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Cultural Norms as Determinants of Gender-Based Violence: A Literature Review of Impacts on Women's Physical, Psychological, and Socio-Economic Well-being in South Africa

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Abstract

Gender-based violence in South Africa is a serious public health and human rights. Cultural norms and patriarchal beliefs often normalize violence, creating difficulties for women to seek help or escape abusive relationships. This narrative literature review examines how cultural norms act as main dictators of gendered violence in South Africa, also how they affect women's physical health, mental well-being, and socio-economic status. Drawing on Heise's (1998) Ecological Model and Social Norms Theory, were used in the study to understand how individual, community, and societal factors interact to sustain harmful gender norms. The review synthesises recent scholarly literature (2022–2026) to highlight how traditional gender roles, notions of male dominance, family honour, and community attitudes legitimize violence and hinder help-seeking and justice. Study findings demonstrate that traditional gender roles, male dominance, and ideas about family honor often legitimize violence and discourage help-seeking. Psychologically, survivors report PTSD, anxiety, depression, shame, and suicidal ideation. Socio-economically, stigma, injury, and lack of land or income often keep women in abusive relationships. Historical factors including apartheid and colonialism continue to limit black women's education, property ownership, and economic independence, particularly in rural areas. Irrespective of progressive legislation, implementation is still ineffective due to cultural resistance and systemic barriers. GBV cannot be addressed at an individual level alone. The review emphasises the necessity for multi-level, culturally sensitive interventions involving traditional leaders, encourage positive masculinities, empower women economically, and enhance trauma-informed support services. This study contributes to the growing discourse on culturally responsive GBV prevention in South Africa and provides practical implications for social work practice, policy development, and community-based interventions directed at transforming harmful norms and advancing gender equality.

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence, Cultural Norms, Patriarchy, Social Work Intervention.

1. Introduction

South African Police Service reported 53 293 sexual offences in 2023/24, but still many cases of intimate partner violence (IPV) go unreported due to stigma and cultural silence. Some of highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) continue to be recorded in South Africa. The Statistics South Africa's Victims of Crime Survey reported that 15.8% of women ranging from 16 years of age and above experienced physical violence from the previous year, with intimate partner violence ranked the most common. GBV exerts profound, complex, and often intergenerational effects on women's physical health, mental well-being, and socioeconomic status. According to Adebayo and Odutayo (2024), gender-based violence is perceived as an umbrella term entailing any act or threat of physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional harm perpetrated against an individual mainly due to their gender. In South Africa, the definition of gender-based violence

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must involve cultural actions that are frequently utilized to justify control, including lobola and beliefs that constitute men as authorised “heads” of households. The historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid worsen these power disparities through displacing men from stable work and fostering patriarchal authority in homes.

Cultural norms and traditional beliefs also shape how often GBV happens in South African communities. Research from the Eastern Cape and Gauteng contend that these norms promote strict ideas about how men and women should act. Adebayo and Odutayo (2024) found that many communities expect men to be in control and women to obey. Kasa and Saunders (2022) reported the same in the Eastern Cape, when men beat their partners, some neighbours call it “discipline” to keep authority at home. Traditional expectations worsen the matter. Women are taught to stay quiet and keep the family together, even when abused. Men are taught that being “a real man” means being strong and in charge. Due to this, women who report violence often blamed. Kasa and Saunders (2022) interviewed women who said family members told them “Don’t bring shame to the house” rather than helping them escape abusive environments. Traditional expectations place women as subservient and responsible for preserving family harmony, with men socialised into dominant and controlling masculinities. Teachings about family harmony emphasize that women are blamed for reporting violence, due to disclosing perceived as bringing shame to the family.

This literature review focuses on profound South African research to understand how cultural norms at community and societal levels contribute to gender-based violence and impact women’s health, mental health, and socio-economic well-being. It highlights how cultural factors intersect with social, economic, and historical realities to encourage and maintain cycles of violence.

Naidoo et al. (2024) demonstrates that the recent South African national statistics highlight the severity of the GBV crisis. Roughly around one in five women in South Africa is most probably to encounter abuse, with family violence ranking among the fastest-growing categories of criminal offences. Kasa and Saunders argue that beyond immediate harm, GBV stands a leading contributor to female morbidity and mortality and exerts crucial adverse effects on the physical and developmental results of women and their children.

