



An exploratory study of the Psychosocial-Cultural factors contributing to Femicide in South Africa: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Globally, femicide is becoming an increasingly alarming and distressing issue, with women subjected to severe and often fatal violence. Femicide, the wilful homicide by men against their female counterparts, is a global and cumulative quagmire worldwide, with South Africa experiencing particularly high rates of magnitude. This review explored the psychosocial and cultural factors that contribute to femicide in South Africa. The review used a psychosocial-cultural perspective to examine key drivers, including patriarchy, gender norms, psychological influences, and cultural beliefs and practices. It also investigated the intersections of gender, violence, and cultural aspects, while analysing the wide-ranging impacts of female homicide on victims, immediate families, friends, communities, and society as a whole. The current research article points out gaps and concerns in the existing body of knowledge, underscoring a need for continual research and the constitution of new policies that advocate against femicide. It calls for the creation and implementation of systematic interventions, plans, and ways to curb and alleviate female homicide in South Africa. Additionally, this review provides a foundational blueprint for ongoing dialogue and evidence-based efforts to combat femicide.

Keywords: Systematic Review, Femicide, Psychosocial-cultural Determinants, Gender-Based Violence, Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

Whittington et al. define femicide as the intentional and methodical homicide of women based on their gender.¹ This inhumane act seems to be an extremely disturbing and widespread quagmire that affects the entire world. Furthermore, femicide is driven by deeply ingrained patriarchal beliefs, gender inequalities, and societal structures that perpetuate violence against women, individuals who are often seen as the heart of society.²

¹ Richard Whittington, Alina Haines-Delmont, and Johan Håkon Bjørngaard, "Femicide Trends at the Start of the 21st. Century: Prevalence, Risk Factors and National Public Health Actions," *Global Public Health* 18, no. 1 (2023): 2225576.

² Awino Okech, "Feminist Digital Counterpublics: Challenging Femicide in Kenya and South Africa," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 46, no. 4 (June 1, 2021): 1013–33, <https://doi.org/10.1086/713299>.

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According to the World Health Organization, gender is a socially constructed concept that shapes behaviours, roles, and expectations considered appropriate for men and women within society.³ South Africa is among the countries that are most severely affected by femicide, with a rising number of these incidents. The psychosocial, economic, and cultural factors of the country have contributed to the worsening of this crisis, which urgently demands immediate attention.⁴ Abrahams et al. and Tintswalo et al. indicate that femicide, particularly when committed by intimate partners, causes deep psychological trauma, which is not easy to overlook.⁵ Statistically, South African countries show this type of virulent violence as the influence of a significant proportion of female homicide, ranging from 40% to 70%. This alarming trend highlights the trend of domestic violence, and also underscores how vulnerable women are in their relationships with men. The researchers contend that these statistics underscore the urgent need for a well-established approach to address the root causes of femicide. Such an approach should encompass educational initiatives, awareness campaigns, legislative reforms, and robust bearing systems aimed at obliterating the persistent threat of intimate partner violence.

According to Standish and Weil, Ngidi, and Uzobo & Ayinmor, there is a growing body of research that consistently highlights that abuse, violations, and the tragic deaths of women in South Africa remain a deeply troubling issue and a profound blemish on the country.⁶ Between July and September 2022, South Africa recorded 7,004 homicides, an increase of 841 compared to the same period in 2021, according to the South African Police Service's crime statistics for the second quarter of 2022/23. This marks a 13.6% increase in homicides. However, it is vital to recognise that these figures reflect a time (July 1 to September 30, 2022) when the country emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic and ease various lockdown measures.⁷

Furthermore, such acts of violence occur in a deeply troubling context where women, who should feel safe with their loved ones, often find that those they trust and love become the perpetrators. According to Mathebula et al., in a society where trust-based connections and relationships are expected to provide comfort and safety, many women face the erosion of these foundations.⁸ This highlights the painful reality that these violent deeds are not separate events but instead form part of a deeply embedded systemic issue. The researchers contend that women should be granted the right to live freely and thrive within society. However, many cannot extricate themselves from a dangerous reality where brutal violence creeps not just in public spaces, but within their most intimate relationships.

