

Battling with gendered violence: The role of South African Police Services in combating gendered violence in Bityi, Eastern Cape, South Africa: Implications for social work

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the pervasiveness and handling of gendered violence against men, set against the backdrop of South African legislative reforms aimed at protecting victims of such violence. Despite the enactment of significant amendments such as the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 13 of 2022 (Government Gazette, 2022a), The Criminal and Related Matters Amendment Act 12 of 2022, and The Domestic Violence Amendment Act 14 of 2022 (Government Gazette, 2022b), questions persist regarding the gender neutrality of these laws and the equitable treatment of victims by law enforcement agencies. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research gathered insights through semi-structured interviews with 12 participants from the Bityi locale, guided by the Person-In-Environment theoretical framework. Findings reveal that men are reluctant to report gendered violence for fear of secondary victimization, fuelled by societal perceptions that equate vulnerability in men with weakness. Moreover, the study further shows an apparent reluctance among police to assist male victims, who are often discredited as the perpetrators instead. The research advocates for inclusive policies and a societal shift away from rigid gender norms to combat gendered violence more effectively. Through challenging the unilateral perception of gendered violence, this study contributes to the literature by informing policy-making that upholds the rights of all victims, thereby enriching the discourse on gendered violence from both micro and macro perspectives.

1. Introduction and background

Various scholars define gendered violence differently (Gill et al., 2016; Kasa & Saunders, 2022; Muluneh et al., 2020; Oparinde & Matsha, 2021). Gill et al. (2016) define it as a social issue tormenting all nations around the globe regardless of one's gender, culture, religion, or socioeconomic class. According to Muluneh et al. (2020), it is any harmful act directed at an individual based on their gender; it is inclusive of behaviors and actions that can be physical, emotional, sexual, or psychological and stem from socially enforced gender norms, roles, and expectations; and can potentially occur at any setting, public or private life. Kasa and Saunders (2022) define gendered violence as a human rights violation that occurs worldwide, in both

developing and developed countries, regardless of culture, socioeconomic level, or religion, and varies in frequency, form, and extent from country to country. According to Oparinde and Matsha (2021), gendered violence can manifest in a variety of ways, including psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse. It can have long-term effects on the victim's physical and psychosocial well-being. Gill et al. (2016) posit that the terms "gendered violence" and "gender-based violence" are sometimes used interchangeably, although they have different meanings. Gendered violence is a broad term referring to violence that arises from gender-based norms and expectations; the term covers violence against anyone who defies traditional gender norms (Gill et al., 2016). This might involve violence against Queer individuals, men who do not adhere to conventional masculine roles, and women who challenge traditional feminine roles (Gill et al., 2016). On the other hand, Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is defined as harmful acts perpetrated against an individual due to their gender (Bankar et al., 2019; Kasa & Saunders, 2022; Oparinde & Matsha, 2021; Roumelioti et al., 2023), and primarily affects women and girls, although men and boys can also be victims (Perrin et al., 2019; World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). According to Oparinde and Matsha (2021), GBV encompasses a wide range of physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm, including domestic abuse, sexual harassment, rape, and human trafficking.

Human rights breaches affect both men and women, but the impact varies depending on the victim's gender due to the patriarchal norms and stereotypes imposed by society (Muluneh et al., 2020). Thusi and Mlambo (2023) argue that these long-standing patriarchal practices encourage men to suppress their emotions and show no vulnerability, leading to significant underreporting of male abuse by women. Arguably, Leburu-Masigo et al. (2019) contend that despite considerable progress by South Africa in commitment to eliminating gendered violence, the problem persists because the focus is solely on women, obscuring the fact that gendered violence can affect anyone of any gender. Thus, Kasa and Saunders (2022) argue that these laws and legislations seem biased toward women, contributing to the exclusion and underreporting of male violence.