GBV is worldwide recognised as a universal human rights violation that transcends culture, social status, and religion, even though its manifestations, frequency, and severity differ per contexts (Balonde et al., 2026; Kasa & Saunders, 2022). South Africa is ranked with one of the highest rates of GBV in the entire world (Malik et al., 2025; Sabri et al., 2022). Statistics South Africa’s 2022 Victims of Crime Survey found 3.5% of women reported physical violence in the previous 12 months (Hossain et al., 2023). Study by Jewkes et al. (2023) illustrates that thousands of women are assaulted, raped, or murdered yearly, with a substantial proportion of incidents remaining unreported due to fear, stigma, and inappropriate and trustworthy support systems for victims and survivors. Patriarchal ideologies, notions of male entitlement, and acts commodifying women usually intersect with poverty, unemployment, and substance abuse to sustain GBV. It is academically and practically important to understand these cultural determinants to be able to develop effective, contextually relevant prevention and response strategies.

2. Problem Statement

South Africa do have progressive legislations on structure to address gender-based violence, including the Domestic Violence Act of 1998, the Sexual Offences Act, National Strategic Plan, and Femicide established in 2020, but the laws alone are not working. Jewkes et al. (2023) report that GBV rate remain very high. SAPS reported 53 293msexual offences in 2023/24, and femicide rates are still among highest globally. Mathews et al. (2022), in a study found that a woman is killed by an intimate partner in every 3 hours in South Africa. The bridge between policy and reality shows that legislation alone does not stop violence.

The key problem is cultural norms and traditional beliefs. Many of the various beliefs make violence against women seem normal. Adebayo and Odutayo (2024) and Malik et al. (2025) explain that such norms create a system where men are seen as leaders and women are viewed as less important. This provides men with more power and control at home. Lobola is one example. With some believing paying lobola provides the right to control a wife's body and decisions. Patriarchal ideologies often display violence as an acceptable mechanism for conflict resolution or the assertion of dominance (Kasa, 2025). Resulting from that, most women experience formidable barriers to disclosure, help-seeking, or leaving abusive relationships because of fear of social ostracism, family dishonour, economic dependence, and community victim-blaming (Naidoo et al., 2024).

Prioritisation of family honour and community reputation, women become ashamed for reporting abuse encountering pressure to remain silent. Financial dependence to perpetrator worsens the idea of escaping violence, more in rural areas and informal settlements with less job choices (Hossain et al., 2023; Malik et al., 2025). The consequences go far beyond individual victims, giving heavy burdens on families, communities, and the national economy via increased healthcare costs, lost productivity, intergenerational trauma, and reinforced gender imbalance. Without intent and sustained effort to change the cultural influences of GBV, profound interventions are most probably to achieve only marginal success. The literature review therefore critically examines the role of cultural norms in sustaining GBV and analyses their specific implications on women's physical, psychological, and socio-economic well-being, with a view to addressing more effective, culturally responsive strategies.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: Lori Heise's (1998) Ecological Model of Gender-Based Violence and Social Norms Theory (Perkins & Berkowitz, 2006). Both the frameworks demonstrate where cultural norms operate and how they keep GBV going in South Africa.

Heise's Ecological Model demonstrates violence towards women as results of interacting factors across four nested levels namely: individual, relationship, community, and societal level (Ghosh et al., 2024; Mtotywa et al., 2023). At the individual level, personal factors involving, history of abuse, attitudes toward gender roles, and substance use shape both perpetration and victimisation. This level looks at how couples treat each other at home. Kasa and Saunders (2022) found that

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many in SA see themselves as “heads of household”. Due to this notion, men often control money and make all big decisions, even when women also work and earn income. When communication breaks down, some men use violence to stay in control. At the community level, social networks, neighbourhood traits, and local cultural practices either inhibit or condone violence. Female elders frequently tell women endure for the family”, meaning the community encourages silence instead of support. This means the community values silence over helping women leave abusive environments. The societal (macrosystem) level entails big ideas that shape all of SA. Jewkes et al. (2025) demonstrate that TV, music, laws, and cultural beliefs teach people what “a real man” or “a good wife” should be. When media and culture show men as strong controllers and women as quiet caretakers, violence starts to look normal.

In the South African context, Heise’s Ecological Model works well here due to the fact that it shows that GBV is not caused by one thing. Colonialism and apartheid broke family structure and jobs, and patriarchal beliefs from the past are still strong up to today. The model demonstrates that workshops for men alone will not work. There ought to be change to what communities accept and what laws and media teach.