Therefore, this study investigates the disturbing reality of femicide in South Africa, examining its various manifestations, as well as psychological, social, and cultural factors, among others, that exacerbate and perpetrate virulent violence against females. The goal is to emphasize the urgent need for social change and international cooperation to address and potentially end this violence.

Legal and policy reports

Femicide remains a persistent human rights and public policy crisis in South Africa, with approximately three women killed daily by intimate partners.⁹ Despite an extensive legal framework, including the

³ World Health Organization, *Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018: Global, Regional and National Estimates* (Geneva: WHO, 2021).

⁴ W. N. Mathebula, N A Mbhalati, and S L Sithole, "A Victimological Analysis of Women in Abusive Relationships in Limpopo Province, South Africa," *Gender and Behaviour* 20, no. 2 (2022): 19565–71.

⁵ Naemah Abrahams et al., "Worldwide Prevalence of Non-Partner Sexual Violence: A Systematic Review," *The Lancet* 383, no. 9929 (May 2014): 1648–54, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(13\)62243-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)62243-6); Shiphamele Tintswalo et al., "Management of Records at Statistics South Africa: Challenges and Prospects," *Information Development* 38, no. 2 (June 8, 2022): 286–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266666920981680>.

⁶ Katerina Standish and Shalva Weil, "Gendered Pandemics: *Suicide, Femicide and COVID-19*," *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 7 (October 3, 2021): 807–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1880883>; Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi, "'I Feel Scared of Being a Girl': Adolescent Girls' Conversations about Heteropatriarchal Sexual Violence in South African Townships," *Geoforum* 134 (August 2022): 40–47, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2022.06.003>; Endurance Uzobo and Aboluwaji D Ayinmor, "Trapped Between Two Pandemics: Domestic Violence Cases Under COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown: A Scoping Review," *Community Health Equity Research & Policy* 43, no. 3 (April 8, 2023): 319–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272684X211022121>.

⁷ South African Police Service, "Crime Statistics 2021/2022," 2022.

⁸ Mathebula, Mbhalati, and Sithole, "A Victimological Analysis of Women in Abusive Relationships in Limpopo Province, South Africa."

⁹ Bhekisisa Centre for Health Journalism, "20 Years of Femicide Research in South Africa: A Brief," Bhekisisa, 2024, <https://bhekisisa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Femicide-Brief-2024-PDF-final.pdf>.

Domestic Violence Act and the National Strategic Plan for Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSP-GBVF), institutional fragmentation undermines effectiveness. Reports from the Commission for Gender Equality¹⁰ and the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation¹¹ reveal inadequate investigative capacity, slow prosecutions, and limited survivor protection—underscoring the need for integrated coordination between the Department of Justice, SAPS, and the National Council on GBVF.¹²

Civil society literature highlights that access to justice remains uneven and that structural gender norms perpetuate violence. The Women’s Legal Centre and Amnesty International emphasise barriers in legal aid and the enforcement of protection orders, while Sonke Gender Justice demonstrates that community-level interventions that involve men and boys are effective, yet underfunded.¹³ Economic analysis further supports investment in prevention, with KPMG South Africa estimating that GBV costs the nation up to R42 billion annually, thereby justifying increased funding for prevention and survivor-support programmes.¹⁴

Improving femicide prevention also requires stronger data governance and participatory oversight. UNODC and UN Women recommend harmonising definitions of femicide and national data integration, a recommendation echoed by the Femicide Watch initiative.¹⁵ The incorporation of these tools into the NCGBVF’s monitoring framework would improve accountability, while partnerships between state institutions, civil society, and survivors advocated by UN Women can ensure that policy responses remain inclusive, evidence-based, and sustainable.¹⁶

