

A National Emergency: Unmasking the Brutality of Gender Based Violence in Namibia

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Abstract:

Gender-based violence (GBV) in Namibia has reached crisis levels, demanding urgent national and international attention. Despite legal frameworks such as the Combating of Domestic Violence Act of 2003, the prevalence of GBV remains alarmingly high, with nearly one in three Namibian women aged 15–49 experiencing violence at the hands of a partner (UNFPA, 2022). GBV remains deeply entrenched in socio-cultural norms and systemic inequalities (UNFPA, 2015). This abstract critically explores the systemic drivers of GBV, including patriarchal norms, economic inequality, and institutional shortcomings, while evaluating current interventions and highlighting gaps in policy enforcement and survivor support. The Namibia Demographic and Health Survey (2013) revealed that 33% of ever-married women aged 15–49 have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence from a partner. Alarmingly, 28% of women and 22% of men justified wife-beating under certain circumstances, reflecting the normalization of abuse (NDHS, 2013). Between 2012 and 2016, the Namibian Police recorded over 22,000 cases of grievous bodily harm and nearly 3,000 rapes, underscoring the scale of the epidemic (UNFPA, 2015). Structural drivers such as poverty, alcohol abuse, and inadequate justice responses further exacerbate the crisis (Gov.na, 2017). Through a multidisciplinary lens, this paper calls for a national paradigm shift centred on survivor-led advocacy, law reform, gender-sensitive education, and community accountability mechanisms to dismantle the root causes of GBV and end the culture of impunity that enables its persistence. Namibia continues to experience high rates of gender-based violence, with widespread normalization rooted in harmful gender stereotypes and power imbalances (UNFPA, 2022). Recent studies have emphasized that interventions must shift from reactive criminal justice responses to preventative, community-based strategies that engage men and boys (LeBeau et al., 2020; IPPR, 2025).

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Intimate Partner Homicide, Patriarchy and Power Dynamics, Femicide, Passion Killings, Survivor Advocacy, Cultural Norms and Masculinities, Law Enforcement and Judicial Gaps, Public Health Crisis, Intersectionality, Gender-Sensitive Policy Reform, Community Engagement and Accountability, Trauma-Informed Support Services, Prevention and Education Campaigns, Structural Violence and Human Rights and Legal Protections.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Gender-based violence (GBV) in Namibia has escalated into a national emergency, threatening the safety, dignity, and fundamental rights of countless individuals particularly women and girls. Despite the country's

progressive legal frameworks, including the Combating of Domestic Violence Act (2003) and the Combating of Rape Act (2000), GBV remains deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, socio-economic disparities, and systemic failures in enforcement and support services (UNFPA, 2020; AHK Prevention, 2024). The persistence of GBV not only undermines Namibia's constitutional commitment to equality and human rights but also hampers national development and public health outcomes.

Cultural constructions of masculinity, economic dependency, and societal tolerance of violence within relationships all contribute to the normalization of abuse. Meanwhile, survivors often face re-victimization in seeking justice, with barriers such as police indifference, stigma, and inadequate psychosocial support. Recent initiatives, such as community outreach programs in the Hardap and Oshana regions and UN-supported safe houses, signal progress, but fall short of the systemic overhaul required.

The Namibia Demographic and Health Survey (2013) reported that 33% of ever-married women aged 15–49 had experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence from a partner. More recent data from the Ministry of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare (2017) highlighted that cultural acceptance of violence, alcohol abuse, and poverty are key drivers of GBV, particularly in rural and underserved communities. Furthermore, underreporting remains a significant barrier, fueled by stigma, fear of retaliation, and limited access to justice and psychosocial support (Gov.na, 2017).

Namibia has made notable strides through the establishment of Women and Child Protection Units and the implementation of national action plans. However, gaps in coordination, resource allocation, and community engagement continue to hinder progress (UNFPA, 2020). This study seeks to critically examine the structural and cultural underpinnings of GBV in Namibia, evaluate the effectiveness of current interventions, and propose a multi-sectoral, survivor-centred approach to dismantle the cycle of violence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender-based violence (GBV) in Namibia has been the subject of growing scholarly and policy attention, reflecting its entrenched nature and devastating impact on individuals and communities. The literature consistently identifies GBV as a manifestation of unequal power relations, deeply rooted in Namibia's colonial legacy, patriarchal structures, and socio-economic inequalities (Edwards-Jauch, 2020). Scholars argue that GBV cannot be understood in isolation from broader systems of structural and cultural violence, which normalize male dominance and female subordination (Sabao & Nauyoma, 2022).

The National Gender-Based Violence Baseline Study (Gov.na, 2017) provides a comprehensive overview of the prevalence, drivers, and consequences of GBV in Namibia. It highlights poverty, alcohol abuse, and weak institutional responses as key contributors to the persistence of violence. The study also underscores the role of cultural and religious norms in perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes and justifying abuse. Despite the existence of legal instruments such as the Combating of Domestic Violence Act (2003) and the Combating of Rape Act (2000), enforcement remains inconsistent, and survivors often face barriers to justice and support services (UNFPA, 2020).

