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Phumuzani Mpofu; S H TFWALA

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Understanding and addressing gender-based violence in Eswatini

[1]Phumuzani Mpofu & [2]Siphiwe Hlobsile Tfwala

Abstract

The high prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) in the kingdom of Eswatini is quiet saddening. Women and girl children become victims of GBV to the extent of losing their lives. Therefore, this article sought to find the causes of GBV, collaborative majors and guidelines to help reduce GBV. The paper employed a qualitative research design underpinned by a transformative paradigm as a framework for promoting preventive action toward social justice for marginalized populations. Participatory Action Learning Action Research (PALAR) was employed. A purposeful sample of traditional leaders, religious leaders, law enforcers, NGOs and public were selected. Data was obtained through individual interviews, focus group interviews and analyzed using the thematic analysis approach. Findings obtained revealed various causes of GBV: unequal power relations, socio-economic factors, weak legal and support systems. Study recommends that government in collaboration with stakeholders must establish educational programs and guidelines to fight GBV, improve psycho-social support, strengthen recreational systems, implement programs that focus on poverty alleviation and economic empowerment, decolonization of patriarchal cultural practices and develop awareness programs about issues faced by GBV survivors. Sexual offences domestic violence act (SODV) must be enforced by the law.

Keywords: *Gender-Based Violence (GBV), collaborative, PALAR, SODV*

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About the authors:
[1]Corresponding author. PhD, Post Doc, The University of Witwatersrand School of Human and Community Development. Department of Psychology. Email: mpofup89@gmail.com

[2]Masters, Lecturer Eswatini College of Theology. Email: hlobsilelukhambule@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Women's human rights are violated and there is a serious public health issue with violence against women, especially in intimate relationship and sexual contexts. According to estimates released by the World Health Organisation in 2021, around one in three (30%) women globally have experienced intimate relationship violence, which includes both physical and sexual abuse, or non-partner sexual assault at some point in their lives. Most of these violent acts involve intimate partners. Approximately 27% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 who have been in a relationship worldwide claim that their intimate partner has physically or sexually abused them. The physical, emotional, sexual, and reproductive health of women can be adversely affected by violence, which can also raise their risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. According to Berger et al. (2018) and the American Psychiatric Association Division of Diversity and Health Equity (2019), some kinds of violence against women may include intimate partner violence (IPV), which occur in all contexts and among all socioeconomic, ethnic, and religious groups, and can include controlling behaviours by an intimate partner as well as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.

Studies conducted globally (i.e. Steen, 2006; The Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, 2003) have revealed that the prevalence of violence against women is highest in environments where gender norms are strictly established and upheld and where the idea of masculinity is associated with toughness, male honour, or domination. Other cultural norms linked to abuse include the belief that men have "ownership" over women, the acceptance of using violence to resolve interpersonal conflicts, and the toleration of physical punishment of women and children. The risk of gender-based violence is determined by a combination of individual-level factors, such as whether a man was molested as a child, and social and cultural norms, such as those that emphasise men's inherent superiority over women. The likelihood of violence increases with the number of risk variables.

According to Action for Southern Africa (2016), 31% of women in Eswatini are HIV positive (UNAIDS, 2014), 70% of female sex workers are HIV positive (AVERT, 2015), and 1 in 3 girls experience sexual violence before the age of 18 (Amnesty International, 2010). Similarly, Amnesty International (2010) states that forced and early marriages are "normal," that marital rape is acceptable, and that only four women, or 6% of the House of Assembly's 65 deputies, are female (Department of Gender and Family Affairs, 2014). Govender (2023) reports that in South Africa, one woman is raped every three hours. In fact, South Africa had

10,818 rape cases in the first quarter of 2022. Brown et al. (2024) found high prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly violence and sexual assault against children; approximately 48% of girls between the ages of 13 and 24 reported having experienced some kind of sexual violence. Street and Mbabane (2023) found that one of the primary causes of the underreporting of GBV cases was cultural barriers. Reports from worried parties outside the family are severely hampered by the "Tibi Tendu" (family secrets) mentality. Given that most violent crimes are committed by people who are in the child's close surroundings, this is particularly harmful.

