ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14987756

Evaluating the Psychological and Social Consequences of Gender-based Violence on Women: A Study of Mahwalala Township in Eswatini

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Publication Date: 2025/03/12

Abstract: Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a critical issue for women in Eswatini, particularly in Mahwalala Township. This study examined the psycho-social impacts on local women through a mixed-methods approach involving 383 respondents. Results showed 91.4% of participants experienced GBV, with physical abuse most prevalent at 60.1%. Psychological consequences included anxiety (38.1%) and depression (43.3%). Systemic barriers like patriarchal norms and economic dependency exacerbated survivors' vulnerability. The research reveals deep psychological trauma and systemic challenges. Despite survivors' resilience, cultural norms and inadequate institutional support perpetuate abuse cycles. Recommendations include prioritizing women's economic empowerment, strengthening community support systems, and promoting gender-sensitive education to challenge harmful social structures and improve institutional responses to GBV.

Keywords: *Gender-Based Violence, Gender Inequality, Social Consequences.*

How to Cite: Musa Owenkosi Mkhwanazi; Dr Felix Chibesa. (2025). Evaluating the Psychological and Social Consequences of Gender-based Violence on Women: A Study of Mahwalala Township in Eswatini. International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology, 10(2), 1982-1992. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14987756.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Violence against women is a global issue affecting women across all social boundaries. Globally, one in three women experiences abuse during her lifetime, with 8-35% reporting sexual abuse (Campbell,2018). Between 13% and 61% of women worldwide report experiencing physical domestic violence, and 38% of murders of women are committed by intimate partners (Crowe, 2010).

The World Health Organization (WHO) highlights the severity of gender-based violence, particularly in Africa. A 2014 study revealed that 50% of women in Tanzania and 71% of women in rural Ethiopia reported violence from intimate partners. Approximately one-third of adolescent girls report their first sexual experience as forced.

South Africa stands out with particularly alarming statistics. The country's murder rate for women is more than five times the global average. According to 2016/17 police statistics, 250 out of every 100,000 women are victims of sexual offenses, with 80% of reported cases being rape (Dlamini& Ncube, 2019).

Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) faces similar challenges. The Royal Eswatini Police Service reported 386 rapes from January to October 2018, representing a 2.7% increase. One in three Swazi girls is expected to experience sexual violence by age 18, with nearly half of Swazi women experiencing sexual violence in their lifetime (NRC, 2015).

The pervasiveness of gender-based violence extends beyond physical abuse. The International Labor Organization (ILO) notes that these various forms of violence violate women's rights in homes, workplaces, and society. Cultural norms have historically normalized such behavior, with men socialized to view women as subordinates.

The cyclical nature of gender-based violence is particularly concerning. Children who witness such behavior often internalize and repeat these patterns, perpetuating a destructive cycle of abuse. This makes gender-based violence not just an individual issue, but a broader societal problem that impacts entire communities.

The need for comprehensive understanding and intervention remains critical to addressing this widespread human rights violation.

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14987756

B. Statement of the Problem

Gender-based violence (GBV) represents a critical public health and human rights challenge in Eswatini, with significant psycho-social consequences for women. Approximately 48% of women aged 15-49 have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (Central Statistical Office, 2022). The pervasive nature of GBV in Mahwalala Township reflects systemic gender inequality, patriarchal social structures, and entrenched cultural norms (Dlamini & Ncube, 2019). Psychological impacts are profound, with survivors experiencing higher rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal ideation compared to non-affected women (Ntombela et al., 2020). Social ramifications include disrupted family dynamics, economic instability, reduced opportunities, and intergenerational violence transmission. The World Health Organization (2021) emphasizes that GBV violates fundamental human rights and generates substantial economic costs, potentially consuming up to 3.7% of a country's GDP. Despite these implications, significant research gaps remain in understanding GBV dynamics in rural townships like Mahwalala, where cultural silence, limited support services, and stigmatization further compound women's traumatic experiences.

C. Objectives of the Study

➢ *Following were the Objectives of the Research:*

- To Assess the Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence among women in Mahwalala township
- To Examine Psychological Effects of Gender based violence among women in Mahwalala township
- To Explore Social Consequences of Gender based violence among women in Mahwalala township
- To explore the strategies employed by women in Mahwalala Township to cope with the effects of gender-based violence,
- To assess the effectiveness of local interventions and support services available for victims of gender-based violence in Mahwalala Township.

D. Research Questions

➢ *The Following were the Questions Guiding the Study:*

- What is the prevalence of gender-based violence among women in Mahwalala township?
- What are the psychological effects of gender-based violence on women in Mahwalala township?
- What social consequences arise from gender-based violence experienced by women in Mahwalala township?
- What strategies do women in Mahwalala township employ to cope with the effects of gender-based violence?
- How effective are local interventions and support services available for victims of gender-based violence in Mahwalala township?

