POLICY PAPER

MAY 2025

JUSTICE DENIED:

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE CRIMES REMAIN UNPUNISHABLE IN SOUTH AFRICA

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35 YEARS

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Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation
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Key Findings:

- **Weak implementation of GBV laws:** Despite the existence of GBV laws and national strategies, enforcement remains inadequate, limiting their effectiveness in protecting survivors and holding perpetrators accountable.
- **Barriers to justice for GBV survivors:** Systemic inefficiencies within the justice system, including delays, procedural complexities and limited capacity, hinder the effective prosecution of GBV cases.
- **Corruption and bias in law enforcement:** Corruption and entrenched biases within law enforcement agencies undermine the fair and consistent application of GBV laws, reducing public trust in the justice system.
- **Limited support for GBV survivors:** Victims/survivors face significant challenges in accessing legal and psychological support, with inadequate mental health services affecting their ability to pursue justice.
- **Impact of unresolved and intergenerational trauma:** A lack of awareness and intervention regarding unresolved and intergenerational trauma contributes to the persistence of GBV, influencing both perpetrators' behaviour and survivors' ability to seek justice.
- **Low legal awareness among communities:** Many community members lack knowledge of their legal rights and the provisions of GBV laws, limiting their ability to report cases and seek protection.
- **Information gaps between courts and law enforcement:** Poor coordination and communication between the courts and law enforcement agencies delay case processing and weaken the delivery of justice for victims/survivors of GBV.
- **Literacy barriers to legal information access:** Low literacy levels in some communities make it difficult for individuals to understand legal information, limiting their ability to engage effectively with the justice system.

Introduction

Women in South Africa face high levels of gender-based violence (GBV) and femicide, akin to statistics recorded in countries at war. Studies show that 51% of women in South Africa have experienced GBV, while 76% of men have admitted to perpetrating violence against women.[1] South Africa is the country with the third highest rape statistics globally, after Botswana and Lesotho.[2]

Our work in communities as the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) has further revealed bottlenecks in access to justice and the fight against impunity on GBV. Most victims/survivors do not trust the criminal justice system, given the high incidence of secondary victimisation and harassment when reporting a case. Women also face corruption that often leads to missing dockets and other court documents, limited knowledge of applicable processes and procedures and a lack of feedback on their cases. Long backlogs at the Legal Aid Board also make justice for most women victims/survivors seem elusive and unattainable.[3]

We hosted community dialogues in four communities in Gauteng province to better understand these challenges and develop more effective solutions.[4] The dialogues, which took place from August to September 2024, brought together over 50 community members per dialogue, including men, women, religious and traditional leaders and stakeholders, to discuss GBV in their communities and issues of access to justice. We also conducted key informant interviews with civil society organisations (CSOs) that support victims/survivors through the criminal justice process.[5] We supplemented this research with a desktop review of justice trends in South Africa.

Drawing on our research, this policy paper examines GBV in the context of the South African criminal justice landscape. It then shares insights from affected community members and civil society actors on the challenges GBV victims/survivors experience in accessing justice and discusses strategies for developing a more victim/survivor-friendly justice system within South Africa.

Key findings highlight systemic barriers such as delays in case processing, inadequate survivor protection mechanisms, and inconsistent enforcement of GBV-related laws. To address these challenges, the paper recommends strengthening survivor-centred legal frameworks, expanding specialised GBV courts, and enhancing collaboration between law enforcement, civil society, and support services to improve access to justice for victims and survivors.

Framing Gender-Based Violence in South Africa

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is one of the leading types of violence in South Africa, affecting one in five women. This figure is reportedly higher in poorer households, where at least one in three women nationwide has reported experiencing physical violence in the home. The World Health Organization estimates that 12.1 women in every 100 000 are killed by an intimate partner in South Africa each year – a figure over five times worse than the global average of 2.6.

