




The destructive effects of gender-based violence against men in South Africa: stigmatizing the victim



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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence (GBV) is increasingly gaining local and international attention. South Africa has been experiencing high volume of GBV cases. Men are unable to report gender-based violence cases because of fears for discrimination, labelling and cultural norms. Traditionally, men are expected to be strong despite the difficulties experienced. Although there is high unequal implementation of programs and policies that caters for GBV, male victims continue to suffer because the societal perception, stigmatization, and discrimination. Notwithstanding the existing policies, men continue to become victims of gender-based violence at an alarming rate. Gender-based violence against men has disturbing effects which includes physical effects, mental health illness, sexual dysfunctionality suicide and femicide. Men significantly suffer gender-based violence which this leads to lack of self-expression due to societal expectations and finding it difficult to seek help and report about the abuse. This mostly results to divorce, homicides and other mental related problems. The purpose of the study was to explore the destructive effects of gender-based violence against men in South Africa. The study employed the qualitative research approach with exploratory research design adopted. A sample of 14 male victims of gender-based violence was chosen for the purpose of the study. The study used interviews with semi-structured interview schedule used to guide the session. Purposive sampling technique was used with thematic content used for data analysis process. Among the many effects experienced, the study established the physical, mental health problems, sexual dysfunctionality, suicide and homicide to be the main effects of gender-based violence against men. Family systems theory was found to be relevant in the study to understand the dynamics of gender-based violence.

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Introduction

Gender-based violence is the global phenomenon that can be described as the act of harm which can be manifested physically, mentally, financially, and emotionally (Kolbe & Büttne, 2020). In most cases, the term gender-based is used in situation wherein women are being harmed and it is less likely to present the harm of man (Thobejane, Mogorosi & Luthada, 2018). The South African Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998 outlines more about the protection of people against violence. However, the government places emphasis on the protection on women and children, neglecting the abuse women perpetuates towards men (Bishop & Bettinson, 2018). It is true that gender-based violence is mostly perpetuated by man but the neglect of man being abused grant the opportunity to women to manipulate the law and play the “victim” whereas they may be the perpetrators of which leads man being subjected to abuse. (Thobejane 2018)

When the word “abuse” is spoken, most people immediately picture the victim to be women and children. It rarely happens that people think of a man being victim. (Thobejane, 2018). Christian (2011) explains that despite the prevalence of gender-based violence against men, there remains a lack of awareness, resources, and support systems specifically tailored to address their needs. This gap in services can leave male survivors feeling isolated, ashamed, stigmatized, discriminated and reluctant to seek help. Corboz, Pasquero, Hogg and Rasheed (2023) indicates that it is crucial to understand the unique challenges faced by men who experience gender-based violence and to develop targeted interventions that empower them to seek assistance, heal from trauma, and rebuild healthy relationships.

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Moreover, the belief that men are strong, and women are weak influences the rise in gender-based violence against married men. Strategies to close the gap between the priorities of abuse against men should be implemented (Cahill, Kern, Dadvand, Cruickshank, Midford, Smith, Farrelly & Oades, 2019). Doing so will make it easier to identify and address the various factors that contribute to abuse against married men. Given that men are supposed to be powerful, and that crying is a sign of weakness and less manliness, most cultures in South Africa forbid men from sobbing (Thobejane, 2018). Some acts of violence by women against males are acts of self-defence, while some have argued that abuse is a human problem rather than a gender issue because some women don't act out of self-defence (Heise, 2018).

South Africa just like any other countries experiences gender-based violence wherein the cultural and social norms play a role to an increase of gender-based violence (Enaifoghe & Idowu, 2021). The South African President in one of his speeches, declared that GBV is the second pandemic after Covid-19. He further explained that numbers of gender-based violence, domestic violence, rape and murder of women and children increases daily. Graaff (2021) states that gender-based violence in South Africa has been influenced by post-colonial and post-apartheid wherein extreme level of violence was normalized. This was because the apartheid state and the liberation groups were characterized with violence and gender inequality and little efforts was made to ensure equality.

