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Gender-Based Violence: Sociocultural Barriers to Men speaking up and Seeking Help in South Africa

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Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) includes, but is not limited to, physical, sexual, psychological, and other threats, coercion, economic harm, etc. Because of their gender placement in society, men are frequently associated with being the perpetrators.. Therefore, using the term “gender-based” reflects the unequal power relationships between the genders, which are entrenched in all societies. It portrays the male gender as being the aggressor and the more powerful, endowed, and opportune in society. This article examines and speculates on the notion that men are sometimes the victims of gender-based violence and women are the perpetrators. Mobilising a secondary data methodology through a systematic review approach, the article consulted electronic resources such as EBSCOHOST, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. The articles consulted ranged from 1996 to 2022, were searched from a global perspective, especially the West, and finally narrowed down to South Africa. JSTOR and Google Scholar produced 95% of the search results, though Google Scholar was most dominant. The key words and phrases used for the search were centred on foregrounding the problem of male GBV victims and their reluctance to speak up and seek help. The inclusion criteria focused on males who suffered violence at the hands of female perpetrators. Male to female violence was excluded. The study concluded that there is a need for society, especially the police organisation to recognise violence against men as a social problem that requires urgent help. It also suggests that counsellors be set up for men in remote places who are losing their self-confidence and esteem in relationships, family setting, and society. It also recommended that South African men need to be encouraged by the media and the Civil Society Organisation to speak up and seek help so that they can maintain their sociocultural prestige, and manage social cohesion in the family and society.

Keywords: *Male victims, Gender-based Violence, Violence against males, Police perception, Societal perception, Media*

Introduction

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) remains a deep-rooted problem in South Africa. According to reports by FACTSHEET¹, South Africa's crime statistics for 2019/20¹, the SAPS crime statistics report for the period 2019/2020 stated that more than 146 sexual offences were committed every day, equaling a total of 53,293 sexual offences; and the majority

¹ <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/factsheets/factsheet-south-africas-crime-statistics-201920> - Accessed 27th August, 2022

being rape, and these are only the reported cases. According to Dlamini (2021), GBV recorded an increase during the COVID-19 lockdown, compounding an already bad situation in South Africa, which is said to have the highest statistics of GBV in the world, including rape and domestic violence (Onyejekwe, 2004). From these studies and statistics, it is easier to conclude that men are perpetrators since almost all the cases, as reported by bodies like the Africa Health Organisation in their 2021 factsheet report² state that 51% of women in South Africa say that they have experienced GBV, with 76% of men saying they have perpetrated GBV at one stage in their lives.

A study by Van Niekerk, Tonsing, Seedat, Jacobs, Ratele, and McClure (2015) shows that men have shorter lifespans and lose more years of their lives to death or disability than women do, and it is because, according to the study, male figures are more prone to violence as a result of their lifestyles, and that masculine social standards have associated male behaviour with aggression and violent behaviour. Conversely speaking, women will be softer and less prone to violence and injury due to their delicate nature and careful behaviour. This notion has cemented a general belief that women are more likely to be victims of violence, including GBV (Van Niekerk *et al.*, 2015). This perception has also created a normative response to men being more involved in violence and crime by virtue of their masculine inclinations and females being the victims.

However, men in many cultural settings, particularly in South Africa, are expected to accept the phenomenon of gender-based violence against them with calm, particularly in public, due to their masculinity. But the reality of violent acts against them is deepening, and it is affecting their mental health and distorting their roles in the family setting and society. This position agrees with Thobejane, Mogorosi, and Luthada (2018) that more research should be carried out on women's violence against men, as it will encourage social cohesion and harmony in the family and society if both genders are conscious of equal public opprobrium and consequences. This will be realised if the police organisation responds to distress calls by men as they do with those of women.

Progressively, Thobejane *et al.* (2018) agree that society is getting a better understanding and appreciation of men's victimisation. The phenomenon has evolved over time, and it is gradually recognising males as both victims and perpetrators of GBV; however, more needs to be

² <https://www.aho.org/news/gender-based-violence-fact-sheet-south-africa/> - 27th August 2022

done. This development is critical to the study of crime and victimisation as it will offer researchers a platform to look into victimisation from different dimensions and perspectives. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to contribute to the research and conversation about GBV against men and to advance the understanding of the victim's normatively understood identity, with the objectives of articulating gender-based violence as a crime against males by females, the perception of the police, family, and society towards male victims, and the challenges faced by them when reporting.