Social Norms Theory complements the ecological approach by defining the tools through which cultural expectations shape behaviour. This theory explains why people copy what another do, even if they do not agree. Bicchieri (2006) posits that individuals follow two things. First is what they think is “normal”, descriptive norms. Secondly, what they think others expect, injunctive norms. Mlik et al. (2025) call this “pluralistic ignorance” in GBV cases. Many people in SA privately dislike domestic violence, but they stay quiet because they think “everyone else accepts it”. So, the violence continues. According to this theory, individuals’ actions are greatly influenced by their perceptions of what is typical (descriptive norms) and what is socially approved or expected (injunctive norms) within their reference groups (Bicchieri, 2006; Malik et al., 2025). In GBV contexts, widespread misperceptions frequently result in pluralistic ignorance, whereby individuals privately disapprove of violence but assume others accept it, thereby sustaining harmful practices through silence or conformity.

In South Africa, social norms that balance masculinity with control and dominance, or that perceive domestic matters as private, significantly contribute to the tolerance of GBV. The theory underscores the capacity for change via norm correction. When integrated, Heise’s Ecological Model and Social Norms Theory foster a comprehensive basis for analysing how cultural norms work at multiple levels and for developing interventions that can effectively disrupt cycles of violence. For this study, both are crucial to understand why cultural norms lead to GBV.

4. Methodology

This study adopted a narrative literature review methodology to synthesise existing literature on cultural norms as determinants of GBV and their impacts on women in South Africa. The aim was to understand how cultural norms lead to GBV by reading and comparing studies.

Searches were conducted in PubMed, Google Scholar, and other academic databases utilizing keywords such as “gender-based violence,” “cultural norms,” “South Africa,” “women’s health,” “psychological impacts,” and “socio-economic impacts.” Only peer-reviewed articles, scholarly

reports, and publications in English from 2022 to the present were included for the study. Studies were selected if they were centred on South Africa or closely related contexts, examined cultural or traditional influences on GBV, and addressed impacts on women's well-being.

Opinion pieces, editorials, non-peer-reviewed works, studies published before 2022, and studies not related to cultural norms or GBV were excluded in the study. A narrative synthesis approach was adopted to determine patterns, contradictions, and gaps. While this methodology fosters rich contextual understanding, most studies used interviews in areas like Eastern Cape and Gauteng.

5. Thematic Findings

5.1 Cultural Norms and the Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence in SA context

Cultural norms and traditional beliefs greatly shape the frequency, acceptance, and perpetuation of gender-based violence in South Africa (Kasa, 2025; Balonde et al., 2026). Such norms operate as strong social regulators that prescribe acceptable acts for men and women, frequently reinforcing patriarchal bodies that subordinate women and elevate male. Malik et al. (2025) found that men are expected to be in control and women to obey and this encourages patriarchal bodies that benefit men with more power and women lesser.

Comfort et al. (2023) explain some men believe beating a wife is “discipline” required to maintain control at home. Kasa (2025) found the same idea in SA communities that violence is perceived as a way to solve arguments or show authority. As much as these conceptions justify abusive behaviour, they also hinder women from seeking help they require or leaving violent situations because of fear of social rejection and family dishonour (Naidoo et al., 2024). Media displays and influential social leaders also add to the problem and promote such harmful norms by romanticising violent masculinity and desensitising society to the significance of GBV (Sabri et al., 2022; Malik et al., 2025).

Cultural norms also greatly discourage the development and implementation of effective legislation and support systems. Kasa and Saunders (2022) contends that even good laws including the Domestic Act fail when community beliefs say “family matters stay private”. Elderly females usually tell abused women to endure for the sake of family honour and due to this notion, many incidents go unreported leading to ongoing cycle of violence (Fono & Kasa, 2024). The stigma and shame that is associated with victimisation remain strong obstacles to reporting violent behaviours. Cultural traditions that legitimise prioritisation of family honour and privacy over individual well-being often prevents victims from disclosing abuse (Comfort, 2023; Fono & Kasa, 2024). This results in underreporting and perpetuates cycles of silence and continued violence.

5.2 Impacts on Women's Physical Well-being

Gender-based violence encompasses severe and variety of physical consequences. Victims often encounter injuries ranging from bruises and broken bones to internal damage and long-term disabilities. Jewkes et al. (2025) and Berbegal-Bolsas et al. (2020) found that repeated abuse leads to the risk of chronic health challenges including hypertension, sexually transmitted infections (STI), and especially HIV/AIDS, to which South African women are particularly

Sexual violence causes the transmission of STIs and may result in unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions and miscarriages from stress. Harmful cultural practices linked to GBV, including child marriage and early pregnancy, further looks down women's bodily autonomy and reproductive health (Adebayo & Odutayo, 2024; Sabri et al., 2024). Women usually abstain from seeking timely medical care, worsening their state of health outcomes due to the fear of stigma and reprisals (Morojele & Nkosi, 2022). The Heise's model assist illustrates why care takes longer. At community level, norms encourage women to hide injuries. Clinic staff often blame women for "choosing" abusive men at societal level.