Creative literature has also emerged as a powerful medium for exposing the lived realities of GBV. The anthology *We Must Choose Life* (2008), compiled by Elisabeth! Khaxas, uses poetry and storytelling to amplify the voices of Namibian women and challenge the silence surrounding abuse. Sabao and Nauyoma (2022) analyse this work through an ecofeminist lens, revealing how women's experiences of violence are intertwined with broader struggles against oppression and marginalization.

Furthermore, the framing of masculinity plays a critical role in shaping GBV dynamics. Edwards-Jauch (2020) argues that hegemonic masculinities, shaped by colonial and postcolonial histories, reinforce violent behaviours and hinder transformative change. She calls for a structuralist approach that addresses the intersections of gender, race, class, and power in both policy and practice.

In sum, the literature reveals a complex interplay of historical, cultural, economic, and institutional factors that sustain GBV in Namibia. While legal and policy frameworks exist, their effectiveness is undermined by societal attitudes, resource constraints, and fragmented implementation. A critical gap remains in translating knowledge

into action, particularly in engaging communities, transforming gender norms, and centring survivor voices in the national response.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a critical feminist framework to explore the structural, cultural, and institutional dimensions of gender-based violence (GBV) in Namibia. The qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing the lived experiences of survivors, unpacking the socio-cultural drivers of violence, and interrogating the effectiveness of policy responses (Gov.na, 2017; SVRI, 2013).

Research Design and Approach

A case study methodology was employed to allow for an in-depth examination of GBV within specific Namibian contexts, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas such as Windhoek and Oshakati. This design facilitates the exploration of complex social phenomena within their real-life settings (Shigwedha, 2018). The study is informed by the ecological model, which considers individual, relational, community, and societal factors contributing to GBV (Gov.na, 2017).

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who have direct experience with or professional knowledge of GBV. These included survivors, social workers, law enforcement officers, healthcare providers, and representatives from civil society organizations. A total of 25 participants were selected to ensure diversity in age, gender, and socio-economic background.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Interviews provided a confidential space for survivors to share personal narratives, while FGDs encouraged dialogue among professionals and community members. This triangulation of methods enhanced the credibility and richness of the data (SVRI, 2013).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and contradictions in the data. Transcripts were coded manually and analysed using NVivo software to ensure systematic categorization. Themes were developed inductively, allowing insights to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of the topic, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Namibia's Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Survivors were offered psychosocial support referrals where necessary (Shigwedha, 2018).

Limitations

The study acknowledges limitations such as potential recall bias, social desirability bias, and the underrepresentation of rural voices due to logistical constraints. However, efforts were made to mitigate these through trust-building, anonymity, and inclusive sampling.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal a deeply entrenched and multifaceted crisis of gender-based violence (GBV) in Namibia, shaped by intersecting structural, cultural, and institutional factors. Drawing from interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary data, several critical themes emerged:

Normalization of Violence and Harmful Gender Norms

Participants consistently highlighted the normalization of violence within intimate relationships, particularly in rural and peri-urban communities. Many survivors reported that abuse was often perceived as a private matter or a sign of male authority, echoing findings from the National GBV Baseline Study (Gov.na, 2017). Cultural beliefs that reinforce male dominance and female submission continue to legitimize violence and silence victims.

Institutional Gaps and Inconsistent Enforcement

Despite the existence of progressive legislation, such as the Combating of Domestic Violence Act (2003), enforcement remains inconsistent. Survivors described police responses as dismissive or retraumatizing, with some officers discouraging formal complaints. These findings align with SVRI's (2013) assessment, which noted limited training among law enforcement and a lack of survivor-centred protocols.

Barriers to Justice and Support Services

Access to justice and psychosocial support remains uneven, particularly in remote areas. Participants cited long distances to Women and Child Protection Units, lack of legal aid, and fear of retaliation as major deterrents to reporting. The SVRI (2013) report similarly found that fragmented service delivery and under-resourced shelters hinder effective survivor support.

Alcohol Abuse and Economic Dependency

Alcohol abuse emerged as a significant driver of GBV, often exacerbated by unemployment and economic dependency. Survivors and service providers noted that financial insecurity traps many women in abusive relationships. These findings echo the National GBV Baseline Study (Gov.na, 2017), which identified poverty and substance abuse as key risk factors.

Youth Vulnerability and Intergenerational Cycles

Adolescent girls and young women were identified as particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and coercion. Several participants emphasized the role of early exposure to violence in normalizing abusive behaviours across generations. This supports the argument by Edwards-Jauch (2020) that GBV in Namibia is perpetuated through intergenerational trauma and hegemonic masculinities.