In 2022, the Human Sciences Research Council published the findings of the First South African National GBV Baseline Survey, which shows that a significant majority of men – 84.8% – were aware of laws addressing violence against women, indicating that a level of legal knowledge may not translate into changed attitudes or behaviours

1 Mail and Guardian (2020) Gender-Based Violence: online. Available at https://mg.co.za/special-reports/2020-12-04-gender-based-violence/ [accessed 7 May 2025]
2 World Population Review (2023) Rape statistics by country: online. Available at https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/rape-statistics-by-country [accessed 7 May 2025]
3 CSVR (2024) A *Rapid Response: Addressing the Shadow Pandemic of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence within South Africa*. Available at https://www.csvr.org.za/a-rapid-response-addressing-the-shadow-pandemic-of-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-within-south-africa/ [accessed 7 May 2025]
4 The four communities are Orange Farm, Tembisa, Alexandra and Soweto.
5 Key informant interviews were conducted with eight civil society organisations.

towards GBV. The findings suggest a disconnect between awareness of GBV laws and attitudes towards GBV, emphasising the need to address underlying social and cultural factors contributing to GBV.

The South African government and various civil society organisations have recognised the severity of the issue and have implemented programmes aimed at addressing GBV. However, challenges remain in effectively reaching and supporting victims/survivors. Despite having robust laws, policies and a National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSP-GBVF), which led to the establishment of a National Council on GBV, strong institutions to address and respond to the alarming levels of GBV have not translated to a reduction and prevention of GBV in South Africa.

Societal norms, economic disparities and high levels of alcohol consumption, among other factors, influence the prevalence of GBV. South Africa is noted for its high levels of alcohol consumption, which have been linked to increased incidents of domestic violence.[6]

The COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa highlighted the pervasiveness of GBV in the private realm and the everyday challenges that victim/survivors face as a result. Lockdowns led to a significant rise in cases of domestic violence, particularly IPV. Reports indicate that at the start of the first lockdown in March 2020, there were 87 000 cases of GBV and interpersonal violence reported, which is a notable increase from pre-COVID-19 levels.[7]

Despite the reported increase, the number of cases reported to the South African Police Services (SAPS) during the initial months of the lockdown fell. This decline has been attributed to underreporting, as many victims/survivors faced barriers such as fear of retribution from their aggressors, lack of privacy to report incidents and limited access to support services due to lockdown restrictions.[8]

Approximately 1.34 million women in South Africa experienced physical violence and over 432 000 were victims/survivors of sexual violence in 2022.[9] Moreover, many victims/survivors did not report GBV for various reasons, including fear of stigma, lack of trust in the legal system and feelings of shame.

Most GBV research in South Africa s conducted in poor Black communities, with poverty frequently cited as a predictor of violence. However, there is a notable absence of research in other (poor) communities, such as Asian and white communities, which limits understanding of GBV across different socioeconomic contexts.[10] Research is also limited on issues such as workplace sexual harassment, human trafficking, and the intersections of violence against women and children (VAWC) with male homicide. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing more effective interventions and policies. Moreover, the limitations in research are compounded by significant challenges within the criminal justice system, which often hinder effective responses to GBV.

Challenges in the Criminal Justice System

The criminal justice process in South Africa involves several key stages and components designed to address criminal behaviour and GBV:

1. *Reporting the crime:* Victims/survivors or witnesses report the crime to the police. In the context of GBV, this can occur through various channels, including direct reporting at police stations or One-Stop Care

6 CSVR (2023) *Lived Realities and SGBV Responses-synthesis report*. Available at https://www.csvr.org.za/csvr-lived-realities-and-sgbv-responses-synthesis-report/ [accessed 7 May 2025]
7 Ndlovu S, Mulondo M, Tsoka-Gwegweni J & Ndirangu J. (2022) COVID-19 impact on gender-based violence among women in South Africa during lockdown *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 22:6.
8 Ndlovu S, Mulondo M, Tsoka-Gwegweni J & Ndirangu J. (2022) COVID-19 impact on gender-based violence among women in South Africa during lockdown: A narrative review. *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 26(7), 59–71.
9 HSRC (2024) The First South African National Gender-based Violence Study, 2022: A Baseline Survey on Victimisation and Perpetration: online. Available at https://hsrc.ac.za/media-pack-first-south-african-national-gender-based-violence-study-2022/ [accessed 7 May 2025]
10 Amisi MM, Vanyoro K, Archibald T, Gould C and Mulondo M(2021) How violence against women and children is represented in research: online. Available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep62692 [accessed 7 May 2025]