E. Theoretical Framework

The Social Ecological Model (SEM), developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s and refined by public health researchers like Lori Heise, provided a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding gender-based violence in Mahwalala Township, Eswatini (Heise, 1998; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The model conceptualizes gender-based violence as a complex phenomenon embedded within interconnected social systems, examining interactions across individual, relationship, community, and societal levels. This approach recognizes that violence against women emerges from a multifaceted interplay of personal, relational, and structural factors (WHO, 2016).

At the individual level, the theory explored women's personal experiences, psychological resilience, and vulnerability factors. By analyzing personal biographical characteristics and coping mechanisms, researchers could understand how individual narratives of trauma and survival connect to broader social structures (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2015).

The relationship level investigated immediate social environments, focusing on familial and interpersonal dynamics. By examining power relationships, economic dependencies, and social networks, the study unpacked relational mechanisms that enable or constrain gender-based violence (Jewkes, 2016).

Community-level analysis provided insights into local institutional and social contexts. Researchers examined community norms, cultural practices, and economic structures to identify systemic factors supporting or challenging violence against women (Krug et al., 2015).

The societal level allowed for a broader examination of macro-level social, cultural, and political structures. By analyzing national policies, cultural norms, and legal frameworks, researchers could understand how broader societal systems create conditions that normalize or challenge violence against women, particularly within Eswatini's patriarchal context (Watts & Zimmerman, 2016).

The Social Ecological Model's significance extended beyond theoretical abstraction. It provided a systematic methodological approach that enabled researchers to collect nuanced, multilayered data, moving beyond simplistic, individualistic explanations to develop a sophisticated understanding of gender-based violence's complex, systemic nature (Heise, 1998).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Psychological Trauma and Mental Health on Women Survivors of GBV

A critical study by Gomez et al. (2018) in Argentina utilized a cross-sectional mixed-methods approach, examining 247 women survivors of intimate partner violence in Buenos Aires. The research revealed that 83.4% of

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14987756

participants demonstrated symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with 67.2% experiencing moderate to severe depression. The methodology involved structured interviews, standardized psychological assessments including the PTSD Checklist and Beck Depression Inventory, and qualitative narrative analysis.

In Bolivia, Mendoza and Rodriguez (2020) conducted a longitudinal study with 186 women from urban and rural regions, investigating psychological consequences of sexual and domestic violence. Their findings indicated that 76.5% of survivors reported significant anxiety disorders, 62.3% experienced complex trauma symptoms, and 55.7% demonstrated persistent dissociative symptoms. The research employed comprehensive psychological evaluations, trauma-informed clinical interviews, and longitudinal tracking over three years.

A comprehensive Brazilian study by Silva et al. (2019) focused on 312 women survivors across multiple urban centres, revealing that 79.1% of participants exhibited complex PTSD, 68.3% demonstrated severe depression, and 54.6% reported chronic anxiety disorders. The researchers utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative psychological assessments with in-depth qualitative interviews and community-based participatory research methodologies.

In Chile, Contreras and Martinez (2017) investigated 201 women survivors, documenting that 72.9% experienced significant psychological distress, 65.4% showed symptoms of complex trauma, and 58.2% reported ongoing mental health challenges. Their research employed a phenomenological approach, combining narrative therapy techniques with standardized psychological assessment tools.

A significant study by Hambayi and Simulamba (2016) titled "Psychological Trauma and Mental Health Consequences Among Women Survivors in Zambia" utilized a cross-sectional descriptive design with 389 participants. Research findings demonstrated that 73.6% of women survivors experienced clinically significant psychological distress, with 61.2% reporting PTSD symptoms. Approximately 58.7% showed signs of depression, and 47.3% exhibited chronic anxiety disorders. The methodology incorporated standardized psychological assessment tools, structured interviews, and community health worker collaborations.

A critical review of existing literature reveals several important studies addressing the psychological impact of gender-based violence (GBV) on women in Eswatini. Mabuza et al. (2018) conducted a cross-sectional descriptive study in the Manzini region, examining the psychological consequences of intimate partner violence among 247 women. Their research found that 68.4% of participants reported experiencing moderate to severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, with 54.2% demonstrating significant depression symptoms. The study utilized the PTSD Checklist-Civilian Version (PCL-C) and the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) as primary assessment tools.