Man do suffer abuse but there are some factors that hinders them to open and share their struggle and they suffer in silent (Thobejane et al 2018). Mbandlwa (2020) argues that there is less reported cases gender-based violence against men compared to the ones reported by women. The reason for low reporting of gender-based violence against men in South Africa is that men fear to go to police station and report such cases because in most cases police officers make jokes out of the reported situation due to social expectations. This makes them feel less of a man hence they end up committing homicides (Majola, Mkhize & Udoh, 2023). Furthermore Thobejane., et al (2018) states that according to social norms, men are not expected to cry or to show a sign of weakness to the society and if one does, it means they resemble a sign of weakness. Society views women as victims of gender-based violence wherein various campaigns about GBV are initiated/planned and implemented to prevent violence towards women to the exclusion of men. Several organizations support women that have been abused by men, but men do not enjoy the same support and protection (Mbandlwa, 2020).

Literature Review

Legislative framework

The South African bill of rights outlines the right to equality and places emphasis on the fact that everyone is equal before the law. It further place emphasis on the rights for the protection against harm and this applies to all citizens residing in South Africa (Tshishonga, 2019). Calvino & Matadi (2023) states that domestic violence Act 116 of 1998 was established to cater for the safety of women and children, protecting them against any form of violence or harassment. This is the pillar that ensures the law enforcement intervention is established in situation that involves children and women whenever violence is manifested. Deshpande (2019) indicates that regardless of the availability of data showing extend of violence men experiences, there's limited legislation or law or rather a policy that protects men from gender-based violence. Furthermore Cold-Ravnkilde (2019) States that South Africa is one of the recognised countries with progressive constitution that promotes equality amongst individuals.

National Policy Framework on Gender-Based Violence has been developed as a comprehensive policy framework to guide interventions and responses to gender-based violence. It is similar but not the same with the National Council against Gender-Based Violence (Brink, Mdaka, Matee, & Weppelman, 2021). These frameworks outline strategies for prevention, support services for survivors, legal reforms, and coordination among relevant stakeholders. These two frameworks provide a holistic approach to gender-based violence but they require sustained political will, adequate resources, and effective implementation to achieve meaningful impact (Jong, Twayise, Jijingubo, Tshetu, & Suliali, 2023). These laws and policies represent significant efforts by the South African government and its people to address gender-based violence comprehensively. However, challenges remain in terms of implementation, resource allocation, and changing societal attitudes. As a result, these persistent challenges remain (De Jong et al, 2023).

Theoretical frameworks

Family systems theory was chosen as the study's guiding theory to better understand how the theory and gender-based violence are related (Priest, 2015). The Family Systems Theory, which was mainly created by Murray Bowen in the 1950s, asserts that because families are emotional units, people cannot be fully understood in isolation from one another but rather as members of a family (Dallos & Draper, 2015). According to this theory, every family member is interrelated, and every person's actions have an effect on the family system as a whole (Jewkes, Flood, & Lang, 2015). The Family Systems Theory has developed over time and been used in a number of disciplines, such as social work, sociology, and psychology (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby 2012).

Family systems theory focuses primarily on the behavioural exchanges that occur during a specific family contact (Johnson & Ray, 2016). According to Masten (2018), the theory posits that family contact patterns initiate, sustain, and extend problematic and non-problematic behaviour. The goal of family system theory is to pinpoint and reconstruct the behavioural interactions that occur inside families. The focus is on recognizing and breaking patterns of recurring behavioural exchanges, of which the problematic behaviour is a component (Haefner, 2014).

A supportive environment for GBV can be produced by specific family dynamics or structures, such as dysfunctional relationships, power imbalances, and poor communication (Capaldi, Knoble, Shortt, & Kim, 2012). Understanding and resolving GBV within familial contexts requires an examination of family interactions, boundaries, and power dynamics, according to the Family Systems Theory (Evans, Davies, & DiLillo, 2016).