Community Silence and Stigma

Stigma and victim-blaming remain pervasive, discouraging survivors from seeking help. Community leaders and religious institutions were often seen as passive or complicit, failing to challenge harmful norms. This finding reinforces the need for culturally sensitive, community-based interventions as recommended by Sabao and Nauyoma (2022).

In summary, the findings underscore a profound disconnect between legal frameworks and lived realities. While Namibia has made strides in policy development, the persistence of GBV reflects deeper societal fractures that require holistic, intersectional, and community-driven responses.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in Namibia requires a multi-pronged, systemic, and culturally grounded response. The following recommendations are proposed to strengthen prevention, protection, and accountability mechanisms:

Strengthen Community Based Prevention and Education

There is a critical need to invest in community-driven awareness campaigns that challenge harmful gender norms and promote positive masculinities. Programs should be tailored to local contexts and delivered in indigenous languages to ensure accessibility and cultural relevance (Gov.na, 2017). Engaging traditional leaders, faith-based institutions, and youth networks can foster grassroots ownership and sustainability.

Enhance Law Enforcement and Judicial Capacity

Training for police officers, prosecutors, and magistrates must be institutionalized to ensure survivor centred, trauma-informed responses. Specialized GBV units should be expanded and adequately resourced, particularly in underserved regions. Fast-tracking GBV cases through dedicated court dockets can reduce secondary victimization and improve conviction rates (SVRI, 2013).

Improve Access to Holistic Survivor Support Services

The government should prioritize the expansion of safe houses, psychosocial counselling, and legal aid services. Mobile outreach units can bridge service gaps in rural areas. A coordinated referral system, supported by digital case management tools, would enhance service integration and follow-up (Gov.na, 2017).

Address Structural Drivers of GBV

Poverty, unemployment, and alcohol abuse are key enablers of violence. Integrating GBV prevention into economic empowerment programs, such as vocational training and microfinance for women, can reduce dependency and increase agency. Regulation of alcohol sales and community-based substance abuse interventions are also essential (Gov.na, 2017).

Promote Gender Transformative Education

Curriculum reform is needed to embed comprehensive sexuality education and gender equality into primary and secondary schooling. Teacher training should include modules on GBV prevention, consent, and respectful relationships. Early intervention is crucial to disrupt intergenerational cycles of violence (IPPR, 2025).

Strengthen Data Collection and Research

There is a pressing need for disaggregated, real-time data on GBV incidence, service utilization, and outcomes. A national GBV observatory could centralize data collection and inform evidence-based policymaking. Further research should explore the intersectionality of GBV with disability, LGBTQ identities, and migration (SVRI, 2013).

Foster Multi-Sectoral Coordination and Accountability

A national GBV task force should be established to oversee implementation of policies, monitor progress, and ensure accountability across sectors. Civil society organizations must be meaningfully included in planning and evaluation processes. Sustainable financing mechanisms, including public-private partnerships, are essential for long-term impact (Gov.na, 2017).

These recommendations aim to move beyond reactive measures toward a transformative, survivor centred approach that addresses the root causes of GBV and builds a safer, more equitable Namibia.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the pervasive and systemic nature of gender-based violence (GBV) in Namibia, revealing it as not merely a social ill but a national emergency with profound human rights, public health, and developmental implications. Despite the existence of progressive legal frameworks such as the Combating of Domestic Violence Act (2003) and the Combating of Rape Act (2000), the persistence of GBV underscores a troubling disconnect between policy and practice (Gov.na, 2017; SVRI, 2013).

The findings demonstrate that GBV in Namibia is sustained by a constellation of factors: entrenched patriarchal norms, economic dependency, alcohol abuse, institutional weaknesses, and community-level stigma. Survivors face significant barriers to justice and support, particularly in rural and underserved areas, where services are fragmented and under-resourced. These realities echo the conclusions of the National GBV Baseline Study (Gov.na, 2017), which emphasized the need for a coordinated, multisectoral response.

Moreover, the study highlights the intergenerational transmission of violence and the vulnerability of youth, particularly adolescent girls, to sexual exploitation and coercion. The normalization of violence within intimate relationships and the complicity of social institutions further entrenches cycles of abuse (Edwards-Jauch, 2020; Sabao & Nauyoma, 2022).

In conclusion, unmasking the brutality of GBV in Namibia requires more than legal reform it demands a transformative shift in societal attitudes, institutional accountability, and survivor-centred service delivery. Only through sustained political will, community engagement, and structural investment can Namibia hope to dismantle the systemic roots of GBV and fulfill its constitutional promise of dignity, equality, and justice for all.

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How to cite/reference this article: **Custon Ziwoni, Clever Marisa, Johannes Marisa, A National Emergency: Unmasking the Brutality of Gender Based Violence in Namibia, *Asian. Jour. Social. Scie. Mgmt. Tech.* 2025; 7(4): 38-43.**