5.3 Psychological Impacts on Women's Well-being

GBV creates significant and enduring psychological effects. Survivors commonly encounter post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, shame, guilt, helplessness, and suicidal ideation (Adebayo & Odutayo, 2024; Chandra, 2026). Legitimation of violence and victim-blaming attitudes in society compound trauma, resulting in recovery more difficult (Balonde, 2026; Berbegal-Bolsas et al., 2020). Chronic psychological trauma negatively affects women's ability to participate fully in social, economic, and communal life, thereby prolonging cycles of vulnerability and exclusion (García-Montes et al., 2022; Hossain et al., 2023; Schuler et al., 2024).

5.4 Socio-Economic Impacts

GBV has broad-ranging socioeconomic consequences. Physical injuries, psychological trauma, and social stigma cause obstacles to seeking employment, education, and economic independence (Abrahams & Jewkes, 2024; Maphakela et al., 2025). Most women end up being entangled in abusive relationships for financial dependence and fear of losing support networks (Hossain et al., 2023).

History also plays a role. Stein et al. (2025) and Rikhotso (2023) illustrates that apartheid and colonialism left black women with less education, land and job opportunities. Fono and Kasa (2024) add that in rural areas of South Africa women often do not own property due culture stating land is for men even when violence takes place women have no economic backup. Ultimately, cultural norms not only perpetuate the occurrence of GBV but also influence and intensify its physical, psychological, and socioeconomic impacts.

6. Discussion

The findings of this review clearly finds that cultural norms are a main reason as to why gender-based violence is common in South Africa. Patriarchal ideologies and traditional gender roles pertaining to men perceived as leaders and women as submissive develop normalization of violence at the same time hindering help-seeking, reporting, and justice. Kasa (2025) developed that number of women remain quiet due to family and community expecting them to "endure". Adopting Heise's Ecological Model helps to clearly understand this. Given the societal level, patriarchal ideas influence laws and media, with traditional leaders and churches reporting to women to remain in marriages due to family honour at the community level. Women split from

their confidence post years of abuse affecting their future development and future opportunities. Violence is evidently not created by one individual, but stems from all interconnected levels (Ghosh et al., 2024). Social Norms Theory goes on to explain the persistence of harmful practices through pluralistic ignorance and conformity pressures (Bicchieri, 2006; Malik et al., 2025).

The gap between legislations and culture is still the biggest problem. South Africa has solid GBV laws, but many people still do not speak out. Bicchieri (2006) explains why a vierty of individuals privately think violence is wrong but remain quiet is because they believe everyone else accepts it. The author refers it to pluralistic ignorance. With people still perceiving silence normal, GBV will continue. Interventions need to work at three levels; collaboration with chiefs and traditional councils. In many rural areas, people listen to chiefs more than police. At community level, conduct ‘men’s dialogue groups’ in townships, and provide skills training to nurses in trauma-informed care. Kasa and Saunders (2022) found men talk openly with other men, they start to question ideals like “a real men controls his wife”. Meaning change should occur at all levels, traditional leaders and pastors ought to engage in solution because due to their influence in South African communities. When pastors preach that violence is not discipline, or when chiefs refuse lobola cases that treat women like property, attitudes begin to shift. The intersection of culture with poverty, race, and historical trauma demands and requires nuanced, context-specific responses. Gaps in the literature involve limited evaluation of culturally adapted interventions and insufficient focus on including men and boys as allies.

7. Limitations, Implications for Social Work, and Conclusion

Limitations

This narrative literature review is subject to publication bias and variability in the quality of included sources. The restriction to English-language peer-reviewed articles from 2022 onwards may have excluded valuable grey literature and earlier foundational studies.

Implications for Social Work

Social workers are well-placed to lead culturally sensitive interventions. Priorities include engaging community leaders to question harmful norms, implementing school-based gender education programmes, encouraging women’s economic empowerment, also fostering accessible trauma-informed support services. Advocacy for better enforcement of laws and integration of cultural considerations into policy is a crucial matter.

Conclusion

This literature review highlights the main role of cultural norms as key determinants of gender-based violence in South Africa and their devastating impacts on women’s physical, psychological, and socio-economic well-being. Addressing GBV needs comprehensive, multi-level, and culturally responsive strategies directed and led by the Ecological Model and Social Norms Theory. Collaborative efforts by social workers, policymakers, traditional authorities, and communities are essential to challenge harmful norms and enhance gender equality. Changing these norms is essential for creating safer, more equitable societies where women can thrive free from violence and discrimination.

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