

Exploring the Role of Women in Gender-Based Violence: Deconstructing the One-sided Narrative in Bityi, Eastern Cape, South Africa



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ABSTRACT

The study addresses the critical and pervasive issue of gender-based violence (GBV), a universal human rights violation affecting individuals across the globe, irrespective of cultural, socioeconomic, or religious backgrounds. While GBV predominantly impacts women, this research sought to highlight the often-overlooked fact that men can also be victims, challenging the one-sided narrative that typically surrounds this issue. Conducted in Bityi, Eastern Cape, South Africa, the study employed a qualitative approach, collecting data from 12 participants through semi-structured interviews. The study was framed by the Person-In-Environment theory and aimed to understand the role of women in perpetrating GBV against men. The findings revealed that men experience various forms of GBV at the hands of women, including emotional, physical, verbal, financial, and sexual abuse. However, such incidents are rarely reported, attributed to cultural norms, the fear of secondary victimisation, and a lack of support and protection for male victims. To address this gap, the study recommended the development of programs to raise awareness about male victimisation and to foster open dialogue among men about their experiences with GBV. This research contributes significantly to the field of social work by offering insights into the experiences of male victims of GBV, thereby enriching the body of knowledge with a largely absent perspective. It informs officials and practitioners about enhanced intervention skills and strategies and influences legislators to develop policies that protect the rights of both women and men. By acknowledging men as victims, the study not only challenges the prevailing narrative about GBV but also provides a platform for male victims to seek help and support, adding depth and nuance to societal understanding of GBV.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) has been and is still a significant societal ailment that is now beginning to dominate discourses in many platforms.¹ This is mainly due to the crippling impact it has had on individuals, directly or indirectly, as well as on various societies at large. GBV can manifest itself in

¹ Donica Jasmin Walton, “The Narrative Of Women In South Africa Use Social Media To Talk About Gender Base Violence” (Rhodes University, 2021).

various ways, which include, psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse, and has long-term consequences for the victim's physical and psychosocial wellbeing.²

The term gender-based violence has been defined greatly by various scholars and organisations.³ It is defined as any act that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.⁴ It is further defined as the human rights violation that occurs globally, in both developing and developed countries, irrespective of culture, socioeconomic class, or religion, and it varies in frequency, forms and extent from country to country.⁵

Furthermore, human rights breaches are committed against both men and women, however, the impact varies depending on the gender of the victim this is due to the patriarchal norms and stereotypes imposed by the society. A study conducted in 2023 revealed these long-standing patriarchal practices and the old saying that "Men do not cry" which often leads to a significant underreporting of male abuse by women.⁶ Furthermore, one study has revealed that women might be instigators or perpetrators of GBV.⁷

Arguably, the South African laws and legislations seem to be more biased toward women and thus contribute to the exclusion and underreporting of male violence. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa signed into law GBV Acts, and in his address, he indicated that the government has strengthened its protection for women and children thus, victims have a greater chance of receiving justice. Amongst the amended Acts that seek to fight GBV are the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, the Criminal and Related Matters Amendment Bill, and the Domestic Violence Amendment Bill.⁸

GBV against women remains one of the major concerns of the world in general, and South Africa in particular.⁹ WHO estimated that globally, 1 in 3(30) % of women have been victims of either physical or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. South Africa was declared to highest on the list of rape cases in the world with 10,818 rape cases being reported in the first quarter of 2022.¹⁰

GBV stands as a pervasive societal issue that has garnered significant attention from the media, policymakers, and researchers.¹¹ However, discussions surrounding GBV often disproportionately focus on women and children, depicting them as the primary recipients of such violence.¹² Moreover, *Sonke Gender Justice*, a South African Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), actively engages in initiatives aimed at involving men in preventing GBV.¹³ One such notable effort is the postcard campaign, which shares individual narratives of women affected by GBV. However, one study underscores a critical limitation in the campaign's scope by pointing out the absence of comparable initiatives addressing

² Kunle Oparinde and Rachel Matteau Matsha, "Powerful Discourse: Gender-Based Violence and Counter-Discourses in South Africa," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 8, no. 1 (January 1, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2021.1911035>.