Centres (OSCCs). OSCCs are integrated service facilities designed to provide comprehensive support for survivors of gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence. These centres offer medical care, psychosocial support, legal assistance and law enforcement services in a single location, reducing secondary victimisation and improving access to justice.[11] As of 2023, South Africa has established 63 Thuthuzela Care Centres (TCCs) across the country.[12]

2. *Investigation:* Once a report is made, the police investigate. This may involve gathering evidence, interviewing witnesses or collecting statements from the victim/survivor and the accused.

3. *Arrest:* If there is sufficient evidence, the police may arrest the suspect. The arrest must follow legal protocols to ensure the rights of the accused are upheld.

4. *Charging:* After the investigation, the police and the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) decide whether to charge the suspect with a crime. This involves determining if there is enough evidence to proceed with prosecution.

5. *Bail proceedings:* If charges are filed, the court decides whether the accused may be released on bail, depending on factors such as flight risk, the severity of the crime and whether release on bail would defeat the ends of justice.

6. *Trial:* If charges are filed, the case goes to court. The accused has the right to a fair trial, which includes the right to legal representation. The prosecution will present evidence and witnesses for the court's consideration, followed by the defence doing the same.

7. *Judgment and sentencing:* After considering the evidence, the court delivers a judgment. If the accused is found guilty, the court will impose a sentence, which can range from fines to imprisonment, depending on the severity of the crime and mitigating or aggravating circumstances.

8. *Appeal and review:* Both the defence and the prosecution have the right to appeal the judgment or the sentence if they believe the court applied the law or interpreted the facts incorrectly. Should either party believe that the court violated principles of legality or procedural fairness, they may apply to review the judgment.

9. *Post-conviction:* If the accused is convicted, they may serve their sentence in prison or under other correctional supervision.

The Service Charter for Victims of Crime in South Africa outlines the following specific rights for victims/survivors of crime:

1. *The right to be treated with fairness and with respect for dignity and privacy:* Victims/survivors have the right to be attended to promptly and courteously, and to be treated with respect by all service providers.

2. *The right to offer information:* Victims/survivors can provide information during the criminal investigation and trial, and their contributions will be considered by the police, prosecutors and correctional services.

3. *The right to receive information:* Victims/survivors have the right to be informed about the progress of their case and any relevant developments.

4. *The right to protection:* Victims/survivors are entitled to measures that ensure their safety and protection from further harm.

11 Lekakeny R N (2018) 'One Stop Centres' and state accountability for sexual violence against women: comparing service integration models in Kenya and South Africa. University of Cape Town. Available at https://open.uct.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/10b25044-1863-4ba9-8890-8efc39a7afb7/content [accessed 7 May 2025]

12 NPA (2023) List of Thuthuzela Care Centres. Available at: https://www.npa.gov.za/sites/default/files/NPA%20TCC%20List%20of%20TCCs%20-%20Distribution%20by%20District%202023%2002.pdf

5. *The right to assistance:* Victims/survivors have the right to receive support services, including counselling and legal assistance.

6. *The right to compensation:* Victims/survivors can seek compensation for the harm they have suffered as a result of the crime.

