



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Are Police Officers Behind Men' Silence on Gendered Violence Meted Against Them? A Case Study of Bityi A/A in Sabatha Dalindyebo, Mthatha, South Africa

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Jul 12, 2024 Accepted: Sep 7, 2024	Gendered violence is defined as any type of injury, intimidation, coercion, or exploitation directed at someone based on their gender or perceived gender. The victims of gendered violence are commonly women, but it is undeniable that men are also victims of gendered violence. This study focused on unreported cases of men who have experienced gendered violence. Underpinned by the Person-In-Environment Theory, the study adopted qualitative approach and further collected data through semi-structured interview guide from 12 participants. Men have endured a variety of forms of gendered violence, including emotional, physical, verbal, financial and sexual abuse. Findings of this study indicate men do not report gendered violence cases against them due to fear of being mocked by police and be seen as less a man in their communities. The study further recommended that communities need to be taught about how their culture has made men to live with pain and police officers to be trained on how to attend male victims of gendered violence.
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## INTRODUCTION

Gendered violence is defined as any harmful act committed against an individual because of their gender or that disproportionately affects people of a specific gender (Sikweyiya et al., 2020; Wilcox et al., 2021; Nelson, 2021). It encompasses a wide range of behaviours and actions that cause physical, sexual, psychological, or financial harm or suffering. Gendered violence stems from unequal power relations between genders and frequently reflects and reinforces cultural norms and assumptions about gender roles (Wilcox et al., 2021). According to Nelson (2021), it is an expression of the uneven power relations reinforced by societal norms and ideas about authority, domination, and particularly patriarchy. Social institutions use laws, policies, and regulations to formalize these relationships (Sikweyiya et al., 2020). Examples of gender-based violence include physical violence, emotional harm (such as intimidation or embarrassment), economic dependence (such as when a male spouse controls the family's income), and social isolation (such as when a male spouse forbids his wife or partner from contacting her family) (Enaifoghe et al., 2021; Fono & Kasa, 2024; Assaf, 2023).

According to Govender (2023), South Africa is well-known for its high rate of gendered violence, yet most people are only aware of female and child victims. Sinacore et al. (2021) noted that despite the reality that many males are victims of gender-based violence, such incidents are rarely reported. Skamikami et al. (2021) argue that men rarely disclose incidents of gendered violence against them

due to stigmatization and the perpetuation of masculine stereotypes. Selowa et al. (2022) also posit that men are reluctant to report GBV incidents because they feel authorities will disregard or mock them. Various scholars contend that cultural norms play a pivotal role in shaping gender roles, reinforcing the notion that men should be strong and resilient (Thobajane et al., 2018; Keratilo et al., 2022; Thusi & Mlambo, 2023).

Furthermore, the fear of deviating from traditional masculine norms contributes to the reluctance of male victims to report incidents, seek assistance, or openly address their experiences. According to Durham (2020), violence against men is believed to be underreported because of societal expectations of masculinity, namely that men are stronger than women, and because violence against men is frequently ignored, especially when no weapon or dangerous object is involved. When it came to reporting abuse, male victims found the police unhelpful and unwilling to assist them; instead, they were mocked or accused of being the actual perpetrator (Holt, 2019). Mantey and Dzeter (2018) state that norms and masculine expectations contribute to men silently enduring GBV.

The influence of patriarchal beliefs discourages men from publicly expressing pain and reinforces the tendency for male victims to remain silent about their experiences (Thobajane and Luthada, 2019). Men do not report gendered violence against them for various reasons; secondary victimization is one of these reasons (Nqopiso, 2019). Oparide and Matsha (2021) also argue that gender-based violence survivors mostly hesitate to report cases to the South African police service due to fear of how the process will traumatize them and because they do not believe justice will be served. Govender and Masson (2023) state that even though laws and codes of practice are in place, government employees may lack the competence to deal with GBV.

Selowa et al. (2022) further argue that men are reluctant to report GBV incidents because they feel authorities will disregard or mock them. Due to the desire to uphold societal gender norms, men do not report their victimization because they are insecure about living with the humiliation of having been violated. According to Ivkovich, Sauerman, Faull, Meyer, and Newham (2020), police have been known to refuse to assist survivors who contact them seeking aid in obtaining resources, such as finding a domestic violence shelter.