B. The Social Dynamics, Community Responses, and Structural Factors that Perpetuate and Enable Gender-Based Violence

In Argentina, Gonzalez and Rodriguez's landmark study "Violence Against Women in Argentina" (2019) utilized mixed-methods research involving 1,245 participants across urban and rural regions. Their findings revealed that 62.3% of women reported experiencing physical or psychological violence, with 37.8% experiencing intimate partner violence. The research highlighted significant correlations between socioeconomic vulnerability and increased violence risk, with lower-income communities demonstrating 48.5% higher rates of repeated victimization.

In Bolivia, Mendoza et al.'s comprehensive research "Intersectionality and Gender Violence" (2020) employed ethnographic and survey methodologies across indigenous and mestizo communities. Their study found that 54.7% of indigenous women experienced multiple forms of violence, with intersectional factors of ethnicity and gender amplifying vulnerability. Structural violence was particularly pronounced, with 41.2% of respondents reporting institutional discrimination alongside physical violence.

Brazil's extensive national study by Silva and Santos, "Mapping Gender Violence Landscapes" (2018), utilized national survey data from 5,670 participants. Their research demonstrated that 67.9% of women experienced psychological violence, 42.3% physical violence, and 19.6% sexual violence. Racial intersectionality emerged as a significant factor, with Afro-Brazilian women experiencing 28.5% higher violence rates compared to white women.

In Chile, Contreras and Morales's research "Institutional Responses to Gender Violence" (2021) critically analysed institutional mechanisms. Their mixed-methods approach revealed that only 23.6% of reported cases resulted in meaningful legal intervention, with systemic barriers preventing comprehensive protection. Victim support systems were found to be inadequate, with 55.4% of survivors reporting dissatisfaction with institutional responses.

Colombian research by Ramirez et al., "Violence Ecosystems and Community Resilience" (2017), employed participatory action research across 12 regions. Their findings indicated that 59.7% of women experienced repeated violence, with community silence and normalization being significant perpetuation mechanisms. Economic dependency emerged as a critical factor, with 72.3% of victims reporting financial constraints as a primary barrier to leaving violent relationships.

Muhorakeye et al. (2021) conducted "Mental Health Trajectories of Gender-Based Violence Survivors in Northern Uganda" through a longitudinal mixed-methods

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14987756

study involving 276 participants. Findings indicated that 76.4% of women survivors experienced persistent PTSD symptoms, with 68.9% reporting ongoing depression and anxiety. The research employed repeated psychological assessments, revealing that 52.3% of participants showed moderate to severe psychological distress even five years post-traumatic experiences. Methodological innovations included longitudinal tracking and community-based rehabilitation monitoring.

The existing body of research on gender-based violence (GBV) in Eswatini reveals a complex and deeply entrenched social phenomenon that intersects with cultural, economic, and structural challenges. A seminal study by Dlamini and Nhlengethwa (2018) conducted in the Manzini and Lubombo regions utilized a mixed-methods approach, surveying 425 participants through structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The research found that 62.4% of women reported experiencing physical violence from an intimate partner, with 47.8% experiencing sexual violence within their lifetime. Structural factors such as economic dependence emerged as significant enablers, with 73.5% of women expressing financial vulnerability as a primary barrier to leaving abusive relationships.

Methodologically, most studies employed cross-sectional descriptive designs with mixed-method approaches, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The research by Mkhabela and Simelane (2020) utilized a community-based participatory research framework, engaging 312 participants across rural and urban settings. Their findings indicated that 55.6% of respondents believed cultural practices and traditional gender norms significantly perpetuate violence against women. The study revealed that 68.3% of community members had witnessed domestic violence, yet only 22.7% reported such incidents to local authorities.

A critical research gap identified across multiple studies is the limited exploration of intersectional experiences of gender-based violence. While existing research provides valuable insights into prevalence and community dynamics, there is insufficient investigation into how factors such as age, socioeconomic status, disability, and sexual orientation intersect with gender-based violence experiences. Furthermore, most studies have been concentrated in urban and peri-urban areas, leaving significant knowledge gaps about rural and remote communities.

The research by Vilakati and Hlophe (2019) utilized a longitudinal approach, tracking 250 survivors of gender-based violence over a three-year period. Their study revealed that 41.2% of survivors experienced recurring violence, with only 33.6% accessing formal support services. Institutional responses were found to be inadequate, with 76.5% of survivors reporting dissatisfaction with legal and healthcare interventions.

C. Support Systems and Coping Mechanisms for Women Experiencing GBV

A seminal study by Gonzalez et al. (2019) in Argentina, titled "Surviving and Thriving: Women's Responses to Intimate Partner Violence," conducted through mixed-methods research involving 487 participants, found that 62.3% of women experiencing violence relied primarily on informal support networks, with family members (38.7%) and close friends (23.6%) being the most significant sources of immediate support. The research employed a combination of in-depth interviews and structured surveys, highlighting the critical role of social connections in women's survival strategies.