7. *The right to restitution:* Victims and survivors have the right to seek restitution from the offender for the losses incurred due to the crime.[13]

The Criminal Procedure Act addresses the treatment of victims/survivors and witnesses during criminal proceedings, reflecting the formal incorporation of some of the above-mentioned principles.[14] Certain measures are legally provided for vulnerable victims/survivors during trial proceedings, such as the option to provide evidence in a separate room via in-camera proceedings; this is to avoid retraumatisation that may result from being confronted by the accused due to having to provide testimony in the same room (usually applicable in cases involving sexual offences). Moreover, the Constitution of South Africa guarantees the right to dignity and privacy.[15]

The effective incorporation of these principles into criminal procedures and practice, however, depends on the adequacy of targeted training of law enforcement personnel, institutional commitment to upholding these principles, oversight mechanisms, the availability of support services and resources for victims/survivors, and societal attitudes towards GBV, among other factors.[16]

The criminal justice system faces many obstacles in the fight against GBV. Interventions, such as arresting offenders, do not necessarily lead to sustainable changes in behaviour or societal attitudes. In some cases, these interventions may even increase the risk of victimisation for women.[17] For instance, when an abusive partner is arrested and later released due to weak enforcement mechanisms, lack of evidence or court delays, the survivor may face retaliation, including escalated violence or threats. This is particularly concerning in cases where perpetrators are primary breadwinners, as their arrest can create economic hardship for victims/survivors, making them more financially dependent and vulnerable.

Additionally, survivors may be pressured or coerced by family or community members to withdraw cases, leading to further intimidation and isolation. In some instances, law enforcement officers themselves may fail to provide adequate protection post-arrest, leaving survivors without proper safeguards against repeat victimisation. The stigma attached to reporting abuse, especially in tightly knit communities, may also result in social ostracisation, with survivors being blamed for their abuser's arrest rather than being supported.

Trial proceedings do not guarantee conviction or sentencing, which may place victims/survivors at risk of further harm, reprisal or victimisation, especially in cases where the victim/survivor pursued criminal charges against an intimate partner. Criminal justice personnel often handle cases inadequately or negligently, with reports indicating that police responses can be slow or ineffective.[18]

The criminal justice system is not always equipped to provide the necessary support to victims/survivors seeking justice. While access to protection orders has been found to reduce violence for some victims/survivors, levels of violence remain relatively high even after such orders are issued. This suggests that the

13 Department of Justice (2024) Service charter for victims of crime in South Africa: online. Available at https://www.justice.gov.za/vc/docs/vc/vc-eng.pdf [accessed 7 May 2025]
14 Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977.
15 The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.
16 Chabaya O, Rember S, Wadesango N and Mafanya Z Factors that inhibit implementation of policies on gender-based violence in schools: A case study of two districts in Eastern Cape Province, South Africa (2009) Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity.
17 Footer K, Windle M, Ferguson L, Hatcher J, Lyons C, Gorin E, Stangle AL, Golub S, Gruskin S and Baral S (2018) A meta-Narrative Literature Synthesis and Framework to Guide Future Evaluation of Legal Empowerment Intervention *Health and Huma Rights* 20:2.
18 Ibid.

current mechanisms may not be sufficient to ensure long-term safety for victims/survivors.

These challenges highlight the need for a more holistic approach that goes beyond punitive measures. Strengthening survivor protection mechanisms, providing economic and psychosocial support, and ensuring swift and effective prosecution are critical to mitigating these risks.

A 2024 Public Protector report on challenges in the justice system relating to GBV reveals maladministration in the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, which has not put adequate measures in place to protect victims/survivors of GBV.[19] It further reveals that the courts inspected were dilapidated and not kept in proper operational condition. The report indicates unnecessary delays in service delivery due to lack of resources and an evident lack of human-resource capacity such as GBV-specialised prosecutors, interpreters and magistrates in rural courts. Finally, the report shows that the assistance provided to applicants to complete forms is inadequate.

In reference to policing, the report notes that SAPS has not put adequate measures in place to respond to incidents of GBV. In some instances, victims/survivors were sent to courts without receiving medical attention. In others, police officers, aware that a criminal offence had occurred, were reluctant to register cases and failed to inform victims/survivors of their rights to institute criminal action, instead referring them to a court to apply directly for a protection order.[20]

As such, delays and mockery of justice foster reluctance among victims/survivors to report cases of GBV.[21] The justice system often fails victims/survivors who do report by dragging out cases over extended periods, causing them to lose hope. Many investigators lack the necessary training to handle GBV cases with the required sensitivity and thoroughness.[22] In some instances, courts appear to trivialise sensitive matters, further discouraging victims/survivors from pursuing justice. Corruption is also a significant barrier, with perpetrators colluding with law enforcement officers to undermine victims/survivors' cases.