³ Andrew Simon-Butler and Bernadette McSHERRY, "Defining Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Refugee Context," *Birmingham: Institute for Research into Superdiversity* 40 (2018); Kasa Luvo and Yolanda Unathi Saunders, "The Role Of Culture In Gender-Based Violence And Its Impacts On The Lives And Wellbeing Of Women: Implications For Social Work," *PONTE International Journal of Science and Research* 78, no. 12 (2022).

⁴ Simon-Butler and McSherry, "Defining Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Refugee Context."

⁵ Kasa and Saunders, "The Role Of Culture In Gender-Based Violence And Its Impacts On The Lives And Wellbeing Of Women: Implications For Social Work."

⁶ Luvo and Saunders, "The Role Of Culture In Gender-Based Violence And Its Impacts On The Lives And Wellbeing Of Women: Implications For Social Work."

⁷ Kajal Carr, "The Pandemic of Being a Woman: A Qualitative Analysis of the South African Media on GBV at the Time of COVID-19," 2022.

⁸ Luvo and Saunders, "The Role Of Culture In Gender-Based Violence And Its Impacts On The Lives And Wellbeing Of Women: Implications For Social Work."

⁹ Nancy Perrin et al., "Social Norms and Beliefs about Gender Based Violence Scale: A Measure for Use with Gender Based Violence Prevention Programs in Low-Resource and Humanitarian Settings," *Conflict and Health* 13, no. 1 (December 8, 2019): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-019-0189-x>.

¹⁰ A. Gouws, "Violence against Women Is Staggeringly High in South Africa – A Different Way of Thinking about It Is Needed," 2022, <https://theconversation.com/violence-against-women-is-staggeringly-high-in-south-africa-a-different-way-of-thinking-about-it-is-needed-195053#:~:text=South Africa has notoriously high,rape incidence in the world.>

¹¹ Xolani Thusi and Victor H Mlambo, "South Africa's Gender-Based Violence: An Exploration of a Single Sided Account," *EUREKA: Social and Humanities*, no. 2 (2023): 73–80.

¹² Kim Robin van Daalen et al., "Extreme Events and Gender-Based Violence: A Mixed-Methods Systematic Review," *The Lancet Planetary Health* 6, no. 6 (June 2022): e504–23, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(22\)00088-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(22)00088-2).

¹³ Tamara Shefer, "Critical Reflections on Contemporary Responses to Gender Violence within Public, Political, Health and Research Contexts," *African Safety Promotion: A Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention* 11, no. 2 (2013): 1–13.

LGBTQIA+ or male survivors of GBV.¹⁴ This observation underscores the campaign's exclusive concentration on women, contrary to its overarching goal of broadening the definition of GBV.

The legislative landscape has evolved, as highlighted by the recognition of same-sex couples in the Domestic Violence Act's definition of domestic relationships.¹⁵ However, a discrepancy persists in policy documents, exemplified by the 2016 White Paper on Safety and Security, wherein violence against women (VAW) often conflicts with GBV. The interchangeable usage of these terms has also been noted, stemming from the predominant association of violence against women with gender-related motivations.¹⁶

While GBV undeniably disproportionately affects women, the acknowledgment of men as potential victims is crucial, as well as emphasizing the need to safeguard their rights.¹⁷ There is great importance of inclusivity in efforts to combat GBV, highlighting the diverse ways in which individuals, regardless of gender, may experience violence.¹⁸

The article challenges traditional perspectives on GBV that often portray women solely as victims and men solely as perpetrators. By investigating the complexities and ambiguities surrounding GBV, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the issue. Furthermore, the article is aimed at fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive dialogue around gender-related violence. This approach could help address the diverse factors contributing to GBV and open up discussions about the various ways individuals of all genders can be affected. Ultimately, the article strives for a more holistic and balanced perspective on GBV, aiming to contribute to a deeper understanding of the issue and potentially inform more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Revealing the Hidden Layers: Shedding Light on Overlooked Dimensions of Gender-Based Violence

The role of women as perpetrators of GBV is a topic that has received relatively little attention in the literature, despite its significant impact on victims and society.¹⁹ Extensive literature provides valuable insights into the experiences of male victims of GBV and the ways in which women can be perpetrators of such violence. A significant proportion of male victims of intimate partner violence experience violence from their female partners, and these men are more likely to experience coercive control and physical violence than women.²⁰