On Saturday, November 11, 2023, Bongiwe Dlamini released an article titled "Eswatini King warns against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) as killings of women escalate." The alleged murders of six women by their intimate partners in a two-week period served as the catalyst for this warning. The same week, women's rights organisations, political parties, and civil society organisations marched to the Deputy Prime Minister's Office in Eswatini to demand that GBV be declared a national disaster. This would allow more resources and maximum effort to be put towards combating the rapidly worsening national crisis. On Friday, October 10, 2023, the Eswatini Royal Police staged a demonstration in the streets of Manzini as part of their effort to raise awareness against the continued murdering of women. Despite all warnings against the abuse and murder of women, on Monday, November 13, 2023, The Times of Eswatini reported that a GBV case was withdrawn by the survivor, stating that she prefers to suffer in silence, citing cultural norms and loss of monthly maintenance, should she continue with the case since she was dependent on the man for financial support. On another note, in the same publication, it was reported that two women were stabbed to death by their intimate partners in separate incidents. What is even more warring now is that the killings are even taking place in public spaces, in broad daylight with people watching, some even taking videos and picture, some continue with their daily activities as normal. This incident was reported by the Eswatini Observer on Tuesday, January 2, 2024, where a young woman was killed by her ex-boyfriend, then a sister to the deceased and her current lover were called on phone to be notified of her murder before the killer left the scene to an unknown destination.

The Swazi Observer (a daily newspaper in the kingdom of Eswatini) on November 14, 2023, an article by Phephile Motau, published a report titled ‘Situation Analysis of SRH Including HIV and GBV Services for Adolescents and the Youth in Eswatini’ from the Ministry of Health. The study suggested that 47.5 percent of adolescents aged 15 to 19 and

37.5 percent of young adults between ages 20 to 24 believe that it is justified for a man to beat his spouse given some of the following situations: if the wife goes out without notifying the husband, neglect the children, she argues with husband, if she refuses sex with husband, if she burns the food, if she refuses to accept step children, if she get intimate with other men, if she initiate sex and if she refuses to give food. Given the current situation and emerging crucial debate on GBV, the purpose of this study was to identify the causes of GBV, find possible collaborative support for stakeholders to help reduce GBV, and come up with practicable solutions to minimise GBV in the Kingdom of Eswatini.

2. Literature review

2.1 Causes of Gender-Based Violence

According to DeWall et al. (2011), violence in social psychology is any violent behaviour that aims to cause severe physical harm, such as injury or death. The emotions, behaviours, and actions impact those around as well as the surroundings overall, all of which are influenced by the ecology. According to Delaney et al. (2013), humans are sentient, moral, physically complex, intelligent beings that possess the power to both inflict suffering on people in the immediate vicinity and provide solace to those in need, all while preserving the planet. According to Hamby (2017), there are four key components to a complete definition of violence: purposeful, unwelcome, damaging, and non-essential behaviour.

On the other hand, GBV is defined by Oparinde and Matsha (2021) as an extreme form of gender inequality that frequently targets women (Zein, 2012). The term GBV has many distinct meanings, and has been defined in a variety of ways, which includes identifying and responding to GBV in many contexts. For instance, sexual violence includes unwanted or uninvited touching, molestation, rape, and sex trafficking. Meanwhile, psychological violence can take the form of cyberbullying, harassment, bullying, insults, controlling behaviour, and exploitation. Physical violence includes beatings and other forms of abuse that can cause harm or even death. Societal exclusion, prejudice, political exclusion, skewed community justice, or other unfavourable societal norms are examples of socio-cultural violence. Lastly, economic violence is defined as having total control over the victim's finances, assets, or activities; denying them access to credit, training, or employment opportunities (Maguire, 2023).

According to Mingude and Dejene (2019), GBV can arise from damaging gender stereotypes; society typically portrays men as violent, domineering, and powerful, while

women are submissive, meek, and dependent on men for care. For example, in Malawi, a survey conducted in 2015–16 by Forty (2022) found that 61% of women and girls reported having experienced sexual abuse and 64% had experienced physical violence, which was made worse by an ongoing food crisis. Another gender stereotype on violence and hostilities, in areas of conflict, child marriage has emerged as a tactic used by families to reduce their financial load or dissolve their family (Keller, 2023). Similarly, the underrepresentation of women and LGBT+ individuals in positions of power are political factors.

