create additional challenges for women, who are disproportionately affected by additional time and stress required to find adequate solutions due to their gendered care responsibilities.

Access to schools for children is also a challenge, as schools are located far away and school uniforms and books are often an additional cost. Job opportunities in Vrygrond are scarce, often limited to distant locations in the informal sector, where income is both unreliable and unstable. Consequently, many people must also rely on government social grants to sustain their livelihoods. The lack of accessible social and community development services and safe spaces, combined with extremely high levels of violence and substance abuse, compounds the challenges they face. Gender-based violence is a particularly serious problem, and women are often vulnerable in an environment where support systems are limited.

The negative impact of overcrowding and poor living conditions was exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic when many people lost their jobs in the informal sector and the crowded living conditions made it more difficult for people to practise social distancing. Women were again particularly affected by this, as they are often employed as domestic workers and also have the primary responsibility for caring for sick family members, making them more vulnerable to the virus.

Despite these overwhelming challenges, the women of Vrygrond remain resilient, playing crucial roles in their families and community, advocating for social justice, and striving for a better future in the face of adversity.

Organising and advocacy

How does your community organise itself to address housing and human rights issues?

Where Rainbows Meet was registered as a non-profit organisation in 2008. Since its inception, in recognition of the multiple disadvantages and challenges facing the Vrygrond community, the organisation has expanded and diversified its work. It aims to achieve social, economic and health improvements within the community of Vrygrond and its surroundings.

By offering a variety of services and events, Where Rainbows Meet provides community members with access to information, education, and support, empowering them to take charge of their lives and their families' well-being. Our activities also aim to enhance job skills, reducing unemployment and associated social issues like drug abuse, gender-based violence, and child neglect. Key services and projects include early child development, income generation, life skills courses, small business development, feeding schemes, and annual awareness events.

What role do women play in these organisational efforts?

Women play a pivotal role, acting as the glue that holds the community together. Through grassroots activism, women have been at the forefront of campaigns for better housing, access to essential services, and the protection of their rights. These efforts highlight the critical role women play in challenging the status quo and advocating for social justice.

The organisation provides them with opportunities to learn new skills, gain confidence, and achieve independence and strength. Women attend meetings around the improvement of living conditions as well

“ Gender-based violence is a particularly serious problem, and women are often vulnerable in an environment where support systems are limited.

as discussions on social and economic issues and gender-based violence. We work with experts to provide training and development programmes that focus on women and how they can improve their lives and the lives of others.

Women also work in our organisation, in the soup kitchen, in the community garden, on creative projects and in our development programmes and training workshops. This can inspire other women, their children, neighbours and partners. Women are often the catalyst for changing the outlook of their entire social circle and wider community. However, their struggle is ongoing, as they continue to navigate a socio-economic landscape that is slow to change, but their determination and collective action remain a beacon of hope for a better future in Vrygrond.

Can you share some successful strategies or initiatives that have made a positive impact in the community?

Among the successful initiatives is our community facility, which is a space where we gather for community meetings as well as our sewing and beading project. The organisation supports children through a pre-school crèche, particularly for those who have lost or been abandoned by their parents. A community garden supplies vegetables for our kitchen, cultivated and maintained by community members. The soup kitchen as well as the nutrition programme provide meals not only for women, but for the community at large. Additionally, we connect the community with businesses for job opportunities, selecting suitable candidates for internships and jobs, thus integrating the community into the broader workforce. The inclusion of men in our efforts has also been vital, offering them a place to connect and contribute.

“ Where Rainbows Meet adapted swiftly to continue serving the community as an ‘essential service organisation’.

During the Covid-19 pandemic we had to adapt our work. As many initiatives closed down, we were the primary source for support in the community. Where Rainbows Meet adapted swiftly to continue serving the community as an ‘essential service organisation’. Our primary goal was to ensure that the nutritional feeding programme remained operational, offering meals to anyone in need, whether children or adults, across the Vrygrond community and beyond.

We also took on the critical task of educating the public about preventing the spread of the virus. This included promoting social distancing, providing sanitation resources, and offering services normally provided by other organisations that were forced to close during the lockdown. As the need grew, we scaled our operations to feed thousands of people every day, becoming a lifeline for many. This experience highlighted the resilience of our community and the essential role of organisations like ours in times of crisis.

Participation in local government

How do you and other community members participate in decision-making processes?

When we started, protests in the community were quite popular, and regularly members of the community would protest by burning things and resorting to destruction. By communicating with all the many different group leaders and key stakeholders within the community, we developed an understanding that it is not helpful for the community to destroy our own place.