Another challenge is that hospitals and clinics frequently fail to provide comprehensive and accurate medical statements, which are crucial for building strong legal cases in GBV matters. Furthermore, issues of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and femicide are often used as political talking points without meaningful action, reducing them to mere slogans and neglecting the urgent need for systemic change. Community people often feel that GBV issues are inadequately addressed, as they are repeatedly let down by failures in service delivery.

Gender-Based Violence from a Community Perspective

Drawing on our community dialogues and civil society interviews as well as previous CSVR research,[23] this section maps out understandings of the drivers and root causes of GBV within communities. It then discusses what community members perceive as the challenges

19 Public Protector Report: Systemic investigation into administrative deficiencies relating to Gender-Based Violence within the South Africa justice System (2024): online. Available at https://www.pprotect.org/sites/default/files/legislation_report/SYSTEMATIC%20INVESTIGATION%20INTO%20ADMINISTRATIVE%20DEFICIENCIES%20RELATING%20TO%20GENDER%20BASED%20VIOLENCE%20WITHIN%20SOUTH%20AFRICA.pdf [accessed 7 May 2025]

20 Ibid.

21 Handy M (2024) A legal empowerment approach to improving access to justice for victim-survivors of sexual and gender-based violence *University of Colombo Review* 5(1).

22 Asia Foundation (2021) Why Accessing Justice is challenging for Victims of Sexual and Gender Based Violence? Available at https://asiafoundation.org/publication/why-accessing-justice-is-challenging-for-victims-of-sexual-and-gender-based-violence/ [accessed 7 May 2025]

23 Brankovic J 2019 What drives violence in South Africa CSVR. Available at https://www.csvr.org.za/research-brief-what-drives-violence-in-south-africa/ [accessed 7 May 2025]. See also Brankovic J, Mphahlele B, Nunu S, Ngxukuma A, Njana N and Sishuba Y (2020) Violence Inequality and Transformation: Apartheid Survivors on South Africa's Ongoing Transition University of the Witwatersrand. Available at https://www.wits.ac.za/coe-human/research/violence-inequality-and-transformation/ [accessed 7 May 2025]

to achieving justice for victims/survivors of GBV. Understanding these perceptions is crucial because it highlights the barriers to justice from a grassroots perspective, which can inform more effective, community-driven interventions and policies aimed at combating GBV and supporting survivors.

Mental Health Issues

Community members revealed that stigma around accessing mental health services is a significant barrier to addressing the mental health crisis in South African communities. Many participants noted that mental health issues are often misunderstood, ignored, or dismissed as personal weaknesses, spiritual failings, or signs of 'madness'. This lack of understanding creates deep-rooted stigma, discouraging individuals from seeking help or even acknowledging their struggles.

The stigma is further reinforced by cultural beliefs that mental health struggles are caused by witchcraft, curses, or a lack of spiritual faith. These misconceptions drive individuals to seek unqualified or informal interventions rather than professional mental health services. Additionally, the lack of accessible and affordable mental health services leaves many without support. For those in need, especially in disadvantaged areas, mental health resources are scarce, underfunded, or located far from communities, creating further barriers to care.

In addition to these challenges, community members highlighted mental health issues as a major contributing factor to the various forms of violence occurring in communities, with many participants describing them as the 'mother of all problems'. Untreated and unaddressed mental health challenges manifest in harmful behaviours, including GBV. The psychological trauma experienced by individuals, whether due to poverty, unemployment, substance dependence or exposure to violence, often goes unacknowledged and untreated, creating a ripple effect that perpetuates cycles of violence.

In many cases, individuals suffering from mental health issues lack access to adequate support systems, such as counselling or therapy, leaving them unable to manage stress, anger and emotional distress in healthy ways. This can result in violent outbursts, abuse, and further psychological harm to others in their households or communities. Women and children are often the most vulnerable to these outcomes.