Research and Methodology

The paper has adopted the qualitative research approach and exploratory research design was found to be relevant to explore the destructive effects of gender-based violence against men. The design was employed to provide a framework that is logical for the research (David & Sutton, 2014). The paper sought to understand the challenges of gender-based violence against men. The study included men who have experienced gender-based violence. The location of the study was Limpopo Province of South Africa because of the high prevalence of cases of gender-based violence against men. Face to face semi-structured interview was used for the collection of data process and with 14 participants included in the study. Data saturation was reached on the 14th participants and the researcher stopped the process of data collection (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2019). The duration of the interviews was different, and 25-40 minutes were spent with the participants during the interviews. The researcher used English as a language of correspondents during the interviews because all the participants were familiar with the language.

The study applied purposive sampling technique to select participants who formed part of the research. Thematic content was used for data analysis with Thompson steps considered to provide a comprehensive process of data analysis. The study considered independent coder for the process of data analysis to validate the research findings and ensure that the findings are dependable (Creswell, 2016). A range of ethical principles was used in the study to ensure compliance with the provision of research values. In adhering to the ethical principles, participants were informed about the content of the study, assurance was given to the participants about the confidentiality of the information provided and the anonymity of the participants (Gray, 2014). Avoidance of harm and debriefing were some of the principles considered to respect the rights of the participants.

Findings and Discussion

Research findings

Theme 1: The effects of gender-based violence against men

The study found that gender-based violence against men has huge effects. Men are affected in a range of aspects of their lives because of the gender-based violence (Wanjiru, 2021). It was found that the effects include homicides, suicides, psychological problems, shock, social and economic problem. Furthermore, the study found that the mental health of the victims gets affected. Sexual dysfunctionality is one of the effects of gender-based violence against men. Gender-based violence against men affect the self-esteem, and the ability of men to work and take decisions about their families. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, feelings of shame, anxiety and guilt have been found to be some of the effects of gender-based violence against men (Buqa, 2022). Furthermore, men who are exposed to violence are more likely to encounter behavioural problems wherein they end up engaging themselves into substance use. Men who have weak capacity to handle problems become violent as a way of dealing with their problems (Anthony, Emmanuel, Ikemefuna, Michael, & Uche, 2020).

“The violence we experience as men has huge effects and affect us in a big way. I become ashamed of myself for allowing a woman to assault me. What is a concern is that the women think they are powerful and we are scared of them. I just do not want to be seen as abuser but there will be a time that I may regret my actions. I will tolerate to some extend and I do not know what will happen tomorrow. I develop anxiety and feel guilty for not responding with violence.” Participant C.

Participants F indicated that sexual dysfunctionality and mental health are some of the key effects of gender-based violence.

“I honestly lose sexual interest because of the violence and abuse I am subjected to. People may take this light but it is not possible to function well sexually with a person who gives you problems. I normally do not get erection because my mind is tired and cannot tolerate some actions. I was diagnosed with depression because of gender-based violence because of anger, anxiety, trauma and inability to deal with the problems.” Participant I.

Contemplation of suicide, suicide, homicide was found to be key effects which affects the socioeconomic positions of families. These have a huge effect in the lives of children and other members of the family.

“There are times that I feel no use of living and many times I have attempted on my life. It is not easy to endure abuse from your partner/wife and this continuously happen. You get embarrassed among the community members and you have no place to go for help. I overdosed my medication with the intention of taking my life, unfortunately my children found me and called the ambulance. You can imagine the trauma for my children. More often I think of suicide and also killing my wife and the children because there is no use. It is painful but we survive” Participant O

According to Smith and Miller (2018) men suffer a huge pressure from gender-based violence. They do not have available services that can accommodate them when they are abused. Most victim empowerment centers are not designed to accommodate men when they are victims (Barchielli, Lausi, Pizzo, Messineo, Del Casale, Giannini, & Ferracuti, 2023). Men who experience violence normally feel guilty, blame themselves, loss self-worth and confidence. Additionally, this can even lead to absenteeism at work which affect their work productivity and their salary. This effects also affects the livelihoods of the family (Wanjiru, 2021).