Hence, this paper mobilised a secondary data approach by retrieving literature from electronic databases including Ebscohost, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. A study done by Johnston (2017) states that the secondary research approach is a method whose time has come and is therefore relevant in any rigorous research endeavour. The articles consulted ranged from 1996 to 2022, were searched from a global perspective, especially the West, and finally narrowed down to South Africa, though there is a dearth of literature exploring the African and indeed the South African experience. JSTOR and Google Scholar produced 95% of the search results, though Google Scholar was most dominant. The key words and phrases used for the search were centred on foregrounding the problem of male GBV victims and their reluctance to speak up and seek help. The inclusion criteria focused on males who suffered violence at the hands of female perpetrators. Male-to-female violence was excluded. The articles were reviewed to ensure their relevance.

The nature of violence

In their work on violence, Rutherford, Zwi, Grove, and Butchart (2007) described violence, operationally speaking, as the use of force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy an individual or group. The World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2014 defined violence as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation. The adoption of the WHO definition was influenced by the work of Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, and Zwi (2002), which also influenced Shukla, Deep, Srikanth, and Shukla (2022) in violence against doctors.

According to Felson (2002), “violence against men” is a term for violent acts that are disproportionately or exclusively committed against men or boys. Lewis (2009) and Young (2014) believe that men are overrepresented as perpetrators of violence. More specifically, sexual violence against men is treated differently, in that the response by police authorities is much slower, or non-existent in some cases, than that committed against women in most societies, and is largely unrecognised by international law (Stemple, 2008).

However, the general perception in society is that men are prone to crime because it is part and parcel of their daily lifestyle and activities, which they participate in. According to Hindelang *et al.* (1978: 245),

...individuals who spend more time exposed to high-risk times, places, and people, are more vulnerable to potential offenders and thus at a higher risk of being victimised.

This viewpoint is also shared by Turanovic, Reisig, and Pratt (2015) and is based on two fundamental assumptions about the nature of criminal victimisation. The first assumption is that victimisation occurs when motivated offenders, appropriate targets, and a lack of capable guardians collide in time and space, while the second assumption is that certain behavioural routines are riskier than others because they increase contact with potential offenders, increase a target's attractiveness, and/or decrease guardianship.

Furthermore, there is a concept that argues for and sees male aggression as part of male masculinity. For instance, where women are investigated as perpetrators, feminist activists advance a gendered ideology that justifies women perpetrating violence under the guise of self-defense rather than abuse, and this assumes a generalisation that women perpetrate crime for their own protection.

Sexual violence and victimisation

By theory, legally, and through societal standards, incidents of sexual violation are exclusive to women. According to feminist theory, sexual victimization is the result of socially constructed male power and privilege being used to subordinate women (Stemple, Flores, and Meyer, 2017; cited in Brownmiller, 1975). This male-on-female construct continues to be the dominant paradigm for understanding and addressing sexual victimization.

Men are commonly assumed to perpetrate sex offences against women or children because of masculine ideologies that automatically deem them to be perpetrators rather than victims. In most societies, sexual violence against men is treated differently than sexual violence against women, and it is largely unrecognised by international law (Drumond, Zalewski, Prugel, and Stern, 2018), however, women also commit sex offences (Budd and Bieri, 2020). Though uncommon, it does not necessarily indicate that it does not happen, but rather that most cases have gone unreported by the male victim.

Feminist movements have developed strategies to address the violations of female victims of sexual violence over time. As positive as this may appear, it has isolated male victims and further discouraged them from coming forward with their experiences. However, evidence has emerged from the realisation that all genders can experience sexual violence as victims or perpetrators. For instance, an estimated 0.9% of men in England and Wales (about 140,000), aged 16 to 59, experienced sexual assault in the year ending March 2018³.

According to Cohen (2014) and reinforced by Javaid (2017), male rape victims report considerably lower rates than female rape victims. As a result, it is critical for scholars to interrogate the police organisation and other volunteer agencies' opinions, beliefs, attitudes, ideas, and perspectives on male rape to ascertain if they believe men can be rape victims; how many male rape victims there are compared to the female gender; and how they handle male rape victims. If male rape myths exist in police organisations and voluntary agencies, it is critical to expose them, and seek to dispel such misconceptions because they lead to male not speaking up, which lead under-reporting. So, it is unclear from this and other existing research whether low reporting reflects police organisation and volunteer agency views regarding male rape or whether it is related to other factors, such as societal responses to male sexual violence, in other words, victims' worries about friends and family finding out.