METHODOLOGY

Van Dinter et al. posit that Academic research generally outlines that scholars should follow key steps when investigating a topic: a) review and analyse existing studies, b) establish links between essential concepts, c) identify gaps in knowledge, and d) suggest directions for future research.¹⁷ To achieve these objectives, the researchers conducted a scoping review focused on understanding femicide in South Africa and the psychosocial-cultural factors that contribute to it. According to Munn et al., a scoping review is a review technique that rapidly identifies the primary and imperative concepts within a research area and the primary sources and types of evidence available.¹⁸ It can also serve as an independent project, especially when the subject has complexities or has not been extensively explored. The researchers opted to use a scoping review because the victims of femicide cannot provide firsthand accounts or participate in traditional research methods due to their deaths, which requires a thorough review of the existing literature to grasp the full scope of the issue. According to Arksey and O’Malley, a framework consists of five stages: (1) formulating the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) selecting studies, (4) charting data, and (5) summarizing the findings.¹⁹ In this paper, the

¹⁰ Commission for Gender Equality, “Annual Report 2023/24 (and Accompanying GBV Index Report),” CGE, 2024, <https://cge.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CGE-ANNUAL-REPORT-202324.pdf>.

¹¹ Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, “Justice Denied: Gender-Based Violence Crimes Remain Unpunishable in South Africa (Report),” 2025.

¹² Department of Justice and Constitutional Development. (n.d.), “Gender-Based Violence and Legal Services,” <https://www.justice.gov.za>, n.d.

¹³ Women’s Legal Centre, “Annual Report 2023 (and Policy Submissions),” Women’s Legal Centre, 2024, <https://wlce.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/WLC-2023-Annual-Report-.pdf>; Amnesty International, “Amnesty International Submission on the National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Bill,” Amnesty International, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/southern-africa/south-africa/report-south-africa/>; Sonke Gender Justice, “Organisational Webpages and Reports on GBVF and Femicide,” Sonke Gender Justice, 2024, <https://genderjustice.org.za/>.

¹⁴ KPMG South Africa, “Too Costly to Ignore: The Economic Impact of Gender-Based Violence in South Africa,” KPMG, 2017, <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/za/pdf/2017/01/za-Too-costly-to-ignore.pdf>.

¹⁵ UN Women, “Tackling Femicide in South Africa through Laws, Policies, and Better Policing [Feature],” UN Women, 2024, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2024/11/tackling-femicide-in-south-africa-through-laws-policies-and-better-policing>.

¹⁶ UN Women, “Tackling Femicide in South Africa through Laws, Policies, and Better Policing [Feature].”

¹⁷ Raymon van Dinter, Bedir Tekinerdogan, and Cagatay Catal, “Automation of Systematic Literature Reviews: A Systematic Literature Review,” *Information and Software Technology* 136 (August 2021): 106589, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infsof.2021.106589>.

¹⁸ Zachary Munn et al., “Systematic Review or Scoping Review? Guidance for Authors When Choosing between a Systematic or Scoping Review Approach,” *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 18, no. 1 (December 19, 2018): 143, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-018-0611-x>.

¹⁹ Hilary Arksey and Lisa O’Malley, “Scoping Studies: Towards a Methodological Framework,” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 8, no. 1 (February 2005): 19–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616>.

researcher combines the data charting and summarization stages of a scoping review, as recommended by Arksey and O'Malley.

a. Identifying the research question

For Muka et al., formulating a clear and focused research question depends on refining the overarching research objective.²⁰ Without a clearly defined objective, the research question may not adequately inform the development of an effective search strategy. The current study aims to explore the psychosocial and cultural factors that contribute to femicide in South Africa. As noted by Muka et al., a well-constructed research question should align closely with the study's objective and can be effectively developed using structured frameworks such as PICOS (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, Study Design), PEO (Population, Exposure, Outcome), or SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type), each suited to distinct research methodologies.²¹ Given the narrative, descriptive and analytical approach adopted in this study, the PEO framework was used to guide the formulation of the research question (see Table 1 for details). Accordingly, the research question posed was: What psychosocial and cultural factors contribute to femicide in South Africa, as identified in the existing literature?