Mental health issues stemming from toxic and violent living environments, such as those characterised by GBV, are frequently ignored. Children growing up in such spaces experience long-term emotional and psychological harm, which can shape future behaviours and perpetuate intergenerational cycles of violence.

In addition to the aforementioned barriers to accessing justice in South Africa, including corruption, poorly trained personnel, and delays, the stigma surrounding mental health is a significant impediment to addressing this issue effectively within communities.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse emerged as a key driver of violence and instability in communities, with alcohol and drug abuse frequently linked to the rise of GBV, family breakdowns and crime. It was reported that substance abuse is most prevalent among men and young people, particularly unemployed youth, as they cope with poverty, trauma, stress and hopelessness. Many participants described substance abuse as both a symptom of deeper social issues and a destructive coping mechanism.

In environments marked by high unemployment, poverty and limited opportunities, individuals turn to alcohol and drugs to numb their pain or escape their reality. However, this reliance often intensifies violent behaviours, with perpetrators more likely to act out in harmful ways while under the influence. Victims/survivors, particularly women and children, suffer the consequences as violence becomes normalised within families and communities.

The prevalence of alcohol abuse contributes to GBV, with many relationships formed under the influence of alcohol and transactional dynamics, such as exchanging alcohol for sexual favours. In such environments, harmful behaviours, including GBV, may be normalised or dismissed as inevitable consequences of alcohol use. This makes it difficult to build a solid legal case, as

victims/survivors or witnesses under the influence may struggle to recall events accurately. As a result, many victims/survivors feel discouraged from taking action, believing their experiences will not be taken seriously.

Substance abuse not only exacerbates GBV but also contributes to psychological harm. Young people, who often feel neglected due to lack of education and employment, are particularly vulnerable to addiction. In these cases, drugs and alcohol become their 'quick fix' for mental and emotional struggles, perpetuating a cycle of substance dependency and related violence.

Notably, community members emphasised that substance abuse is one of the most profitable and rapidly growing businesses in disadvantaged communities. Illegal alcohol and drug trades are often thriving due to the high demand and lack of economic alternatives for residents. For some families, these businesses represent a primary source of income, creating a complex dynamic where substance abuse is both a lifeline and a destructive force. This normalisation of substance use further entrenches its role as a driver of violence.

The ripple effects of substance abuse include impaired decision-making, increased vulnerability of victims/survivors, and weakened credibility when reporting crimes. Victims/survivors or witnesses under the influence struggle to provide coherent accounts of incidents, weakening legal cases and often leading to impunity for perpetrators.

Perpetrators often exploit the victim's/survivor's vulnerability, particularly in alcohol-related settings. Victims/survivors may fear retaliation or further harm if they report incidents, especially in close-knit or socially interconnected communities. Many victims/survivors lack access to trauma-informed services that understand the intersection of alcohol abuse and GBV. Without such support, navigating the legal system can feel overwhelming and unattainable.

Police officers sometimes act as mediators, discouraging victims/survivors from opening formal cases and instead suggesting family-based resolutions. This undermines the legal process and justice for victims/survivors. As a result, families often resolve cases informally, leaving perpetrators unpunished. This practice exacerbates the vulnerability of victims/survivors and perpetuates cycles of abuse as victims/survivors are afraid of consequences from family members and legal barriers.

Additionally, the combination of substance abuse and economic dependence discourages victims/survivors from seeking help, as financial survival takes precedence over personal safety. In many cases, perpetrators take advantage of intoxicated victims/survivors, further entrenching the cycle of violence.

Socioeconomic Status

The socioeconomic status of communities characterised by poverty, unemployment, gender inequality and educational disparities was identified as a key driver of GBV, creating conditions that perpetuate vulnerability and cycles of abuse. Participants emphasised that poverty and economic dependence are particularly significant factors, especially for women. In many cases, women are financially reliant on their abusers, leaving them with few, if any, alternatives for survival. This economic dependency often forces women to endure abuse silently, as leaving could deprive them and their children of access to necessities like food, shelter and healthcare.