The findings of the study challenge the common assumption that women are victims of intimate partner violence and suggest that men may also experience it from their partners. Masculine gender norms serve as an internalised mechanism through which men view and regulate themselves in society.²¹ An understanding of what it means to be masculine emerges from gender role socialisation, which recognises that both men and women acquire a set of learned behaviours based on social expectations based on gender identities.²² The concept of the social construction of gender roles discusses how young boys and girls

¹⁴ Sally R. Munt, "Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics," *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics* 1, no. 1 (October 30, 2017): 1–1, <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc.201700>.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ L.R. Calvino and M.T. Matadi, *Enforcement of Gender-Based Violence Legislation in South Africa: The Need for a Paradigm Shift* (London: IntechOpen, 2023), <https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/1157567>.

¹⁷ Clarisa Bencomo, Emily Battistini, and Terry McGovern, "Gender-Based Violence Is a Human Rights Violation: Are Donors Responding Adequately? What a Decade of Donor Interventions in Colombia, Kenya, and Uganda Reveals," *Health and Human Rights* 24, no. 2 (2022): 29, <https://www.hhrjournal.org/2022/11/gender-based-violence-is-a-human-rights-violation-are-donors-responding-adequately-what-a-decade-of-donor-interventions-in-colombia-kenya-and-uganda-reveals/>.

¹⁸ Dianne Otto, "Gender, Violence and Human Rights," in *Handbook on Gender and Violence* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 357–76.

¹⁹ Richard Mphatheni Mandlenkosi and Edward Mlamla Ntsika, "Gender-Based Violence against Men and Boys: A Hidden Problem," *African Journal of Gender, Society and Development (Formerly Journal of Gender, Information and Development in Africa)* 11, no. 3 (September 1, 2022): 59–83, <https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3622/2022/v11n3a4>.

²⁰ Eunice Masson, "South African Police Are Failing Victims of Gender-Based Violence, Report Shows," *Mail&Guardian*, July 2022, <https://mg.co.za/news/2022-07-13-south-african-police-are-failing-victims-of-gender-based-violence-report-shows/#:~:text=South African police stations are,analysing DNA is often prolonged.>

²¹ Beniamino Cislighi and Lori Heise, "Gender Norms and Social Norms: Differences, Similarities and Why They Matter in Prevention Science," *Sociology of Health & Illness* 42, no. 2 (February 13, 2020): 407–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13008>.

²² Amy R Baugher and Julie A Gazmararian, "Masculine Gender Role Stress and Violence: A Literature Review and Future Directions," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 24 (2015): 107–12.

internalise societal norms and expectations regarding appropriate gender behaviour.²³ As a result of these societal and cultural norms, male victims of GBV do not fit within the framework of socially constructed masculinity, which perpetuates that men should be strong and tough, which contradicts male victims of GBV.²⁴ Many scholars view culture as a strong base for socialisation and gender roles in the society.²⁵ Male victims become reluctant to report incidents of domestic violence or seek assistance for fear of being seen as weak and subjected to mockery as society believes that men are strong and are not supposed to cry.

GBV is a daily occurrence, and women are reported to be the most victims, owing to the notion that they are more likely to report it, whilst males do not, due to the patriarchal norms of most societies.²⁶ According to some scholars, males do not disclose GBV incidents because they believe authorities would dismiss them and are frightened of living with the stigma of being known that they are being abused.²⁷ More so, some scholars argue that government officials sometimes lack the competence to handle GBV, even though the laws and codes of practice are in place, this can be influenced by the notion that GBV is linked to gendered power dynamics that are firmly embedded in most societies.²⁸

Probing questions like “How can a woman abuse you while you have the ability to control her?” and “Why didn't you reprimand her?” the court and police systems transfer guilt to the victim rather than the perpetrator of the abuse.²⁹ This inevitably puts vulnerable victims in a tough situation when they really need assistance and are survivors of awful offences.³⁰ Male victims of GBV frequently suffer abuse both psychologically and physically by their female partners.³¹ However, most male victims feel unable to contact police officials, and those who did report were frequently falsely accused or simply ignored. Men who disclose GBV to authorities are more likely to face secondary victimisation in the form of unwillingness to give aid.³²