Table 1: PEO framework

| P-Population | E-Exposure | O-Outcome |
|---------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Women | Abuse | Femicide |

b. Identifying relevant studies

Charting and summarising the data

The researcher conducted a literature search using ScienceDirect and Google Scholar, applying search parameters to include publications from 2014 to 2024. The inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles within this timeframe to ensure the integration of the most up-to-date data and grey literature such as conference proceedings, books, and book chapters. To uphold the credibility of the findings, non-peer-reviewed sources and review articles were excluded. The search strategy employed keywords such as “femicide,” “unveiling shadows,” and “psychosocial-cultural determinants,” without imposing limitations on research methodology or country of origin. This approach facilitated a broader examination of the existing literature. However, for an elucidation below it is demonstrated as per Boolean.²²

Search terms combined psychological, social, and cultural outcome terms, e.g.:

> (“femicide” OR “gender-based violence” OR “cultural factors to violence” OR “psychological factors to femicide” OR “social factors to femicide” OR “female homicide”) > AND (“gender-based homicide” OR “women” OR “murder” OR “intimate partner violence”) > AND (“South Africa” OR “RSA” OR “Gender related killing”).

Table 2: Data charting

| Sources | Tittles | Methodology | Findings |
|-------------------------|---|--------------------|--|
| Carroppo et al. (2024). | Unveiling the Dark Nexus: systematic Review of the relationship of mental health, | Literature Review | Various forms of femicide arise globally as societal values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours evolve. These include intimate partner femicide, femicide-suicide, religious femicide, honour-based femicide, and revolt |

²⁰ Taulant Muka et al., “A 24-Step Guide on How to Design, Conduct, and Successfully Publish a Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis in Medical Research: T. Muka et Al.,” *European Journal of Epidemiology* 35, no. 1 (2020): 49–60.

²¹ Muka et al., “A 24-Step Guide on How to Design, Conduct, and Successfully Publish a Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis in Medical Research: T. Muka et Al.”

²² Melissa L. Rethlefsen et al., “PRISMA-S: An Extension to the PRISMA Statement for Reporting Literature Searches in Systematic Reviews,” *Systematic Reviews* 10, no. 1 (January 26, 2021): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-020-01542-z>.

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|-------------------|--|
| | substance abuse, and socio-cultural factors in femicide. Legal Medicine, 102334. | | femicide, all of which are influenced by the vulnerability of individuals involved. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A limited number of femicide cases are committed by individuals diagnosed with mental health disorders, and there is an ongoing debate about the potential link between femicide and factors such as drug and/or alcohol use. |
| Kouta (2018). | Understanding and preventing femicide using a cultural and ecological approach. In Femicide across Europe (pp. 53-70). Policy Press | Qualitative | The study found that traditional beliefs, which grant men the perceived right to control or discipline women, contribute to women's vulnerability to intimate partner violence. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It also revealed that prevailing cultural values and social norms often legitimize or support various forms of violence. |
| Cullen, Dowson et al. (2021) | Intersectionality and invisible victims: reflections on data challenges and vicarious trauma in femicide, family and intimate partner homicide research. Journal of Family Violence, 36, 619-628. | Qualitative | The study revealed that physical assault is only the most immediate manifestation of the subordination they experience. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The influence of socio-economic status—or poverty—on the risk of violence, especially when combined with factors such as sex, gender identity or expression, race/ethnicity, and other identities, is still largely overlooked in official data sources commonly used by violence prevention researchers. |
| Okech (2021) | Feminist digital counterpublics: Challenging femicide in Kenya and South Africa. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 46(4), 1013-1033. | Literature Review | The high incidence of violent sexual crimes against young girls and women in South Africa has led to research exploring the connection between the traumatic legacy of apartheid and the present-day expressions of heteropatriarchy. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The study found that class, age and race shape male experiences of men that, in turn, lead to violence against women. |
| Isidro-Arias & Silva-Hernandez (2021) | Psychosocial aspects associated with the incidence gender of femicide | Qualitative | Women in Mexico have gained greater recognition and participation in various spheres; however, many of these advances have not been entirely accepted by the patriarchal society, as they are seen as changes in behaviour and awareness that challenge traditional gender roles and expectations for both men and women. |