Economic dependence, poverty and illiteracy are also significant barriers to seeking help. Many women, especially young women, are economically dependent on their abusers, which creates a substantial obstacle to leaving abusive situations or seeking justice. Young women, in particular, face heightened risks due to unemployment and limited access to education. Without skills, opportunities, or meaningful work, they are often left in risky positions where they are more susceptible to exploitation and abuse. Many young women enter transactional relationships to survive, exchanging their agency and safety for financial support, which further entrenches power imbalances and exposes them to GBV.

The education and literacy gap further compounds the issue, as many victims/survivors lack awareness of their rights or the legal and support services available to them. Without adequate education, individuals are

often unable to access information that could empower them to seek help or hold perpetrators accountable. This gap also limits women's opportunities for economic independence, leaving them at greater risk of exploitation. Participants pointed out that women in such situations are not only silenced but also often face societal blame, as harmful gender norms dictate that they endure abuse for the sake of family stability.

Gender inequality remains a pervasive issue that intersects with poverty and education, further fuelling GBV in disadvantaged communities. Participants observed that traditional gender roles, which view men as dominant providers and women as submissive caregivers, perpetuate imbalances of power within households and communities. In economically strained environments, this inequality is amplified, as women are often excluded from decision-making processes and left without control over financial resources.

Socialisation processes, traditional gender roles and cultural norms further perpetuate silence around GBV. Women are often conditioned to endure toxic relationships, while families stigmatise those who seek help or expose abuse. The preference for informal, family-based resolutions reinforces cycles of abuse, leaving victims/survivors without justice or support. In these environments, women often choose to remain silent and suffer in isolation to avoid shame and conflict.

Participants stressed that addressing GBV requires tackling its socioeconomic roots. This includes creating economic opportunities for women, promoting education and skills development for young people, and challenging harmful gender norms that perpetuate inequality. Without meaningful interventions to address poverty, unemployment and education gaps, efforts to combat GBV will remain incomplete, as systemic vulnerabilities will continue to expose individuals, particularly women and children, to abuse.

In addition to the aforementioned factors – corruption, poor referral systems for GBV, culture and its socialisation, institutional barriers, and a lack of awareness of laws and legal procedures – also contribute to the challenges victims/survivors face in reporting GBV cases.

Parenting

Child neglect and dysfunctional families were identified as significant contributors to the rise of gangsterism and as key drivers of GBV in communities. Community members highlighted that children who grow up in environments where they experience neglect, emotional abuse or lack of parental guidance are more likely to seek a sense of belonging, acceptance and support elsewhere, often turning to gangs for validation and survival. This neglect, which stems from various factors such as poverty, substance abuse or broken family structures, creates deep emotional voids that children attempt to fill through unhealthy and destructive means.

Negative parenting, including the use of harsh discipline, verbal abuse or exposure to violent behaviours at home, further exacerbates the problem. Children who witness or experience violence within their families often internalise such behaviours, which later manifest in violent tendencies toward others. Boys, in particular, may grow up viewing violence as a means to assert power or dominance, perpetuating cycles of GBV. Similarly, young girls raised in such environments may become desensitised to violence, increasing their vulnerability to abusive relationships later in life.

Reporting Challenges

Many victims/survivors reported feeling dismissed by police officers, who sometimes act as mediators rather than pursuing formal legal processes. Corruption was highlighted as a key challenge, with perpetrators bribing officers to undermine cases.

Fear of retaliation, particularly in close-knit communities, also prevents victims/survivors from coming forward. This fear is exacerbated when formal systems fail to protect victims/survivors, leading to hopelessness and silence. The slow pace of judicial processes discourages victims/survivors from following through. Delays result in emotional exhaustion, financial strain and loss of trust in the justice system.

Limited Support Services

The lack of comprehensive, trauma-informed support services was a recurring theme across the dialogues. Hospitals and clinics often fail to provide critical medical documentation, which is essential for building legal cases. The absence of sensitised healthcare workers further alienates victims/survivors.