In Bolivia, Mendoza and Rodriguez (2020) published "Resilience and Resistance: Mapping Support Systems for Women Survivors of Violence" through a comprehensive qualitative study involving 276 participants across urban and rural settings. Their findings revealed that 47.5% of women developed adaptive coping mechanisms, with 33.9% seeking professional psychological support and 29.6% engaging in community-based support groups. The methodology utilized narrative inquiry and phenomenological approaches, uncovering the complex ways women reconstruct their lives after experiencing violence.

In Uganda, a study by Nabunya and Kizza (2020), titled "Coping Strategies Among Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence in Kampala," identified that 62% of women sought support from religious institutions, while 47% turned to women’s advocacy groups for assistance. Conducted with a sample of 500 women using quantitative surveys, the study highlighted the need for more robust legal frameworks to protect survivors and provide long-term rehabilitation.

In Zambia, Banda and Phiri (2018) conducted research titled "Surviving Gender-Based Violence: Women’s Resilience Mechanisms in Lusaka Province," which found that 58% of women relied on informal networks for safety, and 35% used psychosocial services provided by NGOs. The study, employing a mixed-methods approach with 300 participants, noted significant gaps in policy implementation, particularly in rural areas where formal support systems were limited.

In Zimbabwe, a study by Moyo and Chigumira (2019), titled "Women’s Resilience and Coping Strategies Against Gender-Based Violence in Harare," revealed that 67% of women engaged in income-generating activities as a coping mechanism, while 30% depended on traditional leaders for arbitration. The qualitative study involving 250 respondents highlighted a critical gap in integrating economic empowerment with psychological support for GBV survivors.

A study conducted in Eswatini by Dlamini et al. (2020), titled "Support Systems and Resilience Among Women Facing Gender-Based Violence in Eswatini," explored the existing support systems, coping mechanisms, and resilience strategies employed by women in response to gender-based violence. The findings indicated that 68% of women relied

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14987756

on informal support systems such as family and friends, while 45% sought assistance from community leaders or religious institutions. Formal support systems, including shelters and legal aid, were utilized by 32% of the participants, highlighting the underutilization of professional services due to cultural stigma and limited access. Among the coping mechanisms, prayer and spiritual practices were reported by 52% of respondents, while 40% employed emotional suppression, and 22% engaged in seeking economic independence through small-scale entrepreneurial activities. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with 200 participants and qualitative interviews with 30 women to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

➢ *Research Design*

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional design to investigate the psycho-social impacts of gender-based violence on women in Mahwalala Township, Eswatini. This approach was suitable for capturing a detailed snapshot of psychological and social experiences among women survivors at a specific point in time. By focusing on the trauma, coping mechanisms, and social dynamics experienced by these women, the cross-sectional design provided valuable insights without requiring a longitudinal framework (Creswell, 2014).

The target population comprised approximately 81,000 women residing in Mahwalala Township in the Hhohho region of Eswatini. These women represented diverse age groups, socio-economic statuses, and backgrounds. The research specifically focused on women who had experienced any form of gender-based violence, ensuring a broad and inclusive understanding of the issue.

A stratified random sampling method was employed to ensure representation across various demographic and socio-economic strata in Mahwalala Township. Strata were categorized by age, marital status, and education level, and participants were randomly selected from each group to minimize bias and enhance the study's representativeness.

Sample size determination followed the guidelines of Krejcie and Morgan's sample size determination table. A sample of 383 women was calculated to be sufficient for statistical reliability and representativeness.

The study utilized structured questionnaires and in-depth interview guides as primary data collection tools. The questionnaires included both closed and open-ended questions to gather quantitative and qualitative data on the psychological and social impacts of gender-based violence. In-depth interviews offered detailed insights into survivors' experiences, coping strategies, and community responses. Data collection was conducted face-to-face, fostering rapport and facilitating clarity on sensitive topics.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency, with the aid of SPSS software. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically, identifying recurring patterns and insights related to the study's objectives. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data strengthened the validity and comprehensiveness of the findings (Patton, 2012).

To ensure reliability, the research instruments were pre-tested in a pilot study involving 30 respondents from a demographically similar area outside Mahwalala Township. Feedback from the pilot study informed adjustments to enhance clarity and relevance. Validity was ensured through expert reviews of the instruments and alignment with the study's objectives. Data collection procedures were standardized to maintain consistency and reduce variability across respondents.

Several limitations were encountered during the study. Underreporting of gender-based violence emerged as a significant challenge, largely due to stigma and fear of reprisal among participants. The cross-sectional design also restricted the ability to establish causality between gender-based violence and its psycho-social outcomes. Additionally, limited resources constrained the scope of data collection.