Gender equality is the state in which access to rights and opportunities is independent of gender.³³ Gender equality does not imply that men and women will become interchangeable.³⁴ Gender equality entails considering women's and men's interests, needs, and priorities, as well as recognising the diversity of female and male groups.³⁵

Equality between men and women is not only a human right but also a necessary precondition and an indicator of long-term people-centred development.³⁶ Feminist thinkers have made significant efforts to promote women's issues and place them on the social work agenda, while men's issues have been left behind.³⁷ As such, there is an asymmetry in promoting gender equality because it is mostly seen from the

²³ Monica Adhiambo Onyango and Karen Hampanda, “Social Constructions of Masculinity and Male Survivors of Wartime Sexual Violence: An Analytical Review,” *International Journal of Sexual Health* 23, no. 4 (October 2011): 237–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2011.608415>.

²⁴ Gabriella Hagedorn, “The Socialization Process of Masculinity, and Its Manifestation at DePauw University: How Race, Media, and Gender Contribute to the Malleability of Masculinity,” 2019, <https://scholarship.depauw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1108&context=studentresearch>.

²⁵ Tsoaledi D. Thobejane, Lobelo D. Mogorosi, and Ntshengedzeni V. Luthanda, “Gender-Based Violence against Men: A Muted Reality,” *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* 28, no. 1 (September 10, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.25159/1016-8427/4304>.

²⁶ Thobejane, Mogorosi, and Luthanda, “Gender-Based Violence against Men: A Muted Reality.”

²⁷ C. K. Selowa, V Baloyi, and M Chueng, “Experiences of Young Males on Gender-Based Violence at a Selected Village in Limpopo Province, South Africa,” *Gender and Behaviour* 20, no. 4 (2022): 20564–81.

²⁸ Indiran Govender, “Gender-Based Violence—An Increasing Epidemic in South Africa,” *South African Family Practice* 65, no. 3 (2023); Masson, “South African Police Are Failing Victims of Gender-Based Violence, Report Shows.”

²⁹ Govender, “Gender-Based Violence—An Increasing Epidemic in South Africa.”

³⁰ Govender, “Gender-Based Violence—An Increasing Epidemic in South Africa.”

³¹ Thusi and Mlambo, “South Africa’s Gender-Based Violence: An Exploration of a Single Sided Account.”

³² Thusi and Mlambo, “South Africa’s Gender-Based Violence: An Exploration of a Single Sided Account.”

³³ United Way NCA, “What Is Gender Equality? Learn The Definition With Examples,” February 7, 2022, <https://unitedwaynca.org/blog/what-is-gender-equality/>.

³⁴ J. Pivoriene and R. Bardauskiene, “Social Work with Families at Social Risk Promoting Gender Equality,” in *SHS Web of Conferences*, vol. 30 (EDP Sciences, 2016), 00024.

³⁵ Venantie Nyiransabimana, “Gender Equality-Key Challenges and Practical Solutions to Women Participation in Local Governance in Rwanda,” *African Journal of Public Affairs* 10, no. 3 (2018): 1–22.

³⁶ Pivoriene and Bardauskiene, “Social Work with Families at Social Risk Promoting Gender Equality.”

³⁷ Christopher Nkonge Kiboro et al., “Role of Social Work in Minimizing Sexual and Gender Inequalities,” *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no. 14 (2014): 84–88.

perspective of women.³⁸ To this end, social workers participate and advocate for gender equality with the aim of bringing social change.³⁹

GBV is narrated as violence against women while there is also an infringement of men's rights.⁴⁰ Some scholars have primarily focused on the notion that men are the perpetrators of gender-based violence without exploring the factors driving the act of GBV.⁴¹ The law's preference for women has given rise to the idea that a woman is entitled to behave as she pleases and that the results will be blamed on the other gender. The laws include three bills: the Domestic Violence Amendment Bill, the Amendment Bill (Sexual Offences and Related Matters), and the Amendment Bill for Criminal and Related Matters which were signed by the president of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa providing South African women and children with more protection than before. Thus, this research project seeks to deconstruct the one-sided narrative about gender-based violence by shedding light on the role played by women in GBV.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research study was underpinned by the Person-in-Environment theory. Person-in-environment theory is defined as a framework of thought that emphasizes the importance of understanding an individual and their behaviour in the environment in which they live and behave.⁴² The person-in-environment theory evolved from the two theories ecological theory and the general systems theory.⁴³ The ecosystem views individuals and environments as constantly interacting with and adapting to one another in a series of interconnected transactional.⁴⁴