All forms of GBV have a serious underreporting problem, which can be caused by several things including lack of protection measures, cultural obstacles, and ignorance of reporting procedures. A comprehensive government policy in this regard does not exist, nor does the SODV Act contain any provisions outlining the framework for efficient victim response systems. According to the Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA), of all GBV incidents, only 2.1% of women visited a clinic or hospital after the accident; only 7% of women sought counselling services; and only 3% of cases were reported to the police (Brown et al., 2024). Furthermore, only 7% of women reported their incidents to the police.

2.2 Activities to Reduce Gender-Based Violence

Quarshie et al. (2022) suggest that the Kingdom of Eswatini use targeted efforts to increase knowledge of the legislative provisions for underprivileged women in rural regions and provide a thorough response plan for GBV victims. It was also suggested to improve the cultural perspective of women in Eswatini by establishing a national programme for behavioural change and community prevention that educates men on women's rights. Long- and medium-term plans should call for the convening of accountable mechanisms and stringent timetables for local, inclusive conversations that include civic education and ultimately result in a constitutional revision. Going forward, maintaining an open and functional parliament that is chosen by the people and plays its part in a democratic society in line with good governance principles is essential to winning over the public. It is essential to have an unbiased and independent judiciary (Yohannes, 2023; Vale, 2022).

The government of the Kingdom of Eswatini, civil society organisations, and the private sector work together to raise awareness and encourage a change in attitude towards women and women's rights (Guedes et al., 2016). The government is expected to uphold its obligations on women's rights, particularly the Cease All Forms of Discrimination Against

Women (CEDAW). This could materialize by increasing female representation in parliament and government to meet the SADC-agreed goal of 50% female MPs. Institutions in the corporate and public sectors should also assess how many women are represented in decision-making positions inside their own companies. On the other hand, women should, at the very least, be encouraged and assisted to finish their secondary education. This could be accomplished, for instance, by enhancing community-based care. A just allocation of the nation's resources via public spending, initiatives, and policies that support the disadvantaged.

Eswatini passed the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act in 2018, and people have complimented the law for being so comprehensive. Before the Act was passed, there was a lack of legal protection, which made women and children more vulnerable to GBV. This was because of several factors, including insufficient penalties for offenders, a high standard of proof for establishing rape or sexual assault, and gaps in the definitions of key legal terms. Article 2 of CEDAW places a general duty on the state "to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women, including sexual harassment and assault." The SODV Act 2018 aims to address these issues and bring Eswatini in compliance with its international human rights obligations. The Act achieves this in several ways, including broadening the definition of rape to make it a gender-neutral offence, criminalizing harassment and sexual assault, and imposing stringent regulations to safeguard children from sexual exploitation. Additionally, the Act addresses the use of technology in the commission and spread of abuse. However, marital rape is not expressly made illegal under the SODV Act of 2018. The lack of a clear designation of marital rape as a crime that can be prosecuted lessens the seriousness of the crime, even though Section 151 of the Act states that marriage cannot be a défense to any crime. This lack of clear messaging may be less successful in challenging deeply ingrained cultural beliefs when it comes to the incidence of intimate relationship violence (Brown et al., 2024).

2.3 Theoretical framework: Vygotsky's Cultural-historical Activity Theory

One of the practice-based methodologies that offers a strong framework for examining professional work practices, such as social service delivery, is Vygotsky's cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Cong-Lem, 2022; Jokinen, 2015). CHAT allows researchers to analyse complex and evolving professional practices and practitioners to engage in reflective research by providing a multi-dimensional, systemic approach that considers psychological

motives, a variety of tools, and the ever-present dynamics of power, money, culture, and history (Kirsten et al., 2014). To create a unique set of guidelines that would be highly applicable to the participants' experiences and help reduce GBV in the Kingdom of Eswatini, CHAT was used because it is a collaborative approach between participants and the researcher that considers the participant's values and preferences (Witkop et al., 2021). CHAT integrates patient agency and sociocultural effects with a focus on shared decision making, wherein various agents jointly formulate the decision within their own social and behavioural contexts (Witkop et al., 2021). This highlights the necessity of men obtaining education and participating in all talks and educational activities to lower the prevalence of GBV in the communities (Govender, 2023).