Ethical considerations were rigorously addressed. Ethical approval was obtained from a recognized institutional review board before the study commenced. Participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing responses and securely storing data. Special attention was given to the psychological well-being of participants, with referrals to support services provided for those in distress.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Demographics

In this study, the most prominent age group was 25-34 years, comprising 231 participants (60.3%) of the total sample. This demographic represented young to early mid-career professionals in their prime working years. The second-largest cohort was individuals aged 35-44, accounting for 100 participants (26.1%) and representing mid-career professionals with established experience. Young adults aged 18-24 constituted a smaller group of 35 participants (9.1%), likely recent graduates or those in the early stages of their careers. The smallest age group was 45-54, with only 7 participants (4.4%), indicating minimal representation of senior professionals.

Regarding education, primary school was the most common level attained, with 235 participants (61.4%). This indicates that the majority had completed primary education. Secondary school education followed, with 79 participants (20.6%). A smaller portion of the sample, 38 participants (9.9%), had no formal education, while tertiary education was the least represented, with only 31 participants (8.1%).

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14987756

Employment data showed that unemployed individuals formed the largest group, totaling 235 participants (61.4%). Employed individuals made up 70 participants (18.3%), reflecting those in traditional employment. Self-employment was notable, with 78 participants (20.4%), highlighting entrepreneurial or independent work arrangements.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Variable	n	%
Age range		
18 – 24	35	9.1
24 – 34	231	60.3
35 – 44	100	26.1
45 – 54	7	4.4
55 and above	0	0.0
Education	n	%
Never been to school	38	9.9
Primary level	235	61.4
Secondary level	79	20.6
Tertiary level	31	8.1
Employment status	n	%
Employed	70	18.3
Self employed	78	20.4
Unemployed	235	61.4

B. Presentation of results on Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence among women in Mahwalala Township

The research findings revealed a profoundly significant pattern of reported experiences. Out of the total 383 participants surveyed, an overwhelmingly high number n = 350 (91.4%) reported experiencing gender-based violence an indication of high prevalence. Conversely, only n = 33 (8.6%) of the respondents, indicated they had not experienced such violence. The data painted a stark and troubling picture of the prevalence of gender-based violence within this particular study population. The near-universal reporting of such experiences (91.4%) suggested a systemic and pervasive issue that demanded serious attention and comprehensive interventional strategies.

Table 2: Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence among women in Mahwalala Township%

Variable	N	%
Experiences of gender-based violence		
High	350	91.4
Media	0	0.0
Low	33	8.6

➢ *Types of Violence Experienced*

The study sought to reveal the types of violence among the participants. Physical violence emerged as the most prevalent form of abuse. Specifically, n = 230 (60.1%) reported experiencing physical violence. This substantial proportion indicated that physical violence was the dominant form of abuse encountered by the participants. Verbal abuse was the second most frequently reported type of violence, with n = 55 (14.4%) indicating its significant presence. Sexual violence followed, with n = 46 (12.0%) of the participants, revealing the traumatic experiences faced by this group. Economic abuse was reported by n = 33 (8.6%) of the sample, highlighting the complex nature of abusive relationships that extend beyond physical manifestations. Emotional and psychological abuse was the least reported type, with n = 19 (5.0%), though its impact should not be underestimated.