| | | | |
|-------------------------|---|-------------------|---|
| Hernandez (2021) | Gender inequality, impunity, and lack of access to justice. | Literature Review | Exposure to violence-related fatalities (VFR) contributes to depression and increases the use of alcohol and tobacco. Children of VFR victims are more likely to experience recent health problems. Women of higher-income backgrounds have better access to healthcare and mental health support. In contrast, those in lower-income groups often struggle with low self-esteem, lack of emotional support, and higher rates of substance abuse. |
| Mtotywa et al. (2023) | A conceptual framework of gender-based violence and femicide drivers in South Africa. | Qualitative | Gender-based violence is a widespread global issue shaped by social, structural, and psychological influences. Unlike earlier theories, a comprehensive ecological framework considers individual, contextual, and socio-cultural elements. In South Africa, GBV is deeply embedded in cultural traditions and institutional systems, highlighting the need for on-the-ground research to understand and address the problem entirely. |
| Mathebula et al. (2024) | Unveiling the shadows: A Systematic literature review on understanding femicide in South Africa and its socio-cultural determinants | Literature Review | The study discovered that femicide, the deliberate killing of women based on their gender, is a global and unsettling problem with global implications. |

The researcher employed data charting to extract specific information per the PRISMA guidelines for scoping reviews (see Table 1). This process involved examining details such as authorship, year of publication, subject focus, research methodology, and key findings. To synthesise the collected data effectively, the researcher conducted a thorough evaluation of the principal results to identify the wide-ranging themes of the article. The data (see Table 2) were subjected to thematic analysis using inductive content analysis techniques.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The researchers found that the wilful killing of women by their male counterparts is a global crisis that is deeply troubling, accompanied by severe personal consequences for both the direct victims and those indirectly affected. Femicide is a widespread issue in all parts of the world, with women being murdered and subjected to violence at alarming rates, creating a climate of constant fear. South Africa, in particular, records exceptionally high rates of femicide, underscoring the urgent need for swift and effective intervention to address this growing threat.²³

According to the researchers, femicide in South Africa is strongly influenced by psychosocial and cultural factors, including early childhood trauma, rigid gender norms, patriarchal systems, and established cultural practices and beliefs.²⁴ Furthermore, the impact of femicide extends beyond the

²³ Mathebula, Mbhalati, and Sithole, "A Victimological Analysis of Women in Abusive Relationships in Limpopo Province, South Africa."

²⁴ Casey D. Xavier Hall and Dabney P. Evans, "Social Comorbidities? A Qualitative Study Mapping Syndemic Theory onto Gender-Based Violence and Co-Occurring Social Phenomena among Brazilian Women," *BMC Public Health* 20, no. 1 (December 18, 2020): 1260, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09352-7>.

victims themselves, affecting families, friends, and communities, referred to as vicarious victims. These widespread and far-reaching consequences highlight the complex and layered nature of the issue.

In response, the researchers advocate a comprehensive and decisive strategy that includes legal reforms, psychoeducation, active community participation, cross-sector collaboration, and improved data collection.

a. Prevalence of femicide and pattern

A comprehensive review of scholarly literature reveals the deeply troubling and widespread occurrence of femicide in South Africa, highlighting numerous cases of this horrific crime in various regions of the country. The current review draws attention to several forms of femicide, including sexual violence, intimate partner abuse, domestic violence, and brutal killings, among others.

Mathebula et al. highlight South Africa as one of the countries with the highest and most concerning rates of femicide worldwide.²⁵ This crisis is driven by deeply rooted psychosocial, economic, and cultural factors, requiring urgent and targeted intervention. Young women, especially those who live in impoverished rural areas, are disproportionately affected. The review also refers to a retrospective national study by Abrahams et al., which compared female homicide rates in 1999 and 2009.²⁶ The findings showed an evident reduction in the overall occurrence of female homicide, from 24.7 per 100,000 women in 1999 to 12.9 in 2009. However, the statistics of intimate partner femicide remained essentially unchanged between the two periods. In particular, non-intimate femicide cases had increased considerably by 2009.