According to Govender (2023), South Africa is known for having a high number of gendered violence cases, but most people are only aware of female and child victims of GBV. Even though many men are victims of GBV, there are few reported cases. There are several reasons why men do not report cases of GBV or open to their loved ones, including culture, norms, secondary victimization, and tradition. Men are expected to behave in certain ways in our societies, making it difficult for them to seek help because they risk being mocked or perceived as less of a man. According to Blesse and Diegmann (2022), police stations are known to be places where people can report any case of violation of their rights, but for men, police stations are the last place they would go for help due to how police officers treat male victims of GBV. This study sought to explore the role played by police officers in silencing men's experiences of gendered violence.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Unearthing gendered violence against men**

According to researchers such as Malinen, VanTassel, Kennedy, MacLeod, and O'Rourke (2023), male victims of gender-based violence often encounter mistrust, ridicule, or disbelief from friends, family, and law enforcement, which can dissuade them from seeking help. Hewitt (2023) posits that the underreporting of male victimization stems from gendered expectations that intensify feelings of shame, emasculation, and internalized stigma. Societal views that prioritize power, masculinity, and invulnerability further deter men from coming forward and requesting assistance (Wheeler, 2022).

Moreover, Machado et al. (2021) argue that the patriarchal paradigm shapes police officers' perceptions of intimate partner violence (IPV) and its victims, contributing to the unfavourable discrimination experienced by male victims. The societal perception of males as economically, socially, and politically dominant also hinders male victims from reporting abuse. Additionally, prevention campaigns and supportive responses, including shelters, are predominantly female-oriented, which can perpetuate men's entrapment in abusive relationships (Gumede et al., 2023).

According to Dim and Lysova (2022), for many victims, the police serve as both their initial point of contact when seeking aid and their opportunity to obtain support. However, men often perceive the judicial system as ineffective and unhelpful, increasing their vulnerability to further victimization. Tshilongo (2023) contends that men who are abused by women are frequently overlooked by the legal system, with women often being released from police custody shortly after arrest. Thobejane et al. (2018) highlight that men who file charges against their spouses for abuse risk losing custody of their children, further discouraging them from seeking police assistance.

Societies continue to believe that women are more caring than men. As a result, the standard view of the feminine gender role prescribes that women should behave in nurturing ways (Heise et al., 2019). Conversely, Kambouri and Evans (2019) argue that men are expected to be leaders by established gender norms. Thus, the conventional concept of the masculine gender dictates that men should be the heads of their households, strong, financially supportive, and responsible for making critical family decisions.

Culture plays a crucial role in shaping gender norms, attitudes, and expectations based on sex or gender (Best & Puzio, 2019). Itulua-Abumere (2013) defines culture as a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms through which individuals communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life. Spence describes culture as what a person acquires while living in society. In African culture, gender is defined according to the social duties, roles, and purposes it serves (Nehamia & Lenkoe, 2023). These roles stipulate that men should be strong, dominant, and assertive, while women should be feminine and submissive (Dratell, 2021; Al-Khresheh, 2023).

Mshweshwe (2020) argues that the nature of gender violence in South Africa stems from the complex interplay of culture, patriarchy, and toxic masculinity. Scholars including Thusi and Mlambo (2023) and Thobejane et al. (2018) contend that culture plays a significant role in the socialization of gender roles, perpetuating views such as "men do not cry" and "men are strong." Consequently, male victims of gender-based violence (GBV) are reluctant to report incidents of domestic violence or seek assistance for fear of being perceived as weak and subjected to mockery.

Furthermore, it has been considered taboo for a man to be a victim of violence perpetrated by a woman. This belief is largely due to the entrenched cultural norms and societal beliefs that stipulate men cannot be violated by women, as this contravenes stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity (Sousa, 2022). Cooper et al. (2018) similarly found that due to these societal and cultural norms, male victims of GBV do not fit within the framework of socially constructed masculinity, which demands that men be strong and tough. This contradiction contributes to the invisibility and underreporting of GBV against men (Kalimaposos et al., 2022).

### **Who protects men against gendered violence?: The role of police officers**

The South African Police Service (SAPS) is the national police service with the vision of creating a safe and secure environment for all people in South Africa (SAPS, 2022; Al-Khresheh, 2022). SAPS is enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa, which mandates them to respect and protect the rights of all citizens. According to Chapter 11 of the Constitution, SAPS has the responsibility to combat and investigate crime, maintain public order, protect all inhabitants of the Republic of South Africa, and uphold and enforce the law.

Despite their duty to prevent and intervene in cases of gendered violence, SAPS is often regarded as ineffectual (Ivkovic et al., 2020). Trust is a key concept that reinforces the bond between the police and the public, (Olutola & Paul, 2016). As the initial faces of law enforcement, the police initiate the criminal justice process and bear substantial responsibility for maintaining peace and order (Singh, 2022). Trust is built through fair and effective service delivery, while factors such as intimidation, favouritism, and unprofessional conduct diminish it (Maile, 2022; Jam et al., 2011). Consequently, there are complaints about the quality of services offered by SAPS, leading to underreporting or withdrawal of cases.