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2019) estimated that globally, 01 in 03 women (30%) had experienced either physical or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. According to Perrin et al. (2019), gendered violence against women remains a significant global issue, particularly in South Africa. According to Govender (2023), South Africa is the "rape capital of the world," citing 10,818 reported cases of rape against women perpetrated by men in the first quarter of 2022. Thus, in curbing these incidents of violence, Kasa and Saunders (2022) reveal that South African President Ramaphosa signed The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 13 of 2022 (Government Gazette, 2022a), The Criminal and Related Matters Amendment Act 12 of 2022 (Law Library, 2022), and The Domestic Violence Amendment Act 14 of 2022 (Government Gazette, 2022b), which all seeks to strengthen protections against women and children, thereby improving victims' chances of obtaining justice. However, this designation is problematic as it shifts focus away from the broader issue of rape as a crime committed against individuals of all genders, with undue emphasis on women as the sole victims. According to Matumbu (2023), contrary to what other scholars posit, men are the only perpetrators of gendered violence; women, too, might be instigators or perpetrators. To this end, this study investigated the ambiguities of gendered violence by deconstructing the one-sided narrative that portrays men solely as perpetrators through exploring the role played by the South African Police Service (SAPS) in mitigating this social ill.

2. Literature review

2.1. Commitment to a safe South Africa: The Role of SAPS

According to Muluneh et al. (2020), human rights violations are committed against individuals despite their gender; however, the impact and attention differ based on the victim's gender, which may result from patriarchal norms and stereotypes imposed by society. This, according to Thusi and Mlambo (2023), is based on the long-standing patriarchal practices that encourage men to suppress their emotions and show no vulnerability, leading to significant underreporting of male abuse by women. The South African Police Service (SAPS) is a national police service committed to ensuring a safe and secure environment for everyone in South Africa (South African Police Service [SAPS], 2022). Section 205 of the South African Constitution (The Constitution), which provides the main objectives of SAPS, shows that they include but are not limited to preventing, combating, and investigating crimes, upholding and enforcing the law, maintaining public order, and protecting South African citizens and their property.

Moreover, The Constitution further mandates the SAPS to respect and protect the rights of all citizens. Chapter 11 of the Constitution provides that SAPS is responsible for combating and investigating crime, maintaining public order, protecting all the citizens of South Africa, and upholding and enforcing the law. According to Nkosikhona et al. (2023), SAPS must prevent and intervene in gendered violence, although they are mostly regarded as ineffectual. According to Olutola and Bello (2016), trust is one key concept reinforcing the bond between the police and the public. The police are the first faces of law enforcement, initiating the criminal justice process, and hence have substantial responsibility for maintaining peace and order (Ndofirepi, 2023). Trust is built during service delivery, and fair and effective service delivery enhances the chances of trust between the public and SAPS (Burger, 2016). However, Ndofirepi (2023) argues that some factors that diminish trust between the public and SAPS are unprofessional conduct, favoritism, and intimidation.

Although victims are expected to seek assistance from the police, concerns have been raised about the quality of services provided by the SAPS (Cronje & Vilakazi, 2020; Oparinde & Matsha, 2021; Selowa et al., 2022). Selowa et al. (2022) suggest that men are often reluctant to report gendered violence incidents because they fear that authorities will disregard or mock them. This mistrust and reluctance may be attributed to South African laws and legislation that are biased towards women, contributing to the underreporting of male violence (Kasa & Saunders, 2022). Despite laws and codes of practice being in place, SAPS officers may lack the competence to deal with gendered violence, resulting in survivors of this social ill-being being hesitant to report cases to the police due to various reasons, which may be inclusive of mockery and secondary victimization (Cronje & Vilakazi, 2020; Govender, 2023; Nkosikhona et al., 2023; Oparinde & Matsha, 2021). Moreover, Malik and Nadda (2019) posit that regardless of their commitment to protecting citizens, police officers continuously re-assault victims of gendered violence when reporting incidents, contradicting their duties. Nkosikhona et al. (2023) opine that this is demonstrated by their refusal to assist survivors who contact them seeking aid in obtaining resources, such as finding a domestic violence shelter, as well as their probing questions that may be triggering to the victim. Mpatheni and Mlamla (2022) further posit that men who undergo gendered violence receive less attention and support than women, resulting in their cases being unsolved. Moreover, De Sousa (2022) contends that culture, patriarchy, and masculinity play a crucial role in men not reporting their victimization.