Research continues to reveal that violence against women in South Africa remains a significant concern, with high levels of abuse, violation, and murder.²⁷ Between July and September 2022, South Africa recorded 7,004 homicide cases—an increase of 841 compared to the same period in 2021—according to data from the South African Police Service. These statistics highlight the scale and urgency of the femicide crisis, which not only affects South Africa but also reflects a broader global issue.²⁸

b. Psychological determinants

The review indicated that various psychological factors contribute significantly to femicide. Iyican and Babcock highlight that intimate partner violence is often linked to personality disorders, with antisocial personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, and narcissism the most commonly diagnosed.²⁹ These disorders are associated with behaviours that reflect sensitivity to others and a tendency to risky actions. Additionally, Cunha, Pinheiro, and Goncalves identified mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder as contributing factors to femicide.³⁰ Mtotywa et al. emphasized that substance abuse, including alcohol and drugs, significantly affects psychological states and can alter behaviour.³¹ This was supported by the Department of Social Development, which noted that psychological abuse has led many communities to become victims of crime, violence, and substance abuse, with cases of gender-based violence increasing rapidly.³²

²⁵ Wiseman Ntlhari Mathebula, Jabulani Calvin Makhubele, and Thembinkosi Singwane, “The Nexus between Harmful Alcohol Use and Intimate Partner Violence, a Case Study,” *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* (2147- 4478) 11, no. 9 (December 25, 2022): 280–88, <https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v11i9.2199>.

²⁶ Abrahams et al., “Worldwide Prevalence of Non-Partner Sexual Violence: A Systematic Review.”

²⁷ Standish and Weil, “Gendered Pandemics: *Suicide, Femicide and COVID-19*; Ngidi, “‘I Feel Scared of Being a Girl’: Adolescent Girls’ Conversations about Heteropatriarchal Sexual Violence in South African Townships”; Uzobo and Ayinmoro, “Trapped Between Two Pandemics: Domestic Violence Cases Under COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown: A Scoping Review.”

²⁸ South African Police Service, *Crime Statistics Report 2020/2021* (Pretoria: SAPS, 2021).

²⁹ Susan Iyican and Julia C Babcock, “The Relation between the Two Factors of Psychopathy and Intimate Partner Aggression,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 27, no. 2 (2018): 119–30.

³⁰ Olga Cunha, Marina Pinheiro, and Rui Abrunhosa Gonçalves, “Intimate Partner Violence, Psychopathy, and Recidivism: Do Psychopathic Traits Differentiate First-Time Offenders from Repeated Offenders?,” *Victims & Offenders* 17, no. 2 (2022): 199–218.

³¹ Matolwandile Mtotywa et al., “A Conceptual Framework of Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Drivers in South Africa,” *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* (2147- 4478) 12, no. 5 (July 28, 2023): 315–30, <https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v12i5.2633>.

³² Department of Social Development, “Revised White Paper on Families in South Africa,” Government Gazette, 2021, https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202107/44799gon586t.pdf.

Furthermore, the NCADV described additional behaviours related to perpetrators, including aggression, cruelty to animals, blame for victims, and abuse of other family members.³³ Some perpetrators of violence and femicide also experience suicidal thoughts, with many having attempted suicide, and some harbour homicidal tendencies. However, Santos-Hermoso et al. argued that while psychological factors play a role, socio-cultural determinants are more influential and account for a larger share of femicide cases.³⁴ This suggests that socio-cultural factors have a more substantial impact on femicide than psychological ones.

c. Socio-cultural determinants

This review underscores a diverse array of socio-cultural determinants that significantly contribute to the incidence of femicide in South Africa. Existing literature points to deeply embedded gender norms, hegemonic masculinity, and the systemic objectification of women as primary drivers of such violence. In addition, culturally sanctioned acts, such as gender-based bigotry, patriarchal systems, and the social normalisation of violence, further entrench and exacerbate the phenomenon. Femicide, defined as the gender-motivated and wilful female homicide by men, persists as a critical socio-political issue in South Africa, with profound implications for both individual well-being and broader societal cohesion. Therefore, a nuanced understanding of the underlying socio-cultural determinants is essential for developing effective, contextually appropriate prevention and intervention strategies.

