



Nisaa Institute for Women's Development

The Nisaa Institute for Women's Development was founded in 1993 and officially launched in 1994 by Dr Zubeda Dangor and a small group of feminist activists. The organisation emerged from a deep concern for the lack of services available to women facing violence, particularly those from previously disadvantaged communities in South Africa.



Dr Zubeda Dangor

Dr Dangor, a psychologist whose PhD focused on gender-based violence, had worked extensively with women who presented symptoms of depression that were being misdiagnosed or over-medicated, while the underlying issue - violence against women (VAW) - was often ignored. Early community education workshops exposed the alarming extent of violence against women and underscored the desperate need for responsive services.

This motivated the founders to create a space that would serve both curative and preventive functions, supporting survivors while challenging the systems and beliefs that perpetuate gender-based violence.

Early Development and Growth

Nisaa was created to respond to the glaring lack of services for abused women - especially in previously disadvantaged communities - by offering holistic, feminist-oriented support rooted in advocacy, empowerment, and trauma-informed care.

Initially operating out of Lenasia, south of Johannesburg, Nisaa expanded rapidly in response to community needs. Offices in Soweto (1996) and Orange Farm (1998) followed. Today Nisaa also works in additional high-need communities such as Thembelihle, Lehae, Ennerdale, Lenasia South, and Finetown. Its reach extends

beyond urban areas into informal settlements where access to services is limited or non-existent.

From the beginning, Nisaa positioned itself as a non-denominational organisation, working across race, class, ethnicity and religion. Its mission includes the empowerment of women and children, advocacy for systemic change, and collaborative partnerships to ensure a coordinated response to VAW at local, national, and international levels.

Over its 30+ years of operation, Nisaa has evolved into a pioneering organisation tackling gender-based violence through shelter services, psycho-social and economic empowerment, legal aid, advocacy, and training.



Shelter Services and Holistic Empowerment Nisaa's shelter programme offers a safe, secure environment for women and children escaping domestic abuse. Accommodating up to 22 women and their children at a time, the shelter provides:

- Three to six months of accommodation,
- Daily counselling,
- Nutritional meals,
- Legal support (via partnerships with ProBono.org and Fasken Martineau), and
- Economic empowerment (e.g. CV writing, skills training, budgeting).

For children, the shelter offers school access, psycho-social support, and daily early childhood development (ECD) programmes. Bibliotherapy, play therapy, and structured discussions help them process trauma.

The shelter model, refined over decades, has become a national benchmark. Nisaa began mentoring shelters in other provinces in 2022 and presented its model at international platforms including CSW68 and will be presenting it at the 5th World Conference on Women's Shelters (September 2025) as well.

Advocacy, Prevention, and Community Training

Nisaa's awareness and prevention programmes aim to shift societal norms by promoting gender equality, educating stakeholders, and encouraging bystander intervention. Activities include:

- Training and dialogues for police, prosecutors, healthcare workers, and community leaders on gender and gender sensitivity, domestic violence, rape, relevant legislation and how women can access their rights. Further to that Nisaa also conducted Advocacy Training within various communities so communities can become active citizens as opposed to bystanders,
- Advocacy campaigns focused on policy, justice, and survivor rights, and
- Leadership and advocacy training for community members.



Notably, Nisaa's innovative "We Are Those Girls" (2016) and "Rising Up, Moving On" (2014) publications amplified the voices of survivors, with over 12 000 combined downloads and thousands of print copies distributed.

Likewise, "Making a Fresh Start" a book for women looking to leave abusive relationships and "Reclaiming Women's Spaces" are publications that have left their mark in the sector.

Key Impact Statistics and Achievements

- Over 60 000 individuals have received counselling services.
- More than 1 962 women and children have been sheltered.
- 8 300+ individuals have completed Nisaa training programmes.
- 6 million people reached across 54 African countries via Channel Africa.
- 1.3 million listeners reached through local radio awareness campaigns.

- Over 25 advocacy campaigns conducted nationwide.

Nisaa played a founding role in the National Shelter Movement (NSM) of South Africa, helping shape national discourse and policies on shelter services for abused women and children.

Nisaa remains an active participant in policy discussions with government stakeholders, police, and magistrates, advocating for survivor-sensitive responses.

Nisaa has received multiple awards for community service and outstanding performance from the Department of Social Development (2017, 2018), and its leadership, including Dr Dangor, has been recognized for innovation in the NGO space.

In 2025, Nisaa developed a Shelter Operational Handbook to help other shelters improve governance, safety, and service quality. Through its mentorship, advocacy, and publications, Nisaa continues to influence not just local practice but regional shelter policy and implementation standards.

Making differences in individual lives is just as important as one beneficiary explains: “As a parent I have seen what gender-based violence does to my children. I have seen how it damages my relationship with my children. This is not fair on them. They are more affected than me, and I don’t want them to grow up thinking that violence is a solution to a problem. Being an active bystander gives me an opportunity to make my children proud of me. I want to be part of the solution in my community, not part of the problem.”

Conclusion

The Nisaa Institute for Women’s Development stands as a critical institution in the fight against gender-based violence in South Africa. It is not only a provider of essential services but also a pioneer in advocacy, education, and transformation. With over 30 years of community-rooted experience, evidence of impact, and survivor-focused care, Nisaa continues to serve as a beacon of hope - offering safety, empowerment, and dignity to thousands of women and children.

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