According to CHAT, human learning occurs by doing, using tools, and community as a major factor in human activity. Cultural artefacts, or tools, mediate human behaviours. By introducing rules, community, and division of labour into the theory and their impact on an individual (subject) and that individual's mediated activity (object), Engeström (2014) emphasizes the role of community and other external elements to all activities. According to Witkop et al. (2021), this activity system is regarded as the fundamental analytical unit in activity theory. As a result, participants must be given the tools to recognise the signs of GBV and other forms of abuse in general, as well as guidance when they devise solutions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Paradigm

This study adopted a transformative paradigm, characterized by the active involvement of the stakeholders in facilitating change. Gabrielle Huet (2020) asserts that for transformation to be fruitful, people should be strategically convinced about why there is a need to transform the current ways of thinking and doing. Needs assessments are designed to evaluate gabs between current circumstances and desired outcomes, along with possible solutions to the gabs (Altschuld & Watkins, 2014), which then becomes a way to communicate the views of the marginalized groups to those in power (Morris, 2015). In this case, the participants get a chance to assess, evaluate and analyze their beliefs then decide in what they want their society to become in the future. Transformation further involves unlearning, which suggests that previous knowledge must be viewed using the lens of contemporary experiences (Gravett & Kroon 2023) and discarded, if necessary. The main thrust of this study was to affect a shift in the

GBV perpetrators and the victims to adopt practices that would emancipate them and give society a chance to reconsider their predicament.

3.2 Research Approach

Qualitative approach was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of women and children brought by GBV. In-depth insights into understanding the experiences of persons (Bhandari et al., 2020) who have experienced GBV together with all stakeholders were collected using individual interviews (for traditional, religious leaders and NGO persons) and focus group discussions (from social support groups) and the general members of the public. Qualitative research is flexible and focused on collecting rich non-numerical data, which helps the researcher to understand the experiences of persons who suffered GBV. Qualitative research makes it possible for the researcher to answer "how" and " why" a particular phenomenon or behavior that occurs in a specific context. It offered a chance to develop specific insights and turn individual experiences into usable data (Peterson et al., 2021). This approach helped the researchers get rich information from all stakeholders' representatives in the society.

3.3 Research Design

The study employed a transformative paradigm as a framework for promoting preventive action toward social justice for marginalized populations through the lens of a structural and intersectional disadvantage as the problem towards the marginalized group opening up about their lived experiences (Wood et al., 2019). In this study, it was used to actively gather the experiences of persons who have been in GBV situation. Participatory Action Learning Action Research (PALAR) research design was followed (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015). According to Wood and Zuber-Skerritt (2013) and Zuber-Skerritt (2018), PALAR is an effective methodology for solving community-based problems from the inside out. PALAR is a collaborative and emergent form of research that engages the people affected by the problem as a co-researcher and co-creator of knowledge (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). PALAR supports the notion of community of practice through collaborative work between the researcher and participant, and this yields a social change in problems affecting participants in the community (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). Since the study works on collaborative construction of a model to deal with GBV, persons affected by GBV particularly women and

children, human rights groups, civil society, the public are the main community members in this study.

3.4 Participant Recruitment

The study recruited several groups of participants. Firstly, members of the general public were recruited. Secondly, traditional leaders, religious leaders, law enforcers (police) and members of the NGOs. For ethical reasons, persons below the age of eighteen were excluded. Small sample size was preferred as it allowed stakeholders to provide the researcher with their lived experiences and ideas through contextually rich narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Time and costs also limited the sample (Maree & Pieterson, 2016; Mpofu & Tfwala, 2022) to twenty-two participants selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is used when a specific purpose is in mind (Nikolopoulou, 2022). In this study, the target sample was traditional leaders, religious leaders, law enforcers, NGOs, married and unmarried men and women. Hence, the study recruited four traditional leaders (two men and two women), four religious leaders (two men and two women), four law enforcers (two men and two women), two members of the NGO (one man and one woman), and eight members of the general public (two married men, two unmarried men, two married women, two unmarried women). Participants were selected from different age groups and from different institutions for the diversity of views and experiences, and to observe any change in the trends of abuse.