Furthermore, this approach takes a holistic view of individuals' and families' bio-psychosocial development within the cultural, historical, communal, and societal contexts in which they live.⁴⁵ People's behaviour cannot be fully understood unless all aspects of that individual's surroundings are considered, including social, political, family, and economic variables.⁴⁶ Person-In-Environment effectively showed that behaviour is a function of the person associated with the environment.⁴⁷

The person-in-environment approach is a central and core principle in the field of social work practice.⁴⁸ From this perspective, social workers focus on the interactions between individuals and systems in the social environment with the goal of enhancing their lives as well as promoting social justice through recognising and challenging the inequalities and social injustices that exist in the social institutions of society.⁴⁹ Fundamentally, this approach provides a more appropriate frame of reference for assessing an individual and their problem. Therefore, in addressing and understanding GBV against men this theoretical lens equips the researchers with an understanding of the multifaceted view of GBV by recognising the social, cultural and environmental drivers of GBV against and subsequently, this will allow the social workers to take corrective measures to intervene.

³⁸ Kiboro et al., "Role of Social Work in Minimizing Sexual and Gender Inequalities."

³⁹ Katherine Van Wormer, "Social Work in a Globalizing World," *Journal of Social Policy* 40, no. 4 (October 4, 2011): 869–71, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279411000481>.

⁴⁰ Zinyemba and Hlongwana, "Men's Conceptualization of Gender-Based Violence Directed to Women in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, South Africa."

⁴¹ Andrew Enaifoghe et al., "The Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence against Women in South Africa: A Call for Action," *African Journal of Gender, Society & Development* 10, no. 1 (2021): 117.

⁴² S. Tyler, "The Person in Environment," University of Arkansas Libraries, May 26, 2020, Uark.pressbooks.pub.

⁴³ Phillip Dybic, "From Person-in-Environment to Strengths: The Promise of Postmodern Practice," *Journal of Social Work Education* 51, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 237–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2015.1012923>.

⁴⁴ M. Mohinuddin, "Person-in-Environment (Pie) Model in Social Work," 2021.

⁴⁵ Ronald Yesudhas, "SOCIAL WORK JOURNAL (BI-ANNUAL) From Functional to Social Justice Stance: A Review of Social Work Approaches," *Assam University Social Work Journal* 6 (2015): 45–60.

⁴⁶ Mary Ellen Kondrat, "Person-in-Environment," April 29, 2015, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195389678/obo-9780195389678-0092.xml>.

⁴⁷ Rein De Cooman and Wouter Vleugels, "Person-Environment Fit: Theoretical Perspectives, Conceptualizations, and Outcomes," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Business and Management* (Oxford University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.013.377>.

⁴⁸ Nuzha Allasad Alhuzail and Miriam Levinger, "Social Workers' Challenges in Working with Deaf Bedouin Service Users," *Journal of Social Work* 22, no. 5 (2022): 1296–1312.

⁴⁹ Roberta R Greene, "Human Behavior Theory, Person-in-Environment, and Social Work Method," in *Human Behavior Theory and Social Work Practice* (Routledge, 2017), 1–26, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345102959_Human_Behaviour_Theory_Person-in-Environment_and_Social_Work_Method.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach to gain pertinent information. The study adopted a case study as a suitable research design since it emphasises a full contextual analysis of fewer events or conditions and their interrelations. A case study gives an in-depth explanation of a phenomenon its analysis, and a description of the process used to discover these features, which is the research itself. Gender-based violence perpetrated is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive research approach; therefore, a case-study design was deemed an appropriate research method to deconstruct the complexities of this issue. The study was conducted in Bhityi, located in the Eastern Cape, Mthatha, under the King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality in South Africa.

A sample size of 12 participants was used for the study. The participants were drawn from a population of males and females from 24 to 49 years, employed, self-employed, and unemployed. Community members who are younger or older than the mentioned age were restricted from participating in this study. The age preference was motivated by the notion of the study, which focused on finding the role of women in gender-based violence, and women between the ages of 24 to 49 are most likely to be in an intimate relationship or married. The age restriction was to enhance the chances of finding suitable participants for the study. A small sample size was chosen based on several factors, including achieving data saturation, the principle of quality over quantity, and the need to balance the richness of data with the avoidance of repetitive information.