The academic review synthesised a range of socio-cultural factors identified from multiple sources. For example, Mathebula explored the lived experiences of women in abusive relationships in Limpopo and found that victims often remain in such circumstances due to poverty, economic hardship, and financial dependence.³⁵ These insights are corroborated by Zinyemba et al., who conducted semi-structured interviews with adult men to examine male perceptions of gender-based violence.³⁶ Both studies underscore the critical role of socio-economic conditions—particularly poverty and substance abuse—in intensifying gender-based violence. Furthermore, both authors identify patriarchy as a fundamental underlying factor, perpetuating gender inequality and the structural subjugation of women.³⁷

Ross et al. explored how female university students in Limpopo understand intimate partner violence.³⁸ This qualitative study revealed four central themes: cultural beliefs, the influence university on partner violence, the consequences of such violence, and potential interventions. Among these, cultural beliefs emerged as a primary factor that fosters violence against women. Financial hardship and limited household resources were also identified as contributing factors that prevent women from leaving abusive relationships. The study also pointed to a significant lack of awareness about brutal violence and the instruments available from close partners to address it among students surveyed.

Lastly, Mathews et al. examined how child sexual abuse is discussed among girls in the South African context, through in-depth interviews with victims aged 8–17 and their caregivers.³⁹ The findings showed that many victims delayed disclosure due to fear of adverse reactions from caregivers. This process was shaped by fear, disbelief, parenting styles, and the identification of trusted individuals to

³³ NCADV, “Signs of Abuse,” 2022, <https://ncadv.org/signs-of-abuse>.

³⁴ Jorge Santos-Hermoso et al., “Psychopathic Femicide: The Influence of Psychopathy on Intimate Partner Homicide,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 67, no. 4 (2022): 1579–92.

³⁵ Mathebula, Mbalati, and Sithole, “A Victimological Analysis of Women in Abusive Relationships in Limpopo Province, South Africa.”

³⁶ Kudakwashe Gracious Zinyemba and Khumbulani Hlongwana, “Men’s Conceptualization of Gender-Based Violence Directed to Women in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, South Africa,” *BMC Public Health* 22, no. 1 (2022): 2235.

³⁷ Zinyemba and Hlongwana, “Men’s Conceptualization of Gender-Based Violence Directed to Women in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, South Africa.”

³⁸ Christina Ross et al., “South African University Women’s Perspectives on Intimate Partner Violence: A Qualitative Study of Reactions to a Tailored Vignette,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 24, no. 11 (November 1, 2022): 1481–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2021.1970813>.

³⁹ Shanaaz Mathews, Rachel Jewkes, and Naeemah Abrahams, “‘So Now I’m the Man’: Intimate Partner Femicide and Its Interconnections With Expressions of Masculinities in South Africa,” *British Journal of Criminology* 55, no. 1 (January 2015): 107–24, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azu076>.

confide in. Collectively, these studies offer valuable insight into the complex psychosocial and cultural factors that contribute to femicide and gender-based violence in South Africa.

d. Intersectionality

The context and empirical findings of this study are firmly grounded in the foundational tenets of intersectionality, a theoretical framework pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s to examine how racism and sexism (among other axes of inequality) intersect to create distinct experiences of marginalisation for women of colour.⁴⁰ This paradigm holds that physical violence must be understood not only as isolated acts of assault, but as manifestations of broader systemic oppression that amplifies vulnerability to physical harm—especially among multiply marginalised women.

Gender inequality compounds women's disadvantages through entrenched poverty, limited access to employment opportunities, economic dependency, and the disproportionate accounting of unpaid family and childcare responsibilities. While some social indicators—such as age, country of origin, and socio-economic background—are regularly prioritised during data gathering, other identifiers, including disability, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity, are often documented incompletely and subjected to inadequate analytical depth. Race and ethnicity in particular remain among the most recalcitrant variables to operationalise accurately within empirical research, despite their salience to the intersectional framework—a failure that has contributed to a distinct paucity of reliable studies focused on the most vulnerable marginalised groups.⁴¹