3.5 Ethical Consideration

When carrying out research, researchers are expected to observe ethical principles. These are ethical principles, standards or morals that control people's behaviour and research that involves human beings (Resnik, 2021). The researchers observed the ethical research principles to protect participants' dignity, rights and safety, hence, the study objectives were communicated to participants before data collection assuring them of the anonymity of their identities and personal data. It was also explained to the participants that data and information pertaining to the study would remain confidential. Interview notes and transcripts would exclude personal identifiers. Consent forms expressing the participants' voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time were given to participants in time to read and sign if they agreed to participate in the study. Issues of credibility and validity were addressed through

triangulation, where data was collected through individual interviews, and focus group discussions which validated submissions from the individual interviews.

4. Findings and Discussion

The data collected was analysed using themes based on the research questions that sought to identify the causes and potential strategies to curb GVB in the Kingdom of Eswatini.

Theme 1: Causes of Gender-Based Violence

Unequal power relations. Traditional gender role in Eswatini often place men in a position of authority over women creating an imbalance that can lead to violence. This is consistent with research conducted by the Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights (2003) revealing that gender norms are strictly established and upheld in which the idea of masculinity is associated with toughness, masculine honour, or domination and the most common sites for violence against women. From the focused group discussion, some participants remarked:

> *"At times I get angry when my woman refuses to play her role in the house like, preparing my food in time, when I have to remind her to clean, wash, help children with their homework."*
>
> *"I get worked out when she talks back at me whenever she talks back at me, and my father used to beat my mom if she did that, so I do the same because I feel disrespected and belittled by a woman for that matter."*
>
> *"We both go to work so we can make ends meet for our family, but when we come back in the evening, he expects me to do all the house chores alone without any help since we do not even have a maid, and he will be relaxing claiming to be too tired, yet we do the same job. And if I dare ask him to help, he will yell at me telling me that he paid 'lobola' bride-price and the reason he has a wife is for him to be saved."*

Some men complained that some women drive them crazy by trying to control them or dominate in the relationship which ends in a fight, either physically or exchange of words. Women felt like they are not given a fair treatment in their marriages/relationships since they are expected to carry out all the house chores even when they equally go to work and provide for their family or partners. As traditional roles shift, tensions can arise leading to violence as some resist these changes, therefore, Swazi men need to align with change in society and embrace it.

Socio-economic factors. Poverty, unemployment, and lack of education can contribute to a higher risk of GBV. Additionally, substance abuse can be a trigger for violence. Moreover, certain cultural beliefs can downplay the seriousness of GBV or even justify it in some situations. Silence surrounding the issue can also prevent victims from seeking help. Some participants remarked:

> *"I lost my parents at a very tender age, as the eldest child in my family I had to fend for my younger siblings, I had no financial support of any sort, I would allow a certain man in my community (old enough to be my father) to have his way with me so he could give me money to support my family."*
>
> *"I come from a humble background, so my father convinced my mother to give me out in marriage at a tender age so they could reduce the number of children to feed at home. That old man used to talk to me anyhow he wanted, he would force himself on me, prohibited me to use any form of birth control, treated me like a child to an extent of beating me whenever I did something he didn't like. The beating happened mostly when he was drunk."*
>
> *"My girlfriend and I fight when we are drunk/high, but we always make peace the next day and life goes on."*

Some people were trapped in GBV helpless, and no one looks out for them in the communities. Maybe if the traditional structure could really care for the orphaned and vulnerable children, life would be better for everyone. That would close the gap in people taking advantage of the young, vulnerable and needy citizens. They can also prevent forced marriages if they get really involved maybe by providing pre-marriage interviews on both parties and then provide options for persons being forced to marry (whether forced by other people including parents and, or circumstances).

Weak legal and support systems. Ineffective enforcement of laws against GBV and lack of support services for victims discourage reporting and create a climate of impunity for perpetrators.

> *"I once reported my husband to the police for physically abusing me. Both my family and his, neighbours and even my friends blamed me for running to the law to report, such that I ended up doubting my decision. More than anything, my husband threatened to stop providing for me and children, since I'm unemployed, the best option was to drop the charges."*

Theme 2: Strategies to Curb Gender-Based Violence

Enact and enforce strong laws against GBV. The participants of the study shared that government should invest in prevention programs that address underlying causes. They can also provide adequate funding for support services for survivors. Government can only ensure justice for victims by strengthening the legal system.