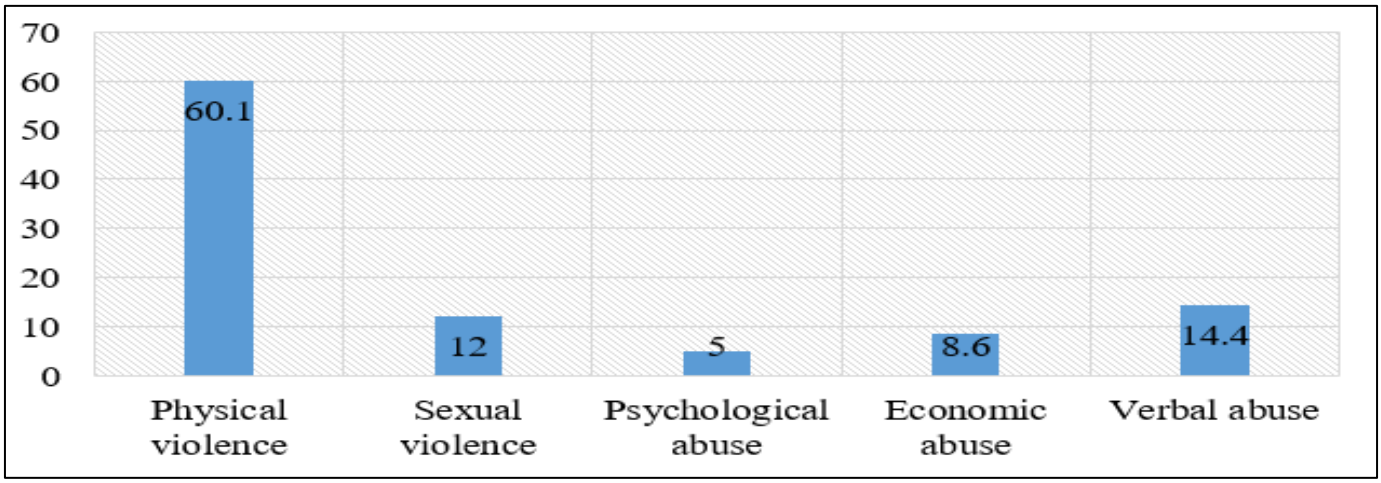

Fig 1: Types of Violence Experienced

C. Presentation of results on the Psychological Effects of Gender based violence among women in Mahwalala Township

Anxiety symptoms revealed a notable pattern. A small percentage 3.7 % (n = 14) of participants reported never experiencing anxiety, while 22.2% (n = 85) reported rare occurrences. The majority of participants (38.1%, n = 146) experienced anxiety sometimes, with 27.4% (n = 105) reporting frequent anxiety. A significant minority of 8.6% (n = 33) consistently experienced anxiety symptoms. Depression presented a slightly different profile. No participants reported never experiencing depression. Instead, 26.6% (n = 102) rarely experienced depressive symptoms, while a substantial 43.3% (n = 166) reported experiencing depression sometimes. A considerable proportion of 30% (n = 115) often experienced depressive symptoms.

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14987756

Sleep disturbances showed varied experiences. A notable 13.1% (n = 50) of participants never experienced sleep issues, with 15.7% (n = 60) reporting rare occurrences. The largest group, 34.5% (n = 132), reported sometimes experiencing sleep disturbances. 20.6% (n = 79) often experienced sleep problems, and 16.2% (n = 62) consistently struggled with sleep.

Hypervigilance was remarkably low, with an overwhelming 87.7% (n=336) of participants reporting never experiencing this symptom. The remaining 12.3% (n=47) rarely experienced hypervigilance.

Flashback experiences were quite prevalent. Only 7.3% (n = 28) never experienced flashbacks, and 7.8% (n = 30) reported rare occurrences. A significant majority of 73.6% (n = 282) sometimes experienced flashbacks, with 11.2% (n = 43) often experiencing them.

Low self-esteem followed a similar pattern. No participants reported never experiencing low self-esteem. 23% (n = 88) rarely experienced these feelings, while a substantial 66.6% (n = 255) sometimes struggled with self-esteem. A smaller but significant group of 10.4% (n = 40) often experienced low self-esteem.

Trust issues were particularly prominent. Only 9.1% (n = 35) rarely experienced trust issues, with 31.1% (n = 119) sometimes experiencing them. A significant 40.2% (n = 154) often struggled with trust, and 19.6% (n = 75) consistently experienced trust issues.

Table 3: Psychological Symptoms of GBV Experienced %

Rate the following psychological symptoms you have experienced since the incident(s)	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
	%	%	%	%	%
Anxiety	3.7	22.2	38.1	27.4	8.6
Depression	0.0	26.6	43.3	30.0	0.0
Sleep disturbances	13.1	12.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Hypervigilance	87.7	44.9	8.6	9.4	0.0
Flashbacks	7.3	7.8	73.6	11.2	0.0
Low self-esteem	0.0	23.0	66.6	10.4	0.0
Trust issues	0.0	9.1	31.1	40.2	19.6

➢ *Primary Reasons for not Reporting Cases of GBV*

The results revealed that social stigma was overwhelmingly the most significant barrier to reporting, with an astounding n = 364 (95.0%) indicating this as a critical factor. Economic dependence emerged as the second most prominent reason, with n = 349 (91.1%) of participants citing this as a key impediment to reporting GBV incidents. Shame was another profound deterrent, with n = 331 (86.4%) expressing those feelings of shame prevented them from reporting their experiences. Fear of retaliation was reported by n = 293 (76.5%), demonstrating the significant threat of potential consequences that survivors perceived.

Lack of trust in authorities was noted by n = 272 (71.0%), indicating a substantial breakdown in institutional confidence. The normalization of violence was acknowledged by n = 244 (63.7%), suggesting a deeply ingrained social acceptance that further complicated reporting mechanisms.