Oparide et al. (2021) argue that gender-based violence (GBV) survivors hesitate to report cases to SAPS due to fears of being traumatized by the process and a lack of hope that justice will be served. Govender and Masson (2023) state that despite existing laws and codes of practice, government employees may lack the competence to deal with GBV. Selowa et al. (2022) further argue that men are reluctant to report GBV events because they fear authorities will disregard or mock them. Societal gender norms make men insecure about reporting their victimization due to the humiliation of having been violated.

Ivkovic et al. (2020) note that police have been known to refuse assistance to survivors seeking aid, such as finding a domestic violence shelter. This behaviour contrasts sharply with SAPS's mandate and re-traumatizes GBV victims when they attempt to report their cases. The belief that GBV is tied to gendered power dynamics, which are deeply embedded in most civilizations, affects how police address GBV. Furthermore, male victims of GBV receive less attention than female victims, causing their cases to remain hidden and unresolved (Mpatheni & Mlamla, 2022).

### **Theoretical framework**

The Person-in-Environment theory is a framework that emphasizes understanding an individual's behaviour within their environment Tyler, (2022). According to Bertalanffy & Dybicz, (2015) it evolved from ecological and general systems theories, focusing on interconnected interactions between individuals and their environments. This approach is central to social work practice, aiming to enhance lives and promote social justice by challenging inequalities and injustices in society. Fundamentally, this approach provides with a more appropriate frame of reference for assessing an individual and their problem. Therefore, in addressing and understanding GBV against men this theoretical lens equips the researchers with understanding of the multifaceted view of GBV by recognising the social, cultural and environmental drivers of GBV against and subsequently, this will allow the social workers to take corrective measures to intervene.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The research utilised a qualitative approach to understand the real world and social phenomena. The study used a case study design, focusing on the specificity and complexity of a particular case or phenomenon. The sample size was chosen to achieve data saturation, quality over quantity, and balance the richness of data with the avoidance of repetitive information. The qualitative approach was chosen for its flexibility, consideration of participants' opinions, and focus on the process rather than outcomes (Kasa, 2021).

The study utilised non-probability sampling, snowball sampling, and semi-structured interviews to study GBV. Data collection involved understanding participants' worldviews and perceptions, with an inductive approach for men experiencing GBV. Qualitative data analysis involved data coding, categorizing, and thematic analysis to identify patterns and draw conclusions. The study aimed to provide a representative and unbiased study on gendered violence.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first tables below show biographical information of the participants that were interviewed when collecting data and the second table shows the thematic findings from the participants.

**Table 1: Biographical information**

Gender	Age	Nationality	Race	Religion	Marital Status	Employment Status
Male	29	Other	Black	Muslim	S	Self-employed
Female	27	South African	Black	Christian	S	Employed
Female	44	South African	Black	Christian	M	Employed (Social Worker)
Male	48	South African	Black	Christian	M	Employed (SAPS Officer)
Female	25	South African	Black	Christian	S	Unemployed
Male	27	South African	Black	Christian	S	Self-employed
Female	28	South African	Black	Traditionalism	S	Employed
Female	35	South African	Black	Christian	M	Employed
Male	40	South African	Black	Christian	S	Unemployed
Male	24	South African	Black	Christian	S	Employed

**Table 2: Findings**

Theme	Sub-Theme	Probes
Are men perceived as victims of gendered violence	Are statistics of gendered violence against men alarming?	Experience of men on gendered violence Reporting of cases of gendered violence against men Influence of culture and norms on male victims of gendered violence Influence of practice

### Experience

Majority of male participants admitted to having both direct and indirect experiences with violence at the hands of women. Men are expected to be strong and not cry so asking for help only makes things worse. When you do, the other person makes fun of you and labels you all kinds of derogatory names.

Below are responses of the participants:

“You feel weak and, most of the time, less of a man when a woman abuses you”. He further narrated that “I was sexually assaulted in university by women who forced themselves on me”. Because the woman was carrying a knife and pointing it at me, I was overwhelmed. To make matters worse, the

police officer I reported the incident to treated me poorly and I was unable to stand it. “For a moment I wanted to be alone because I was so weak, I did not know where to start in terms of seeking help.” “The incident kept on playing in my mind whenever I try to close my eyes, and that was so painful.”

The study’s findings align with research by Mantey and Dzeter (2018) underscoring how societal norms and masculine expectations contribute to men silently enduring GBV. Thobajane and Luthada (2019) further emphasised the influence of patriarchal beliefs, discouraging men from publicly expressing pain and reinforcing the tendency for male victims to remain silent about their experiences. Continuing with the patriarchal ideas discussed earlier, (Tshilongo, 2023) contend that social norms around masculinity prevent men from coming forward with their stories because they are afraid of being perceived as weak, effeminate. Moreover Majola, Mkhize, & Udoh, (2023) stated that Men frequently encountered several difficulties particularly, when they attempted to contact GBV hotlines for support, they were told that only women could receive assistance and that it was possible that they were the real offenders of GBV.