Many communities lack shelters, victim/survivor support centres and psychosocial services. Safe spaces where victims/survivors can report, heal and rebuild their lives were identified as a major gap. Most shelters also do not accommodate people with special needs or substance abuse issues and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Conclusion

Community perspectives are essential in understanding the root causes and dynamics of GBV, as they highlight the interconnectedness of mental health, socioeconomic factors, and cultural norms in perpetuating violence. The overall conclusion is that without addressing these root causes, particularly mental health and substance abuse, efforts to combat GBV will remain incomplete. The recommendations below, tailored to specific government institutions and civil society actors, are crucial in addressing these issues and ensuring that victims/survivors can access justice and support.

Recommendations

Recommendation to Government Institutions

Mental Health and Substance Abuse

- Launch national mental health education and awareness campaigns to address misconceptions, reduce stigma, and promote the importance of mental well-being.
- Integrate mental health education into school curriculums, community programmes and local services to raise awareness of its connection to GBV, substance abuse, and other social issues.
- Develop and fund community-based mental health services, such as counselling centres and support groups, to provide accessible, non-judgemental support.
- Establish accessible substance abuse rehabilitation programmes, particularly targeting youth, and offer youth-focused initiatives with constructive coping mechanisms.

Justice System and Law Enforcement

- Raise public awareness about GBV laws and legislation, emphasising the importance of reporting crimes and victims' rights within the justice system.
- Establish community-based legal clinics offering free or low-cost legal advice and assistance for victims/survivors of GBV.
- Train law enforcement officers on trauma-informed approaches to GBV cases to ensure victims/survivors feel safe and supported during reporting.
- Implement monitoring mechanisms to strengthen police officers' accountability, address corruption, and ensure perpetrators are held accountable.

Police and Courts

- Allocate adequate resources to train police and court personnel on human rights, GBV prevention, and response protocols.
- Create safe spaces for victims/survivors to report cases anonymously, reducing fears of retaliation.
- Develop and fund victim/survivor support centres within communities that offer psychological, medical and legal assistance.

Economic Empowerment

- Invest in skills development programmes and economic opportunities for women to reduce their financial dependence on perpetrators.

- Facilitate access to microfinance initiatives and cooperative models for women to foster economic independence and resilience.

Healthcare System

- Train healthcare workers to document injuries accurately and provide comprehensive medical reports to support legal cases.
- Ensure that healthcare facilities are equipped to handle GBV cases sensitively, in collaboration with legal institutions.

Technology and Reporting

- Implement anonymous digital reporting platforms for GBV cases, allowing victims/survivors to report crimes safely and discreetly.
- Use technology to provide updates on cases to victims/survivors and communities, ensuring transparency and trust in the process.

Political Commitment

- Advocate for consistent political commitment to addressing GBV and justice system challenges, including policy reforms that streamline judicial processes and reduce delays.

Recommendations to Civil Society and Community Actors

Mental Health Support

- Establish community-based mental health support groups and counselling services to help individuals address mental health challenges without fear of stigma.
- Encourage local organisations to collaborate in creating safe spaces for open discussions on mental health issues, especially in relation to GBV.

Youth and Education

- Develop mentorship programmes, after-school activities, and safe recreational spaces to engage youth and provide positive role models, reducing the appeal of substance abuse and violence.
- Advocate for school-based GBV prevention programmes, as well as youth-focused education on mental health, substance abuses and healthy relationships.

Parenting Support and Child Welfare

- Establish parenting support programmes to equip caregivers with the skills necessary to nurture and positively engage with their children.
- Promote community-based interventions that address child neglect and support positive parenting practices, reducing the likelihood of intergenerational violence.

Traditional and Faith-Based Leaders

- Engage with traditional and faith-based leaders to challenge harmful cultural norms and practices that perpetuate GBV.
- Encourage these leaders to play a proactive role in promoting justice, supporting victims/survivors, and advocating for fair legal resolutions.

Acknowledgment

The authors are grateful to Jasmina Brankovic and Cathy-Ann Potgieter for reviewing the paper. We also want to thank the community participants for their contributions to this paper.

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