

## [Un] Masking Domestic Violence against Men in South Africa

**Malesela Edward Montle**

University of Limpopo

Department of Languages: English Studies

[edward.montle@ul.ac.za](mailto:edward.montle@ul.ac.za)

---

### ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence is a vexing issue in the present-day South Africa. It is an apex challenge engendered a variety of initiatives from the South African society; communities and government rising to fight against it. This is because gender-based violence threatens the socio-economic growth of the country. This involves its effect on productivity, leadership, health, and business facets of South Africa. Many scholarly studies, campaigns, talk shows, and documentaries have reflected on the destruction that gender-based violence causes for women in the country. It is women who are proclaimed to be victims of gender-based violence, and the latter is found to be a hindrance to their social, political, and economic progress. However, this qualitative study identifies male gender-based violence as the gap in the literature as little has been done to raise awareness about the plight of men amid the appalling gender-based violence. Abuse against men is also a critical problem that tends to be overlooked and this necessitates the need to address gender-based violence against men. The study has drawn from a minimum of five narrative cases of male domestic violence which were snowballed from daily newsletters. It concluded that it is socio-cultural notions, *inter alia*, that perpetuate the mystification of men being immune to domestic violence, and as a result, it has become difficult for victims of male gender-based violence to ‘come out of the closet.’

**Keywords:** Economic growth, Gender-based violence, male domestic violence, socio-cultural notions.

---

### Introduction

The present-day South Africa marks a vexing concern against gender-based violence which Bloom (2008: 14) depicts as “violence that occurs as a result of the normative role expectations associated with each gender, as well as the unequal power relationships between the genders within the context of a specific society.” This gender-based violence is found to be the cornerstone of tragic moments in families, relationships and

marriages (World Health Organisation, 2013). It has garnered intense scholarly attention with most studies asserting that women are victims of the violence and men are perpetrators. Thus, Atmore (2001: 2) postulates that “to varying degrees, this view has shaped different stances on and responses to domestic violence as a social problem, in areas ranging from government policy to feminist campaigns.” This noted, the study argues

that there is a gap between men and women in terms of addressing gender-based violence as there are negligible cases of male domestic violence that are not brought to limelight. This, among other factors, is found to be informed by cultural notions such as the saying *Monna ke nku o llela teng* (A man is a lamp and cries inwardly). This saying makes it a taboo for a man's tears to be seen or his cry to be heard. Therefore, this brings to question the number of men that subscribe to this saying and suffer in silence. Barber (2008: 15) adds that "male victims do not freely admit being victims of intimate partner violence at the hands of females." Nevertheless, statistical reports in South Africa confirm that a vast majority of women are victimised by men than women victimising men. For instance, The Institute for Security Studies (2011) reports that "80% of men admitted having transgressed against intimate partners, whereas, married women experienced the most intimate partner violence (53%)." Given the statistics above, it is blatant that women are most vulnerable to gender-based violence, however, the unaddressed portion of male domestic violence cannot be ignored as it is capable of affecting the country's socio-economic growth. Srivastava (2016: 1193) confirms that "the victimisation of men by their women partners is a serious social problem and it is largely ignored by the society." Moreover, taking into consideration that "domestic violence is more dangerous than cancer, motor vehicle accidents, war and malaria. It cuts across boundaries of age, race, culture, wealth and geography" (Kaur 2011: 10), it is important to address male domestic violence, thus, combating gender-based violence without preference

or limitation and not "falling into a clear-cut division of simply promoting the interests of male victims of undermining feminism, especially when we keep in mind that the effects of some claims can be unintended" (Atmore, 2001: 3).

### Literature review

Gender-based violence is typically known to affect women from different walks of life. It is this perception that fabricated a passive reaction to the abuse of men and boys. Most societies are still ignorant about male domestic violence and deem it as "taboo— especially male-on-male rape — and is not often spoken about" (Clarfelt, 2014: 6). Thus, it is almost impossible to track accounts of domestic violence as referential comments depict women as justified victims of assault (Atmore, 2001: 5). The silence and ignorance revolving around male domestic violence deteriorate this problem. It becomes difficult for men to find help unlike their female counterpart and this inspired by socio-cultural constructions such as the saying *Monna ke nku o llela teng* (A man is a lamp and cries inwardly) which declare that "men are strong and tough and fighters, that men do not feel pain or cry, and therefore cannot be vulnerable to abuse. Reporting to the police was said to be particularly problematic because police officers will dismiss and/or ridicule the victim" (Clarfelt 2014: 6). This observable ignorance on male domestic weakens the weaponry to deracinate gender-based violence all together such as the initiative to report the abuse. Some exceptional citizens point out the height of male abuse in South Africa. A female participant in Clarfelt's (2014: 6) study acknowledges