2.2. Culture

Johnson (2019) describes culture as the information, beliefs, morality, laws, and customs a person acquires while living in a society. Puzio and Best (2020) posit that culture is a significant determinant of gender norms, attitudes, and expectations placed on people based on their sex or gender. De Sousa (2022) argues that it has been considered taboo for men to be victims of violence perpetrated by women; this is mainly due to this embedded culture and beliefs in society, which stipulate that a woman cannot violate men as this contravenes the stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity. To reinforce this argument, Tshilongo (2023) states that the nature of gendered violence in South Africa stems from the complex interplay of culture, patriarchy, and toxic masculinity.

2.3. Patriarchy and masculinity

Patriarchy refers to the belief that women in South African society are inferior to men (Anwana et al., 2024; Cislighi & Heise, 2020; Thobejane et al., 2018). According to Thobejane et al. (2018), this belief has directly encouraged men to suppress their feelings and always display a strong personality, conforming to the societal standards of masculinity, which defines them as the most substantial group in society. As a result of this social norm, male victimization is stigmatized (Cislighi & Heise, 2020). This stigmatization results in men feeling ashamed and less masculine, making them reluctant to report abuse or ask for assistance because they worry about appearing weak or unmanly (Clatterbaugh, 2018). Consequently, with men being encouraged to be dominant and strong, interventions and safety measures to prevent crime and enhance safety and security within society are always focused on women, leading to men being side-lined (Kambouri-Danos & Evans, 2019).

2.4. Reason for men's failure to report

Extensive literature shows that various factors contribute to men's inability to report gendered violence meted out against them (Cronje & Vilakazi, 2020; Oparinde & Matsha, 2021; Selowa et al., 2022). Despite laws and practices in place, culture and norms may influence their implementation, causing government employees to lack the necessary competence to effectively handle incidents of gendered violence (Cronje & Vilakazi, 2020). Selowa et al. (2022) suggest that men are hesitant to report incidents of gendered violence due to fear of being mocked and disregarded by the authorities. Oparinde and Matsha (2021) argue that survivors of gender-based violence often hesitate to report cases to the South African Police Service due to the fear of stigmatization, as it is considered taboo for a man to show vulnerability.

2.5. Theoretical framework: Person-in-environment

The person-in-environment guides the research study as a theory that explores the significance of comprehending individuals and their behavior within their environment. This theory is rooted in ecological and general systems theories, viewing individuals and environments as constant interaction and adaptation. Taking a holistic view of individuals' and families' bio-psychosocial development within cultural, historical, communal, and societal contexts, the theory maintains that behavior is a product of the individual in conjunction with their environment (Fono & Kasa, 2024). It is a core principle in social work practice. It allows social workers to focus on interactions between individuals and systems within the social environment to promote social justice and challenge social inequalities and injustices. Furthermore, this approach provides a more appropriate framework for assessing individuals and their problems. In the context of addressing and understanding gender-based violence against

men, this theoretical lens equips researchers with a multifaceted view by recognizing the social, cultural, and environmental drivers of violence, enabling social workers to take corrective measures to intervene.

3. Research methodology

The study used qualitative methods, applying a case study as a suitable research design to investigate and thoroughly understand gendered violence's complexities. This design was ideal for unpacking the nuances of this social ill. The study further used suitable qualitative data collection methods, which are interviews that took a duration of 30 to 45 minutes, and observations to gain pertinent information that will assist in understanding men's experiences of gendered violence perpetrated by women.

The study took three months and was conducted in Bityi, Eastern Cape, Mthatha, within the King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality of South Africa. The data was gathered from a purposefully selected sample of 12 participants, both male and female, aged 24 to 49, across different employment statuses. This age group was specifically targeted to explore the role of women in gendered violence under the assumption that individuals within this range are likely to be in intimate or marital relationships. The study aimed to ensure participant relevance while avoiding data redundancy by opting for a small, focused sample, prioritizing data richness and saturation.