As an alternative way, over time we have found and established more formal ways to communicate with the government. We have also established the Vrygrond Community Forum, which gives the different members of the community a formal space to organise around the different challenges we are facing. Nowadays many of the key stakeholders of the community and the major organisations are part of this Forum, which has made it easier and more effective to talk to the government authorities. It is a structure that allows [us] to filter information from different channels into the community.

What challenges do you face when trying to engage with local government officials?

The challenge is often that although we discuss our challenges with the government, there is little or no change in the housing situation. They promised houses a long time ago and we still have not seen any changes. We have also repeatedly applied for government funding for our organisation, striving to meet all requirements to the best of our ability. However, the overly bureaucratic process has made it impossible for us to rely on government support so far.

Support and collaboration

What kind of support do you receive from NGOs, international organisations, or other external entities?

Support comes from various sources, predominantly international organisations, and local partnerships. Despite the lack of government funding, collaborations with local NGOs and businesses, alongside our own initiatives, provide financial resources for the organisation.

We also work together with the government when it comes to delivering government social grants. The South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) comes once a month to our school in order to make access easier for people. These grants, which include child support, disability, and old-age pensions, play a vital role in alleviating poverty and providing a safety net for the most vulnerable populations, particularly because formal employment opportunities are scarce in Vrygrond.

With regard to gender-based violence, we report cases to the relevant authorities, such as the Department of Social Development, to assist with immediate placement and removal from the areas. Due to safety concerns, we do not have a shelter in our community, as we had bad experiences with this in the past. We also offer many training programmes and psychosocial support programmes for affected women, and assist them with job placement through our link with local businesses later on in their recovery journey.



The South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) comes once a month to our school in order to make access easier for people.

Vision and future goals

What is your vision for the future of your community in terms of housing and human rights?

My vision for the future involves securing a major donor to expand the organisation's capacity, enabling more comprehensive support for community members and the development of additional programmes.

Personal insights and advice

What has been the most rewarding part of your work as a community leader?

The most rewarding aspect of my work is witnessing the community's self-sufficiency as people develop skills and hope for positive change.

What advice would you give to other women who want to take on leadership roles in their communities?

You need to be patient and earn the community's trust over time. Women leaders in various communities must understand that we do not own the community and need to support any development that can possibly make the communities better, and should never stop development in any form, as we are merely serving the public as we committed ourselves to be servant leaders.

We need to support each other more as leaders, as the world is big enough for all of us to bring the changes we wish to see in our communities, and we can only do it stronger together. There is no greater revelation than the development of others.

Closing thoughts

Is there anything else you would like to share about your work or the situation in your community?

I want to emphasise that the living and housing conditions in this community are inhumane. For others, it might be unimaginable what kind of challenges people here face, and we cannot allow this to continue.

How can people outside your community best support your efforts and advocacy for better housing and human rights?

People can promote Where Rainbows Meet nationally and internationally. They can try and bring their local companies on board, as well as sharing skills with us to enhance our work. Although we do have people that support us, it is not enough to carry the organisation, as it foresees closure. The organisation has grown into a multipurpose training facility with many pillars of development, and the size of the funds coming in does not match the size of the organisation.

Mymoena Scholtz is the Director of Where Rainbows Meet, a community-based organisation in Vrygrond, Cape Town, South Africa. As a community leader, she aims to economically and socially empower women, men, and youth in informal settlement communities through skills and development training.

For volunteer opportunities or to provide support through donations, contact Mymoena Scholtz at info@whererainbowsmeet.org or +27 21 205 3496. More information is available on the organisation's website: www.whererainbowsmeet.org

Acknowledgmentst

Kelly Bishop conducted the interview at Vrygrond on 23 July 2024 while visiting as a doctoral researcher at the Dullah Omar Institute (DOI) of the University of the Western Cape. The research visit was made possible through the LoGov project funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (<https://buff.ly/3LQqWd>) and the support of [Ximpulse](#).

She is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Public Law, Faculty of Law, University of Bern, Switzerland. Thanks to the Socio-Economic Rights Project of the DOI, contact was established with a local community leader.

Contact

Socio-Economic Rights Project

Dullah Omar Institute for Constitutional Law,
Governance and Human Rights

University of the Western Cape
New Social Sciences Building
Private Bag X17, Bellville, 7535



Tel: (021) 959 2950



Fax: (021) 959 2411



Email: serp@uwc.ac.za



Website: <https://dullahomarinstitute.org.za>