Theme 2: Physical effects of gender-based violence against men

The study found that there are lot of effects of gender-based violence against men. Physical injuries, injuries to the genital areas, and urinary are some of the effects gender-based violence suffered by men (Perrin, Marsh, Clough, Desgropes, Yope Phaniel, Abdi, AKaburu, Heitmann, Yamashina, Ross, & Read-Hamilton, 2019). Furthermore, headaches, backpains, and abdominal pains are some of the physical effects of gender-based violence experienced by men. It was also revealed that it leads to long term effects such as insomnia, aggression and phobia.

“I have experienced a number of physical injuries because of the assault and other form of violence. It is pity because I do not see the need to be violent and respond because it will be headlines. At times I get injuries on my genitals which has in the past affected my urine systems. I was assaulted with a stick on my genitals and this has caused a permanent damage to my genitals.” Participant E.

Participants K included the headaches, abdominal pains and backpains as some of the physical effects of bullying.

“Since the start of this violence in this house, I have developed lot of physical problems and they are disturbing. I have developed non-stop terrible headaches, abdominal pains and the back pains. This has been my daily struggles and at times I struggle to sleep because of these challenges. The back pains and abdominal pains were caused by the abuse and violence that I experienced. Gender-based violence is dangerous and must never be tolerated regardless of who is involved or who is the victims.” Participant K.

Buqa (2020) support the findings of the study relating to the physical effects of gender-based violence against men. He argues that men suffer physically, and some are unable to recover from the sustained injuries. Gender-based violence against men is a serious problem that is increasingly gaining momentum throughout the country. Educational programs need to be provided to mitigate the challenges experienced by male victims of gender-based violence (Johnson, 2015). Some of the physical injuries sustained by the male victims of gender-based violence may be fatal. Some victims have their world shut down because of this phenomenon (Perrin, Marsh, Clough, Desgropes, Yope Phaniel, Abdi, AKaburu, Heitmann, Yamashina, Ross, & Read-Hamilton, 2019).

Theme 3: Stigmatization of the male victims of gender-based violence.

Interestingly, the study found that men choose not to talk to anyone about their mental health problems and stresses of gender-based violence. The internalized believe and perception that men can never be the victims of gender-based violence causes men to remain silent about the abuse they experience at the hands of their partners (Carlson, Casey, Edleson, Tolman, Neugut, & Kimball, 2015). The study found that men fear stigmatization and discrimination because of societal and cultural perception that a man cannot be abused by a woman. Furthermore, the study found that men are expected not to express weakness. Additionally, the study found that men feel embarrassed when they are reporting abuse, are unable to seek help for gender-based violence with the believe that speaking out will ridicule them.

“I would rather keep quiet and not talk to anyone about my abuse because of the societal perception. I once attempted to report a police case and I was never treated like a victim and regretted why I went there. The police actually perpetuate the homicides because of their attitude towards the male victims of gender-based violence. Silence is a better tool that I use to prevent embarrassment.” Participant A.

Discrimination has been found to be prevalence on the phenomenon of gender-based violence against men. Stigmatization has also been found to be a factor that deter male victims of gender-based violence from reporting.

“As a man, I am not able to freely talk about my abuse without being discriminated by my family, friends, community and law-enforcement. I was once stigmatized and referred to as a weak men who is beaten by a woman. You are labelled and isolated from the entire community. I will never report or talk about the abuse and violence I am experiencing.” Participant D.

Cultural perception is one of the aspects within the stigmatization and discrimination that makes male victims of gender-based violence. Men are expected not to display sign of weaknesses.

“Traditionally, men are expected to display signs of resilience and not to be seen as weak. I am forced by culture and societal perception to behave in a manner that makes me strong when I am suffering emotionally and mentally. Education must be provided to communities about consequences of psychological, emotional and mental health problems. This cultural expectation put pressure on the victims to suffer in silence and never report abuse.” Participant G.