A non-probability snowball sampling technique was utilized as it is effective for researching sensitive topics like gendered violence, and it fosters trust and rapport among participants while ensuring the study's representativeness. The study used thematic analysis to interpret the data collected, carefully scrutinizing the recordings and comments to uncover the challenges and experiences shared by the participants. This methodology underscores the study's commitment to finding the complex dynamics of gendered violence through a detailed and empathetic lens.

4. Presentation of findings and interpretation of findings

This study investigated the complexities behind the one-sided perception of gendered violence against men. The interviews were conducted in Bityi, and the primary criterion for selecting the participants was men who have experienced gendered violence. The study notes the silenced reality of male-gendered violence victims. Four significant themes with subthemes emerged. One theme underscores the role played by SAPS in combating gender-based violence. Moreover, the study addresses the issue of reporting gendered violence. The data is presented in direct quotes from the participants.

The findings revealed that instances of gendered violence are indeed present among men, although some men find it challenging to acknowledge experiencing gendered violence from their partners openly. Gendered violence experienced by men encompasses emotional, physical, financial, and sexual violence, yet men themselves rarely report such incidents. Participants in the study mentioned that men rarely report gendered violence to law enforcement due to the associated stigma and perpetuation of masculine stereotypes. Consequently, gendered violence against men is frequently underreported and overlooked.

Mbandlwa (2020) states that studies on men's experiences of gendered violence have historically focused on its impact on societal expectations and stereotypes surrounding masculinity. For instance, Yagi et al. (2022) interviewed male victims of violence and revealed the entrenched beliefs in male strength, dominance, emotional control, stoicism, and self-

sufficiency. These perceptions significantly influence how men perceive themselves as victims of gendered violence.

Various factors contribute to the underreporting of gendered violence against men, encompassing cultural norms and gender disparities. Mpatheni and Mlamla (2022) contend that cultural beliefs often justify violent behaviors. Participants in the study emphasized that societal expectations dictate that men are perceived as strong, fostering a culture of silence around gendered violence against men. These entrenched cultural norms establish standards for how men should react to gendered violence, resulting in diminished reporting of such cases. Thus, this study reveals that while gendered violence against men has long been present, it has not received the same attention as violence against women. The study condemns society's norm of encouraging silence amongst male victims and further advocates for scholarly examination to illuminate its prevalence and advocate for gender-inclusive interventions. The researchers have thoroughly interpreted and analyzed the results of their study. To ensure a comprehensive analysis, themes and sub-themes were identified through a rigorous examination of the data. Furthermore, they employed thematic analysis to interpret the collected data, scrutinizing the recordings and comments to unearth the challenges and experiences shared by the participants.

Biographical information of participants

The study involved 12 participants, including males and females between the ages of 24 and 48. Out of the 12 participants, seven were males and five were females. All participants were of Black ethnicity and South African descent, with one being Pakistani. Three participants were married, and nine were single.

Table 1

Investigating the SAPS Documented Cases of Gendered Violence Against Men

Theme	Sub-theme	Probes/Categories
Investigating the SAPS documented cases of gender violence against men	Are statistics of gendered violence against men alarming?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency • Statistics of gendered violence against men • Perception and influence on practice

Source. The data are from "Investigating the ambiguities of gender-based violence: deconstructing the one-sided narrative in bityi location under the king sabata dalindyabo local municipality in the eastern cape" by Z. Fono, H. Mqoboli, B. Mveyishi and T. Dutywa, 2023. Unpublished manuscript.

Frequency and statistics of gendered violence against men

When interviewed, South African Police Service officials indicated that they do not receive as many gendered cases against men as they do against women. The official mentioned that when comparing and analyzing the statistics they have, 01 in 10 men report when he is being abused, whereas 08 in 10 women report when they are abused. The officer further mentioned that an alleged explanation for underreporting was that charge officers ridicule and mock men who report. The official declared that the statement or explanation was misleading because they attended to the case when a person came to report.