The study used a non-probability sampling method. The sampling technique adopted by this study was snowball sampling. This is the most prevalent method researchers employ to identify information-rich key informants. Snowball sampling was particularly effective when researching sensitive topics such as GBV because it allowed participants to refer others with similar experiences and to create a sense of trust and rapport between participants and the researchers. For this study, this method was used to gather data that accurately reflects the experiences of men who might have experienced GBV. Furthermore, the method was crucial in ensuring the research was representative and unbiased.

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were applied for this study's overall data collection process. In addition, an inductive approach was used in the study. This approach allowed the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of men who might be experiencing GBV perpetrated by women. In this study, thematic analysis was used to analyse data.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS /FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

The researchers have meticulously interpreted and analysed the results of their study. To ensure a comprehensive analysis, themes and sub-themes have been identified through a rigorous examination of the data. Furthermore, thematic analysis has been employed to interpret the data collected, carefully scrutinising the recordings and comments to uncover the challenges and experiences shared by the participants.

Table 1: Biographical information of participants

Gender	Age	Nationality	Race	Religion	Marital status	Employment status
Male	29	Other	Black	Muslim	S	Self-employed
Female	27	South African	Black	Christian	S	Employed
Female	44	South African	Black	Christian	M	Employed (Social Worker)
Male	48	South African	Black	Christian	M	Employed (SAPS Officer)
Female	25	South African	Black	Christian	S	Unemployed
Male	27	South African	Black	Christian	S	Self-employed
Female	28	South African	Black	Traditionalist	S	Employed
Female	35	South African	Black	Christian	M	Employed
Male	40	South African	Black	Christian	S	Unemployed

Male	24	South African	Black	Christian	S	Unemployed
Male	27	South African	Black	Other	S	Unemployed
Male	26	South African	Black	Christian	S	Unemployed

Table 2: An exploration of the role of women in gender-based violence against men.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Probes
To explore the role of women in gender-based violence against men.	Kindly please tell me your view or understanding of gender-based violence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of GBV. • Victimised • Triggered reaction • Experience • Reporting

All participants shared a common understanding of what GBV means. They mostly perceived GBV as violence directed towards women. The majority of female participants acknowledged that women are the most vulnerable group, and as a result, men often exploit them.

During the discussion, a female participant put forth a defence for her statement by emphasising the fact that men are generally more dominant and physically stronger than women. In contrast, male participants attributed GBV to violence against women due to their perceived inability to defend themselves. Upon further investigation, it became evident that the participants' comprehension of GBV was closely linked to the belief that men are primarily responsible for perpetrating it.

Some of the responses were:

Participant 2: *"I don't think men would experience GBV that would mean that man is weak."*

Participant 5: *"GBV is the violation of women by men, and it does not go the other way around."*

The responses from the participants are in accordance with the body of research, which has repeatedly shown that men are the main GBV perpetrators.⁵⁰ Contrastingly, women can also be perpetrators of GBV.⁵¹ This highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of GBV that takes into account the complex interplay of gender, power, and violence.

Victimised

All female participants of the study did not directly admit to victimising a man, they all shifted the blame to the man. One of the female participants stated that they are "fighting back" and that males cannot be labelled as "victims".

Some responses were:

Participant 5: *"I unintentionally slapped him."*

Participant 7: *"He made me so angry, and I lost my cool."*

GBV is often understood as violence perpetrated against women and children. This understanding has led to a lack of attention to cases where women are the perpetrators of GBV. However, the above responses showed that women can be perpetrators of GBV. Research has shown that cases of GBV involving female perpetrators have been largely overlooked.⁵² This is a concerning issue as it is important to understand the full scope of GBV in order to effectively address and prevent it. However, the above responses showed that women can be perpetrators of violence. Therefore, it is crucial to broaden the focus of GBV research to include cases where women are the perpetrators.

Triggered Reaction

When female participants were asked if they had ever victimised a man and what made them react that way, every female participant stated that their boyfriend's or husband's actions were the cause of them reacting in a violent manner. All the female participants refused to admit to abusing their partners.