Civil society organizations (CSOs). The participants express the need to raise awareness about GBV through campaigns and community education. Similarly, providing support services to survivors, including counselling, shelter, and legal aid advocate for legislative reform and policy changes to address GBV.

> *"The government and the NGOs should run campaigns about GBV and emphasize on that people need to report any form of abuse early enough and also provide mental/psychological support to survivors."*
>
> *"NGOs may also prove safe places for survivors once they have reported abuse and the environment at home is no longer favourable for both adults and children who suffered abuse."*

These safe houses or home will provide neutral environment for survivors to heal, and healing period could be fast if withdrawn from the place where one has been abused.

Traditional and religious leaders. The leaders the need to challenge harmful cultural norms that condone GBV. This could be done through promoting message of gender equality and respect for women's rights. They also express the need to support survivors and encourage reporting of abuse.

> *"During religious gatherings (church) and traditional gatherings (kuhlehla), people should be educated about social ills."*
>
> *"Traditional structure in our communities, together with the government should keep the youth engaged through sports, cultural activities and more job opportunities be created so that the youth is kept busy."*

If people are made to understand that both the traditional and religious settings have zero tolerance of against GBV, they may change in fear of being treated like outcasts in their own communities. According to the participants, individuals may also be encouraged to educate themselves about GBV and challenge sexist attitudes by speaking out against GBV

whenever they witness it. Similarly, they can also support survivors and link them to organizations working to end GBV.

Strengthening Legal and Support Systems. Stakeholders may have a GBV 'indaba' to come up with a relevant national GBV strategy and action plan where they can develop a comprehensive plan outlining a multi-sectorial approach to GBV prevention, response, and support services.

> *"The state should take over GBV cases even when the reporter/survivor decides to drop the charges against the perpetrator, or have a minimum sentence put in place for anyone who dares to intimidate a GBV case reporter."*
> *"The government should employ enough social workers and be deployed to communities to help people who needs mental health support."*

The government of the Kingdom of Eswatini should have a standardized training in place to ensure that police, prosecutors, judges, and healthcare professionals receive training on GBV to improve investigation, prosecution, and victim support.

> *"The primary law enforcers, especially police officers dealing with domestic violence should have at least a certificate in mental health or counselling psychology, so that they are able to give adequate and relevant advice and support to GBV survivors."*

The government should also implement clear protocols for handling GBV cases, including survivor-centered approaches and witness protection to strengthen the legal and support system. The government must conduct periodic reviews of the national GBV strategy and action plan to assess progress and adjust as needed.

Enhancing Prevention Efforts. Launching awareness campaigns that challenge harmful stereotypes, promote gender equality, and encourage bystander intervention can help create health relationships in our communities.

> *"People need to be taught about early signs/indicators of GBV so that they can be able to avoid being abused and report in time."*

Life skills education. The government through the National Curriculum Center should integrate gender equality and healthy relationship skills into school curriculum from a young

age. This can help promote equality and new values and norms for the new generation. The government and NGOs can work with community leaders, religious leaders and other organizations to raise awareness, promote positive norms, and identify potential perpetrators.

Economic empowerment programs. The government should invest in programs that provide women and the youth with education, job training, and income-generating opportunities to reduce their vulnerability.

> *"My friends and I tried to start an agriculture business, but we could not strive because of the high taxes we paid, we practically did not make enough profits to keep our business going so we liquidated."*
>
> *"The government can also introduce children grants to liberate child headed families from depending on handouts from relatives."*

The grants should be increased to promote stability, and the beneficiaries of the grant can be offered basic education on budgeting and finance handling.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that men failed to understand that times have changed. Most men are victims of their past socialization where women were viewed as minors who were not allowed to question instructions from men. In addition, poor enforcement of laws like SODV is another contributing factor for continued violence against women and children. Therefore, this study recommends awareness programmes rolled out at community levels to curb GBV. While the law enforcers and implementers strive to enforce the law impartially, women should avoid continuing in abusive relationships and withdrawing cases when they have been reported to the police.

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ORCID
Phumuzani Mpofu – https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5671-9263
Siphiwe Hlobsile Tfwala – https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6561-1089

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