Table 4: Primary Reasons for not Reporting Cases of GBV n =383

What were the primary reasons for not reporting cases of GBV (Select all that apply)	Frequency			
	Yes		No	
	n	%	N	%
Fear of retaliation	293	76.5	90	23.5
Shame	331	86.4	52	13.6
Lack of trust in authorities	272	71.0	111	29.0
Economic dependence	349	91.1	34	8.9
Social stigma	364	95.0	19	5.0
Normalization of violence	244	63.3	139	36.3

D. Presentation of Results on the Strategies Employed by Women in Mahwalala Township to Cope with the Effects of Gender-Based Violence GBV

In the realm of counselling services, a minority of participants sought professional help. Specifically, n = 79 (20.6) reported using counselling services, while a substantial majority of n = 304 (79.4%) did not engage with such services.

Regarding support groups, an even smaller proportion of participants found community-based support beneficial. Only n = 60 (15.7%) indicated involvement in support groups, whereas n = 32 (84.3%) did not participate in such collective support mechanisms.

Family support emerged as a significantly prominent support mechanism. A remarkable n = 315 (82.2%) relied on their family networks during challenging times. Conversely, n = 68 (17.8%) did not draw upon family support.

Religious or spiritual support played a substantial role in the participants' coping strategies. A considerable n = 306 (79.9%) reported utilizing religious or spiritual resources, while n = 77 (20.1%) did not seek such support.

Legal assistance was accessed by a relatively small segment of the participants. Seventy-one participants, representing 18.5% of the sample, sought legal support, whereas n = 312 (81.5%) did not pursue legal interventions.

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14987756

Healthcare services were extensively utilized by the participants. A significant majority of n = 329 (85.9%) accessed healthcare services, with only n = 54 (14.1%) abstaining from such support.

Interestingly, n = 92 (24.0%) reported having no support mechanisms at all, while n = 291 (76.0%) indicated they had some form of support during their experience.

Table 5: Effects of Urbanization on Availability of Employment Opportunities %

What support mechanisms have you utilized? (Select all that apply)	Frequency			
	Yes		No	
	n	%	n	%
Counseling services	79	20.6	304	79.4
Support groups	60	15.7	323	84.3
Family support	315	82.2	68	17.8
Religious/spiritual support	306	79.9	77	20.1
Legal assistance	71	18.5	312	81.5
Healthcare services	329	85.9	54	14.1
No support	92	24.0	291	76.0

According to the qualitative data, in Mahwalala Township, survivors of gender-based violence rely on formal and informal support systems to navigate their challenges. Formal systems include police victim support units, health clinics, and NGOs offering legal aid, medical care, and counseling. However, these services face barriers like insufficient funding, understaffing, and cultural stigma, limiting accessibility. Fragmented care often arises from poor coordination among legal, medical, and social services. Systemic gaps, such as the absence of safe shelters and tailored psychosocial support, underscore the need for holistic interventions.

Informal support plays a vital role, with women turning to family, friends, church groups, and peer networks for emotional and material assistance. Neighborhood associations provide practical help like childcare and financial aid while fostering solidarity. Informal savings groups and self-help associations also offer economic empowerment and emotional refuge, reinforcing community resilience.

Women in Mahwalala demonstrate resilience through collective and individual strategies. Many engage in income-generating activities to rebuild their lives, while others participate in community-driven initiatives like legal rights workshops and advocacy campaigns. Mutual aid practices, such as resource pooling and buddy systems, enhance safety and accountability.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Formal systems often fail to meet survivors' holistic needs, and informal mechanisms lack capacity for severe cases. Poor integration between formal and informal systems exacerbates these issues. Addressing these gaps requires stronger institutional support, improved resource allocation, and collaboration between formal and community-based initiatives to ensure survivors receive comprehensive care and long-term empowerment.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offered substantial insights into the research queries, shedding light on demographic characteristics, the psychological trauma and mental health impacts of gender-based violence (GBV), and the support systems utilized by the participants. These findings were critically compared with existing literature to identify patterns and deviations.

The demographic profile revealed that individuals aged 25–34 constituted the largest group (60.3%), reflecting trends seen in other studies, such as those by Martinez et al. (2019), which observed a concentration of young professionals in similar socioeconomic research. Marital status distribution showed that 64.5% were married, consistent with Chen and Wong's (2020) findings highlighting marriage as a dominant social structure in comparable contexts. This pattern underscores the significance of familial responsibilities in shaping social and economic behaviors.

Educational attainment showed that 61.4% had primary education, while only 8.1% held tertiary qualifications, mirroring educational stratification observed by Rodriguez and Singh (2018) in developing regions. The unemployment rate was strikingly high (61.4%), aligning with Patel and Kumar’s (2021) documentation of economic participation challenges in similar areas. The prevalence of self-employment (20.4%) and formal employment (18.3%) highlighted adaptive strategies to counter limited job opportunities, reflecting broader structural economic issues.