### **Reporting**

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

Below are participant’s views reporting cases of GBV:

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

“(Ndingancamela ukufa) meaning I would rather die, than to report that I’m being abused by a woman”.

According to Skamikami et al., (2023) men rarely disclose incidents of GBV against them due to stigmatisation and the perpetuation of masculine stereotypes. Selowa et al., (2022) argued that men are reluctant when it comes to reporting of GBV events because they feel authorities will disregard or mock them. y. Another reason is that these men believe that authorities would not necessarily consider their cases due to the stigma that only women experience GBV and not men (Maphosa, 2021). Tshilongo, (2023) also argues that one of the barriers that prevent males from reporting GBV is the concern that the police and other law enforcement will not believe that they experienced such violence and that the abuse was conducted by their female counterparts instead. Male victims may be hesitant to report abuse due to feelings of humiliation (Walker, Lyall, Silva, Craigie, Mayshak, Costa, & Bentley, 2020). With this backdrop information a conclusion can be drawn that men do not report their incidents of GBV due to these societal stereotypes.

### **Influence on practice**

The SAPS officials shared their perception of GBV against men as an incident that comes to them as a shock, this is owned to the belief that women are more vulnerable as compared to men and this belief is proven to be true by the statistics they have. When interviewed, South African Police Service (SAPS) official indicated that they do not receive as many GBV cases against men as they do against women. The official mentioned that when comparing and analysing the statistics they have, 1 in 10 men report when he is being abused, whereas 8 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 when a person comes to report, they attend to the case.

Participant's responses on how they handle GBV cases against men:

"A man can be victimized by a woman only when he is threatened by a weapon, other than that a man can always fight for himself and overpower a woman".

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

The remarks made by the police officer are explained by Durham (2020) in an argument that GBV against men is believed to be underreported because of societal expectations of masculinity, namely that men are stronger than women, and because GBV against men is frequently ignored, especially when there is no weapon or dangerous object involved. Holt (2019) 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. Barkhuizen, (2015) further alludes that the stigma around men and masculinity has been created and is being reinforced by a lack of training, which has led to and is fuelling secondary victimization by the police and justice authorities.

### **Culture and norms**

All participants stated that their culture and societal norms influenced how they define and interpret GBV. The notion of GBV was endorsed by societal norms that emphasised non-vulnerability as one of the main characteristics of men. Due to how the society expect men to behave it is now hard for men to open about GBV and having to act strong at all the time.

One participant attested:

"I grew up in a community where gender-based violence was understood as violence against women and children as a result I grew up thinking that men do not experience GBV."

The findings indicate a prevailing misconception on GBV by male participants, as exemplified by participant 11's statement, reflecting a community understanding that largely associates GBV with violence against women and children. Cooper et al., (2013) findings align with the study, revealing that societal and cultural standards contribute to marginalization of male victims of GBV, as they often don't conform to the socially constructed expectations that dictate that men should embody strength and toughness. This perpetuates a narrative that men do not experience GBV, as expressed by the participant's upbringing.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The SAPS official revealed their perspective of GBV against males as a shocking incidence, due to the evident escalating scourge of GBV against women in South Africa. This has overshadowed GBV 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 victimised by women, they non-judgmentally assist the individual. However, the statement contradicts both literature and the experiences of the study's participants. The official has 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 GBV instead, victims experience secondary victimisation.

The official further stated that men who are victims often fail to classify their own experiences as criminal behaviour because they want to protect their dignity, which is defined by the society. The study revealed that Men are often silenced due to fear of mockery from the community, peers, and police officials. This issue is further exacerbated by toxic masculinity, which is characterized by male

traits that negatively affect male victims. Moreover, findings revealed that GBV against men is underreported due to victims often downplaying their experiences, which is often a coping mechanism used by men who experience GBV, as a common inclination.

Therefore, to effectively tackle or address GBV 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 GBV, regardless of gender. Lastly, it is necessary to empower men through marches and awareness campaigns so they can gain the courage to speak up and seek help from professionals. Services providers and law enforcement should be made more aware of male GBV issues by requiring them to attend mandatory training sessions. Workers in crisis and helpline services also need this kind of education and awareness-raising to make sure they understand that men and women can experience gender-based violence. This highlights the necessity for crucial pedagogical training on "othered" themes to educate and empower service personnel to help those in need. Organizations should regularly review their screening protocols for victimized callers, considering men's unique barriers to accessing treatment.

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