⁵⁰ Lori Heise and Mary Ellsberg, "Ending Violence Against Women," 1999.

⁵¹ Zamokuhle Mbandlwa, "Analysis of a One-Sided Narrative of Gender-Based Violence in South Africa," *Solid State Technology* 63, no. 6 (2020): 13227–40.

⁵² Thobejane, Mogorosi, and Luthanda, "Gender-Based Violence against Men: A Muted Reality."

Furthermore, one in four women admitted that her family history had an influence on her physically fighting her partner. She revealed that when they were growing up, their father had physically abused their mother in front of them. After that, she made a vow to herself that no man would ever subject her to what her mother endured, this explains why she would be the first to punch her boyfriend when they got into an argument or disagreement.

One female participant went so far as to say:

Participant 8: *“Andivele ndimsukele nge mpama.”-I don’t just slap or throw punches at him.*

Participant 5: *“I was just asking for money and then he started calling me names such as ‘you leech’ I lost my cool and slapped him”*

The participant’s behaviour is based on the argument that a child would replicate the social and emotional interaction between his or her parents if he or she perceives it to be acceptable.⁵³ The social environment has a huge influence on people’s behavior, family, friends, community, culture, and media all contribute to one’s social environment.⁵⁴ These elements can have an impact on people’s attitudes, beliefs, and values, as well as their decisions and behaviours.⁵⁵

Direct and Indirect Experiences

Majority of male participants admitted to having both direct and indirect experiences with violence at the hands of women. One participant reported that *“you feel weak and, most of the time, less of a man when a woman abuses you.”* Men are expected to be strong and not cry so asking for help only makes things worse. When you do, the other person makes fun of you and labels you all kinds of derogatory names. He further narrated *“I was sexually assaulted in university by women who forced themselves on me. Because the woman was carrying a knife and pointing it at me, I was overwhelmed. To make matters worse, the police officer I reported the incident to treated me poorly and I was unable to stand it.”*

Some participants said:

Participant 10: *“For a moment I wanted to be alone because I was so weak, I did not know where to start in terms of seeking help.”*

Participant 6: *“The incident kept on playing in my mind whenever I tried to close my eyes, and that was so painful.”*

The study’s findings show how societal norms and masculine expectations contribute to men silently enduring GBV.⁵⁶ The influence of patriarchal beliefs, discouraging men from publicly expressing pain and reinforcing the tendency for male victims to remain silent about their experiences.⁵⁷

Reporting Incidents

While some of the male participants admitted to reporting their incidents, the majority of them stated they did not. This was largely due to the fear of being subjected to judgment and mockery. Furthermore, one of the male participants stated that at some time in their lives, they had reported the abuse to the authorities, but it was all in vain because they were ridiculed and treated unfairly. He further said that the police officer was reluctant to open an offence docket. Furthermore, during this interview, male participants attributed their non-disclosure to fear of stigmatisation and mockery by their peers and community.

Some participants said:

Participant 1: *“I reported the incident to the police, but because of my nationality I was told that I was twisting the story. ‘It’s the other way around’. ‘Foreigners are monsters’ said the police officer.”*

Participant 12: *“(Ndingancamela ukufa” – I would rather die than report that I’m being abused by a woman.*

⁵³ S. Bilgiler, Suko Susilo, and E. Dergisi, “The Role of Families in Cultivating Children’s Personality Values: An Analysis of Social Psychology Education,” *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* 11, no. 4 (2020): 275–303.

⁵⁴ Bharat Dhiman, “How Social Environment Influences People’s Behavior: A Critical Review,” *Available at SSRN 4417597*, 2023.

⁵⁵ Bilgiler, Susilo, and Dergisi, “The Role of Families in Cultivating Children’s Personality Values: An Analysis of Social Psychology Education”; Dhiman, “How Social Environment Influences People’s Behavior: A Critical Review.”

⁵⁶ Efua Esaaba Mantey and George Dzetor, “Juvenile Delinquency: Evidence of Challenges in Rehabilitation,” *American Journal of Applied Sciences* 15, no. 6 (June 1, 2018): 321–30, <https://doi.org/10.3844/ajassp.2018.321.330>.