Stigmatization and discrimination perpetuate the abuse of men and deter them from reporting cases of abuse and violence. Deshpande (2019) concurs with the findings of the study that societal perception put fundamental pressure on the male victims of gender-based violence. Despite the prevalence of violence and homicide, gender-based violence against men has not attracted interest from authorities. Men continue to suffer in silence with limited interventions because of the fear of embarrassment when reporting cases (Allen, 2018). Furthermore, society expect men to be strong and not display the weakness. They are unconsciously put under pressure, and this affect their mental health problems (George, 2020).

Discussion

Men are exposed to gender violence that is perpetuated by their wives. Some violent behaviours include physical, sexual, psychological, and economical abuse (Thobejane et ai. 2018). Men are anxious to report cases due to stereotypes, discrimination, societal norms and cultural believes attached to what is expected from men. Men do suffer violence, and they remain silent about it and as a consequence they become victims of gender-based violence. The cultural norms, perception and stereotypes results in injustice, discrimination, societal perceptions and discouraging treatment when men report gender-based violence cases to the police (Deshpande, 2019). Although it is true that women are more exposed to GBV than men, gender-based violence against men remain a prevalent phenomenon in South Africa and continuously on the increase (Van der Hoven, 2001)

The study found that gender-based violence is influenced by cultural variables. Men have historically been viewed as dominating and women as inferior in South Africa as is the case in many other countries in the continent and around the world (Allen, 2018). It further established that married men in South Africa continue to suffer GBV and have limited support offered to help them address mental health problems (Buqa, 2022). The study highlighted that some cultural customs unintentionally encourage the acceptability of violence. Culture, norms that condone or justify the use of force in relationships were found to foster an atmosphere that increases the likelihood of gender-based violence (George, 2020). Cultural and societal norms can reinforce unequal power dynamics between genders. Cultural expectations around privacy and family matters can contribute to the underreporting of GBV.

Study limitations

Interviewing men who are victims of gender-based violence about sensitive topics like GBV may result in data that is misleading or limited since interview subjects may choose to withhold information. The linguistic diversity of South Africa may made communication difficult which made impact on the precision and breadth of the data gathered. The extent of the investigation was restricted by ethical considerations, especially when it comes to the confidentiality of participant identities and mental health. Stigma and cultural norms related to male GBV victims made it difficult for honest communication and result in underreporting.

Recommendations

- i. Addressing gender-based violence (GBV) against men requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses awareness-raising, support services, policy changes, and cultural shifts.
- ii. Gender based violence against men must be mainstreamed to ensure protection.
- iii. To the mental health wellbeing of the victims. Government needs to mainstream gender-based violence against men.
- iv. There should be a proper training of police officers to handle GBV cases with non-judgemental attitude when assisting men who are victims of gender-based violence.
- v. Movements and or community programmes that will cater or prevent gender-based violence against men should be implemented. This will allow men to have conducive atmosphere to vent or share what they are going through without a fear of being judged and this should include social work intervention strategies.
- vi. It is important to increase awareness and dispel myths that support the notion that men are incapable of being victims of gender-based violence. Educating the public about the reality of gender-based violence against men and eradication of stigma should be prioritized.
- vii. Encourage male victims to come out and ask for assistance without worrying about being judged or stigmatized by others when telling their stories.
- viii. Enable male survivors to speak out about their experiences and push for changes in their communities and social networks.

Conclusion

The study revealed that South African men are subjected to Gender-Based Violence, influenced by societal expectations and stigmatization attached. The study further accentuated that men experience both physical and psychological effects of Gender-Based Violence, which can escalate to the feeling of shame, anxiety and depression. Women manifest aggressive behaviours towards men which leads to physical injuries and men usually don't report such incidents. According to the results of the study, men don't report to the law enforcement due to social perceptions and stereotypes. The study has found that the South African legislative frameworks is established to cater for its citizen and ensure equality for all, but women are more prioritized then men and considered to be more vulnerable. The already existing literature surrounding gender-based violence against men concur with the findings of the study.

Furthermore, it places emphasis on how men suffer violence perpetuated by women, affecting both their psychological, emotional and physical well-being.

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