Discussion Summary

This review has illuminated how intersecting dimensions of identity—including gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, psychological health, and cultural norms—interact in shaping women's lived experiences of violence and elevating the risk of femicide in South Africa. It demonstrates that race, low economic status, and mental health vulnerabilities do not simply coexist with gender-based violence; instead, together they form synergistic configurations that intensify harm for individual women. In this way, the intersectionality of gender-based violence, cultural beliefs, and structural inequality emerges as an intricate and dynamic challenge, demanding a nuanced and holistic approach to prevention and intervention. The literature cited in this review goes beyond South African examples to include international cases, such as those involving African American women who have survived intimate partner violence.⁴² These insights highlight different dimensions of intersectionality. Ruiz et al., for instance, note that African American women are disproportionately affected by homicides related to intimate partner violence, and they often struggle to access support due to systemic racism and discrimination.⁴³ Similarly, Kouta found that cultural and social factors often serve as the root causes of femicide and gender-based violence.⁴⁴ Based on these findings, the researchers advocate for the dismantling of patriarchal systems and the rejection of gender norms that perpetuate inequality and violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The review suggests that the South African government must adopt innovative approaches to implement comprehensive, inclusive legal reforms and ensure effective, robust law enforcement. The researchers also emphasize the need for immediate and intense institutional interventions to provide support not

⁴⁰ Abrahams et al., "Worldwide Prevalence of Non-Partner Sexual Violence: A Systematic Review."

⁴¹ Patricia Cullen et al., "Intersectionality and Invisible Victims: Reflections on Data Challenges and Vicarious Trauma in Femicide, Family and Intimate Partner Homicide Research," *Journal of Family Violence* 36, no. 5 (July 3, 2021): 619–28, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-020-00243-4>.

⁴² Cullen et al., "Intersectionality and Invisible Victims: Reflections on Data Challenges and Vicarious Trauma in Femicide, Family and Intimate Partner Homicide Research."

⁴³ Ashley Ruiz et al., "The Impact of the <sc>COVID</Sc> -19 Pandemic on Help-seeking Behaviours of Indigenous and Black Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence in the United States," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 79, no. 7 (July 19, 2023): 2470–83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.15528>.

⁴⁴ Christiana Kouta et al., "Understanding and Preventing Femicide Using a Cultural and Ecological Approach," in *Femicide across Europe* (Policy Press, 2018), 53–70, <https://doi.org/10.56687/9781447347163-007>.

only to the victims of femicide but also to those indirectly affected, such as family members and friends. The review recommends a holistic assessment of victims that considers psychological, social, medical, and potentially religious factors. Additionally, the review advocates for harsher penalties for those found guilty of femicide. Another critical recommendation is the introduction of psychoeducation programs, which would help challenge harmful gender norms, patriarchy, and cultural factors that contribute to femicide, abuse, and gender-based violence. Awareness campaigns should also be implemented to promote empathy, equality, respect, dignity, and human rights for all individuals. Furthermore, schools should organize programs to educate young boys on how to respect and treat women from an early age, laying a foundation for appropriate attitudes toward women, rather than fostering objectification and mistreatment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this systematic literature review sheds light on the complex factors that contribute to femicide in South Africa, a country that faces alarmingly high and rapidly increasing rates of gender-based violence against women. The comprehensive analysis of scholarly articles, research studies, and reports highlights the central role of established gender norms, cultural beliefs, and the patriarchal system as key drivers of femicide and gender-based violence in the country. The review also emphasizes the devastating impact of femicide on both individuals and communities, stressing the urgent need for accelerated research and policy interventions. By examining the interplay of gender, violence, and culture, the findings call for a careful, rigorous, and coordinated response to address this critical issue. The review underlines the importance of evidence-based strategies grounded in a deep understanding of the root causes and various expressions of gender-based violence. By identifying knowledge gaps and highlighting the need for further research and policy development, it offers a clear roadmap for stakeholders across sectors to collaborate to combat femicide in South Africa. Moreover, the review provides actionable recommendations that researchers consider essential to effectively challenge femicide. It outlines potential interventions to confront harmful gender norms, patriarchy, and other social discriminations against women. For policymakers, researchers, activists, practitioners, and community members, this review is a foundational guide to developing policies, frameworks, and strategies to prevent and reduce femicide.

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Conflicting interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Authors' contributions

A.Z. conceived the original idea for this study, establishing the topic and overall framework. U.M. constructed and wrote the introduction and references. A.Z. did the rest of the manuscript.

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