The police officer stated emphatically:

Participant 4: "There is never a day where we treat a case differently because of the individual's gender".

Participant 4: “(*Amadoda awaketh*) meaning that men do not speak up”.

SAPS continuously declares that they attend to cases without an exception of an individual’s gender, contradicting literature by Mpatheni and Mlamla (2022); Dim and Lysova (2022) opines that, inevitably, gendered violence against men does not receive the same level of attention as violence against women, as a consequence, current numbers or statistics do not fully reflect the true scope of gendered violence in South Africa.

Perception and influence on practice

The SAPS officials shared their perception of gendered violence against men as an incident that came to them as a shock. This is owed to the belief that women are more vulnerable as compared to men, and this belief is proven to be accurate by the statistics they have.

The official went as far as saying:

Participant 4: “*A man can be victimized by a woman only when a weapon threatens him; other than that, a man can always fight for himself and overpower a woman*”.

The remarks made by the police officer are explained by Durham (2020) in an argument that gendered violence against men is believed to be underreported because of societal expectations of masculinity, namely that men are more potent than women, and because gendered violence against men is frequently ignored, especially when there is no weapon or dangerous object involved. Holt-Lunstad (2020) further argued that when it came to reporting abuse, male victims found the police unhelpful and unwilling to assist male victims; instead, they are mocked or accused of being the “actual perpetrator”.

Summary

The SAPS official revealed their perspective of gendered violence against males as a shocking incidence due to the evident escalating scourge of gendered violence against women in South Africa. This has overshadowed gendered violence against men and sent a message that women are the only ones who suffer from this social ill. The official stated that, while it is culturally foreign for men to be victimized by women, they non-judgmentally assist the individual. However, the statement contradicts the literature and the experiences of the study’s participants.

The officials have declared that they have noticed an overwhelming rate of underreporting by men who are victims of gendered violence, and this is due to an alleged notion that police are unhelpful when it comes to males being victims of gendered violence; instead, victims experience secondary victimization. The official further stated that men who are victims often fail to classify their own experiences as criminal behavior because they want to protect their dignity, which is defined by society.

Recommendations

✓ Upon examining the complexities inherent in gendered violence and the findings presented, the investigators contend that effectively addressing this societal issue requires a shift from entrenched gendered norms and cultural expectations based on gender or sex;

✓ These entrenched norms and expectations act as significant impediments to progress and have a profound impact on the development of legal frameworks and policies aimed at eradicating gendered violence;

✓ As noted in a prior chapter, President Cyril Ramaphosa enacted gendered violence Acts into law, emphasizing the government’s enhanced protective measures for women and children based on their perceived heightened vulnerability.

However, the researchers recommend that policy frameworks and legislative measures should adopt an inclusive approach, extending protection and support to all individuals identified as victims of gendered violence, regardless of their gender.

5. Conclusion

Gendered violence is often interpreted as violence against women, which indirectly affects men's rights. Scholars have primarily focused on men's roles as the primary perpetrators of such violence, often overlooking the factors that contribute to it. Additionally, men who experience gendered violence receive less attention than women due to societal and legal biases favoring women. The study revealed that gendered violence against men by women is perceived as a taboo issue, leading men to remain silent out of fear of mockery from the community, peers, and police officials. Clatterbaugh (2018) suggests that this perception is exacerbated by toxic masculinity, which is characterized by male traits that negatively impact male victims.

Furthermore, gendered violence against men remains underreported, and this may be attributed to victims failing to classify their experiences as illegal, often downplaying them as a typical coping mechanism used by men who have experienced gendered violence (De Sousa, 2020; Thobejane et al., 2018). Men downplay their experiences to protect their ego and dignity defined by societal norms (Malik & Nadda, 2019). Ultimately, gendered violence against men is often overlooked because the predominant focus is on victims who are women and girls. Therefore, to effectively tackle or address gendered violence against men, society needs to move towards eliminating gendered norms and cultural expectations that have been 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 gendered violence, 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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