Female sex offenders, according to researchers, may go undetected because they engage in offending behaviours while performing traditional care-giving tasks, such as bathing an infant (Almond, McManus, Giles, and Houston, 2017). Furthermore, the scarcity of research in this area can be attributed to the low prevalence of female sex offenders in the

³https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/783996/Male_Victims_Position_Paper_Web_Accessible.pdf- Accessed 3rd June, 2022

criminal population. According to recent international statistics, females are responsible for only 4 to 5% of all sexual offences (Cortoni & Hanson, 2005; Cortoni, Hanson, & Coache, 2010). These figures show a slight increase in the reported offences, as previous estimates indicated that women made up less than 1% of all rape and sexual assault offenders (Greenfeld, 1997).

Perceptions of the police and society against male victims

The gendered ideology of what a victim ought to be has created a limited environment for male victims to seek help. In a study by Douglas and Hines (2011), 302 men who sought assistance for victimisation in the United States of America were approached for the survey, and they rated the police and domestic violence (DV) agencies as least helpful in their support services to them. The men were more positive about their experiences seeking help from family, friends, and mental health and medical providers. Male victims, on the other hand, were more likely to complain about a lack of investigation into their situation; they reported that when they called the police during an incident of female perpetrated violence, the police did not always respond or act on their report (Douglas and Hines, 2011). This initial effort at reporting the cases was frustrated by a lack of interest in their reports, and that has further pushed them into silence and caused them to suffer therefrom.

In another study, conducted by Buzawa and Hotaling (2006) and reiterated by Dim and Lysova (2021), it was stated that male victims were less likely than female victims to be given information about available services, including restraining orders. By virtue of understanding masculine standards, this indicates that there is a lack of understanding when victimisation is perpetrated against males. As a result, this may be a significant reason for the underreporting of violence by male victims.

Seeking help as a victim is a complex behaviour that is influenced by a variety of individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors like individual trauma histories, cultural and religious beliefs, economic resources, and awareness of formal support locations (Addis and Mahalik, 2003; Ansara and Hindin, 2010; Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, and Weintraub, 2005). Therefore, men are less likely than women to seek help for a wide range of physical and mental health problems, and men are less likely to seek help for problems that society considers non-normative for men (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Hammer et al., 2013; Syzdek et al., 2014; Machado et al., 2016). Men appear to be losing their

voices because they are not only afraid of being victimised by the media and feminist activists, even when the violence is directed at them, but they are also expected to bear their burden with calm. This is not only a torment to their mental health, but it is also making them lose their cultural standing, and become permissive on any issue in the family and society for fear of being tagged an aggressor.

Exploring hegemonic masculinity as a theory for interrogating violence against men

The paper mobilised hegemonic masculinity as a theory to interrogate violence against men within the context of GBV in order to appreciate the phenomenon of gender based violence against men.

The theory of hegemonic masculinity found immediate application in the late 1980s and early 1990s when research on men and masculinity was establishing itself as an academic field with the aid of conferences, the publication of textbooks like Brod (1987), and several journals, and it became a rapidly expanding research agenda spanning the social sciences and humanities. In education studies, the concept of hegemonic masculinity was used to understand the dynamics of classroom life, including patterns of resistance and bullying among boys (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The concept has also been mobilised in research on criminology as well as in the media, and it has made an influential footprint there.

Studies have demonstrated that men commit more traditional crimes as well as more serious crimes than women. Research in criminology shows how specific patterns of aggression are linked with hegemonic masculinity, not as a mechanical effect caused by hegemonic masculinity but through the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity. The theory of hegemonic masculinity was also used in studies on specific crimes committed by men, such as rape in Switzerland, murder in Australia, football hooliganism, white-collar crime in England, and assaultive violence in the USA (Messerschmitt, 1993).

The theory has also been applied to the study of male media representations, such as the interaction of sports and war imagery (Jansen and Sabo, 1994). Because hegemonic masculinity aided researchers in making sense of the diversity as well as the selectiveness of images in mass media, this has led to media researchers beginning to identify and promote relationships between representations of various masculinities. The most common perception popularised through the media was the

unacceptability of masculine males portraying vulnerability, especially on issues relating to male victimization. The Mass media generated stringent ideologies that were promoted through hegemonic masculine standards labelling males who expressed vulnerability as stigmatised by society..