⁵⁷ Tsoaledi Daniel Thobejane and Vitcor Luthada, “An Investigation into the Trend of Domestic Violence on Men: The Case of South Africa,” *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development* 12, no. 03 (2019): 11–18.

Men rarely disclose incidents of GBV against them due to stigmatisation and the perpetuation of masculine stereotypes.⁵⁸ Men are reluctant when it comes to reporting GBV events because they feel authorities will disregard or mock them.⁵⁹ With this backdrop information, a conclusion can be drawn that men do not report their incidents of GBV due to these societal stereotypes.

During the face-to-face interviews, all participants expressed their understanding of GBV against men by women. The findings revealed that knowledge about GBV against men is still limited or non-existent. The majority of participants dismissed GBV as nothing more than abuse or violence committed by men against women and children. This finding confirms the argument put across by van Daleen et.al., that generally discussions surrounding GBV often disproportionately focus on women and children, depicting them as the primary recipients of such violence.⁶⁰ This perception is largely influenced by the societal standards, cultural norms and gender stereotypes that define men as heads of households, who are supposed to be strong and show no emotion of weakness.

Furthermore, the findings offered a detailed summary of the data on male victims of GBV perpetrated by women. Male participants mentioned being abused by their female partners in the form of emotional, physical, verbal, and sexual abuse. However, the participants trivialised their experiences, and many were hesitant/ unwilling to talk about being victimised considering that it contradicted their masculinity, particularly within a society where males are discouraged from talking about their emotions. Furthermore, the study's findings revealed that most men do not report or seek help because they are afraid of being judged and stigmatised. This further confirms the findings of Luvo and Saunders in a study conducted in 2023 which revealed these long-standing patriarchal practices and the old saying that "Men do not cry" which often leads to a significant underreporting of male abuse by women.⁶¹ However, this need not be the case and efforts should be made to curb abuse to men which often causes mental torture as the data revealed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ More research on GBV against men should be carried out so as to shed light on how the social ailment negatively impacts men.
- ✓ The legal framework that addresses GBV should be gender-neutral and focus must be placed equally on the needs of both men and women.
- ✓ Men must be empowered through awareness campaigns and outreach campaigns so as to gather courage and be able to seek professional assistance.
- ✓ GBV researchers should collaborate with trusted community structures such as traditional leaders depending on the community, for the victims to feel comfortable and safe.

CONCLUSION

GBV is comprehended as violence against women while there is an indirect infringement of men's rights. Scholars have been and are still focusing on men's role without considering factors that might be driving GBV. The law and cultural preference for women lead to the assumption that a woman has the privilege to act however she pleases and that the other gender would be held responsible for the consequences. Therefore this study aimed at challenging this narrative by examining the role of women in GBV against men. The study has revealed that GBV against males by women is a taboo issue in society. Men are often silenced due to fear of mockery from the community, peers, and police officials. This issue is further exacerbated by toxic masculinity, which is characterized by male traits that negatively impact male victims. Moreover, findings have revealed that GBV against men is underreported due to victims often downplaying their experiences, which is often a coping mechanism used by men who experience GBV, as a common inclination. Therefore, in order to effectively tackle or address GBV against men, society as a whole needs to move towards eliminating gendered norms and cultural expectations that have been

⁵⁸ Mwiza Sikamikami, Brian Mumba, and Kavuyi Kamelu, "Examining Reporting of Gender-Based Violence Incidents by Men in Intimate Relationships in Zambia: A Case Study of Chilenje Township," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 11, no. 8 (2023): 398–414.

⁵⁹ Selowa, Baloyi, and Chueng, "Experiences of Young Males on Gender-Based Violence at a Selected Village in Limpopo Province, South Africa."

⁶⁰ van Daalen et al., "Extreme Events and Gender-Based Violence: A Mixed-Methods Systematic Review."

⁶¹ Luvo and Saunders, "The Role Of Culture In Gender-Based Violence And Its Impacts On The Lives And Wellbeing Of Women: Implications For Social Work."

imposed on individuals based on their gender or sex, as they become a barrier to progress. Policies and legislation should target everyone who has been identified as a victim of GBV, regardless of gender. Lastly, it is necessary to empower men through marches and awareness campaigns so they can gain the courage to speak up and seek help from professionals.

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