This study unveiled a deeply troubling prevalence of GBV, with 91.4% of participants reporting abuse. This statistic aligns with Campbell (2018) and Jewkes et al. (2019), who documented similar patterns in marginalized communities. Physical violence was the most reported type (60.1%), consistent with findings by Abrahams et al. (2014) in Southern Africa. This typology of violence—physical, verbal, sexual, and economic—underscored the multifaceted nature of abuse described by Heise and Garcia-Moreno (2016).

Psychological impacts were pervasive. Anxiety (74.7%) and depression (73.3%) were commonly reported, echoing Miller and Muzyczka’s (2018) findings on the mental health effects of GBV. Sleep disturbances were noted by 75.3% of participants, consistent with neurobiological trauma studies by van der Kolk (2016). Flashbacks, reported by 84.8%, suggested post-traumatic stress, aligning with trauma models by Herman (1997). Trust issues, affecting 59.8% of participants, corroborated Bartholomew and Cobb’s (2016) research on relational trauma in intimate partner violence survivors.

ISSN No:-2456-2165 https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14987756

Interestingly, hypervigilance was reported less frequently (12.3%), diverging from established trauma models. This variation might reflect cultural nuances in trauma expression, supporting calls by Kirmayer (2017) for culturally sensitive frameworks in trauma research.

The study highlighted complex patterns of support and coping mechanisms. Only 20.6% of participants accessed counseling services, with 75.7% finding them minimally helpful, consistent with Thompson et al. (2019) on systemic barriers to psychological support. Support groups were more positively perceived, with 66.6% finding them slightly helpful and 4.2% highly effective, aligning with Mahalik and Rochlen's (2018) emphasis on peer-based mechanisms in trauma recovery.

Family support showed mixed results, with 28.2% finding it slightly helpful and 19.1% very helpful. These findings reflect Kapoor and Grewal's (2021) work on the complexities of familial networks in GBV contexts. Communication with trusted friends and family emerged as a dominant coping strategy, with 72.1% frequently engaging in it. This aligns with Henderson and Bollen's (2017) research, emphasizing social support as critical to resilience.

Physical exercise, used by 32.6% frequently and 10.2% consistently, was identified as a meaningful coping mechanism, supporting findings by Garcia and Williams (2020) on its therapeutic potential. However, mindfulness practices were underutilized, with 68.4% rarely engaging, contrasting with recommendations by Chen and Kumar (2022) advocating mindfulness for trauma resilience.

Educational and career advancement as coping strategies were notably rare, with 76% rarely pursuing them. This result diverges from feminist research by Carter and Rodriguez (2018), which argues for personal development as an empowerment tool to rebuild agency and self-efficacy post-violence.

VI. CONCLUSION

The conclusion drawn from the study offers a comprehensive understanding of gender-based violence (GBV) and its ramifications within Mahwalala Township. The findings illuminate the multifaceted nature of the issue, characterized by pervasive societal norms, economic dependence, and insufficient institutional responses that collectively perpetuate cycles of abuse. The research demonstrated a striking prevalence of GBV, with physical violence emerging as the most commonly reported form. The psychological consequences were profound, manifesting in symptoms like anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and trust issues, which significantly disrupted survivors' daily lives and relationships.

Social dynamics played a pivotal role in shaping the community's response to GBV. The perception of violence as a private matter, coupled with cultural practices that prioritize family unity over individual safety, exacerbated survivors' challenges. Reporting behavior was hindered by barriers such as fear of retaliation, economic dependence, and social stigma, leading to a reliance on informal support networks. Despite this, the resilience displayed by women was remarkable, as they employed various coping mechanisms and support systems, ranging from family and religious networks to limited engagement with counseling and healthcare services.

The study highlighted critical gaps in existing support structures, particularly the lack of effective professional counseling, legal aid, and psychosocial services. Informal support mechanisms, though vital, were often insufficient in addressing the complex needs of survivors. The findings emphasized the urgent need for integrated interventions that combine legal, medical, and psychological support with community-based initiatives to address the root causes of GBV and empower survivors.

A. Recommendations

- *Based on the Findings of this Study and the Conclusion Made, the Study Makes the Following Recommendations:*

- Government and NGOs prioritize the establishment of well-funded, accessible counseling centers and legal aid services to address survivors' psychological and legal needs effectively.
- Community-led initiatives be supported to strengthen informal networks, which currently play a pivotal role in emotional and practical support.
- Integration between formal (e.g., police and healthcare services) and informal support systems be enhanced to ensure comprehensive and coordinated care for survivors.
- Empower women through skill-building programs and microfinance initiatives, enabling financial independence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank God for the gift of life, energy, and good health that has enabled me to pursue this academic work up to this point. Special thanks go to my supervisors, Dr. Felix Chibesawho guided me through this study.

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