Men, according to the argument of the theory, have a persona to maintain within societies, which is validated by hegemonic masculinity (Jewkes, Morrell, Hearn, Lundqvist, Blackbeard, Lindegger, Quayle, Sikweyiya, and Gottzén, 2015). This persona would be broken if a male figure came forward and admitted their victimisation by a female, and this would make them feel delegitimised as males. Some male victims have found that harmful gender stereotypes around masculinity prevent them from discussing these issues or reaching out for help until they are in crisis (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009).

The South African Experience: Victims' Voices Unheard Despite Seeking Help

Thobejane et al. (2018) concluded in a study conducted in Vuwani within the Makhado Local Municipality, Vhembe District in the Limpopo Province, South Africa, that male victims of domestic violence are reluctant to speak up about their experiences for fear of being ridiculed by significant others in society, such as their members, peers and police officials. Though the data from their study showed that domestic violence against men by women is not a new phenomenon in South Africa, it is hardly spoken about. The study confirmed that men too can be victims of domestic violence, but their plight is not made as prominent as that of women victims because of the cultural adage such as *Monna ke nku o llela teng* (“*A strong man must suffer in silence*”) concluded by Thobejane et al. (2018).

In a study titled “Unspoken victims: A national study of male rape incidents and police investigations in South Africa,” Jina, Machisa, Labuschagne, Vetten, Loots, and Jewkes (2020) claimed that while there is a political commitment to acknowledging sexual violence against women as a problem in society, sexual violence against men, such as rape and assault, is rarely acknowledged and researched. They posited that there is a need to address these phenomena, which also demonstrates how vulnerable men are as they are also desirous of seeking help.

Another study by Modau (2016), titled “The Silence of Male Victims in Relation to Domestic Violence in Heterosexual Relationships in Makhado Municipality, Limpopo Province, South Africa: An Exploratory

Study” submits that the current law discriminates against male victims and all the campaigns against GBV are in support of women. The study argues that though men would like to report these cases of violence against them by female, they feel that the authorities will not believe them, and that has hindered them from seeking help.

In their own study, Tan and Kuschminder (2022) introduced an interesting nuance about how male migrants are also victims of GBV in South Africa. Interestingly, most of the perpetrators of violence against migrant men are men themselves. The results of their study demonstrate a high prevalence of GBV among migrants, and in particular among vulnerable migrant groups such as forced migrants and irregular migrants, with an emerging focus on male victims. They concluded that there was a need for GBV research against migrant groups, especially the male to go beyond prevalence reporting to identify risk factors and possible prevention measures by encouraging reporting on their experiences. This way, the government and international agencies will document the cases with a view to introducing and instituting coping mechanisms, and taking action against the perpetrators.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The various studies and literatures cited have revealed a phenomenon in which men rarely want to speak up when they encounter gender-based violence against them by women; this is especially true in cases of Intimate Violent Partner (IVP) because they believe they will not receive justice or sympathy from the police organisation or society. This notion is reinforced by the success feminist activists in South Africa have had in positioning GBV as a violent act against women only, which is also akin to the philosophy of feminist activists in developed western countries.

The male gender in South Africa, which is still holding on to its beliefs and cultural status as the patriarch in the family and society, is now struggling to redefine itself and its role in 21st century South Africa. Perhaps these are the unintended consequences of the activist campaign of the feminist theories, and this has left some men without a voice and lacking in self-confidence and esteem, even in intimate relationships where Intimate Partner Violent (IPV) against men is prevalent through verbal abuse, especially when the man is unemployed or underemployed.

This situation is inimical to family and society cohesion and can affect how a male child grows up and sees himself since there might be

no role model for him to emulate and function in a normal role as the family head as expected culturally and even religiously.

Therefore, African researchers in sociology, psychology, and criminology, gender studies and communication and media studies should research more into GBV against men, not from the perspective of protecting or condoning violence perpetrated by men but from the perspective of promoting social cohesion in the family and society as it affects their cultural and social cohesion.

This paper suggests that civil societies organisations in South Africa should work towards setting up clinics to manage mental health fallouts among men in remote areas seeking help and should also encourage the police to respond to cases of violence reported by men to encourage others to come forward and speak up. This will bring to the forefront the mutual responsibilities and respect both genders have for each other in a relationship, family, or society.

The South African media will need to re-position the portrayal of men as being masculine and stoic, or “super human” who bear all pressures and burden with equanimity and encourage them to tell their stories so that the society may see them as humans with emotions who can also be victims of gender-based violence.. These propositions will encourage male victims to speak and seek help, which is necessary for family and societal formation and cohesion.

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