that “male abuse is not taken seriously. People think that a man cannot be raped or beaten by his wife. People need to be given more knowledge. Boys are raped outside and people are not aware of that happens, and what to do.” Equally important, it is societal misconceptions that cement gender-based violence to play a malicious role in men’s lives. In most cases, these men are found to be subjects if not objects of gender-based violence, and this manifests the latter as a curse to men. Clarfelt (2014: 3) asserts that “men and boys who fail to conform to socially acceptable notions of what it means to be a man are vulnerable to physical, emotional and sexual abuse.” This is because social notions seemingly enforce stiffness, strength, and dominance in men while turning a blind eye to their human weaknesses and holding back an ear to listen to their cries. Barbelet (2014: 5) avers that “men and boys are often seen as potential soldiers and fighters in conflicts – and thus a threat to the opposing side – due to the socially attributed role given to men. Targeted killings of men and boys because of their gendered role should be recognised as a form of gender-based violence, similar to sexual violence against women and girls.” Thus these men find themselves impelled to conform to the social notions and enforce dominance to appease and be accepted by the society as menlike this “society that we grow up in that is that we have been told by our parents told us men need to be strong, the man is the provider of the family, men do not cry, if they feel pain, they cry from inside” Clarfelt (2014: 12). This *inter alia* may perpetuate the abuse of women by men to be a prove a point relayed to them by society. It necessitates gender balance

to combat domestic violence as it is blatant that any loophole on the side of both male and females may extend the upper hand to the nemesis. Dempsey (2013) asserts that “the feminist model viewing men as violent and women as victims of their violence, reinforces gender stereotypes, minimising the seriousness of female-perpetrated abuse and increasing the invisibility of male victims of domestic abuse.” It is such gaps that result in the persistence of gender-based violence which needs to be utterly addressed.

### **Perpetrators and forms of domestic violence against men in South Africa**

Several men and boys are found to be victims of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. The latter is corroborated by Barbelet (2014: 3) who notes that “men and boys have also been sexually abused in conflicts. We don’t know the full scale of this crisis globally and how many have experienced sexual violence precisely because this has been such a hidden issue.” The male victims are silenced, among other factors, by socio-cultural notions that deny the man the right to express his pain and for the exceptions that decide to ‘come out of the closet’, they often mutter that “you keep on empowering our women - but who comes to talk to us about regaining our dignity and listens to our problems?” (Barbelet, 2014: 3). This domestic violence against men manifests in forms as orchestrated by different perpetrators depending on their intentions. These perpetrators include both women and men abusing other men in different facets. This is detailed below:

### **Sexual abuse of men by women and other men**

Although societal perceptions seemingly encourage men to be strong, tough, and dominant, this does not make them immune to domestic violence. Notably, men appear to be haunted by sexual violence in different platforms of life and this has been privatised matter in communities particularly those that robustly culturally-driven. Hence, Clarfelt (2014: 9) notes that “male-on-male rape was said to be a form of sexual and gender-based violence against men that is not acknowledged or spoken about openly in the communities where young people live.” Male rape appears to be far-fetched to society and this noted as a result of its doubtful reaction to cases of male rape. For instance, in a health E-newsletter by Maseko (2015), a man aged 26 states that he was raped by a stranger on his way home around 7pm and when he broke the sad news to his friends, they laughed at him and this discouraged him from reporting the case. This, among other reasons, is inspired by the common belief that a man is physically strong and cannot be overpowered to a point of rape. It worsened the circumstance when the man is raped by a woman. However, it does not only take physical strength to orchestrate rape but a psychological and emotional advantage. For instance, in a Metro newsletter by Hartley-Parkison (2017), a 25-year-old man was raped by two middle-aged women who held him at gunpoint and commanded him to drink a certain substance before they could rape him. A further confirmatory case could be drawn from the story of a 28-year-old female teacher who raped a 13-year-old boy in

Bloemfontein by Zuma (2019) on news24. Furthermore, the stories above delineate the magnitude of the menacing sexual abuse against men. Atmore (2001: 27) postulates that “most perpetrators of violence against men and boys are also male, whether the violence is public or private, and whether it involves a perpetrator who is in an intimate relationship with the victim, a complete stranger, or some other relationship.” This is evidenced by the appalling cases of male rape cases in prison. In a study by Booyens and Bezuidenhout (2014), about 84% of inmates claimed that they had personally witnessed another inmate getting raped in prison. With this excruciating sexual violence against men, comes health risks such as HIV and other STI diseases. To date, the male remains with a pictorial taboo upon it and “only 110 (5.1%) out of 2 152 reported cases of rape in South Africa in 2012 were identified as cases of rape against men” (Machisa et al. 2017). Moreover, Clarfelt (2014: 20) avers that “the taboo around homosexual acts or men who have sex with men was also said to be a significant barrier in addressing male-on-male rape.”

### **Physical abuse of men in families by men and women**

Physical abuse arises as a result of one person being able to use physical force to overpower and inflict pain to another. This noted, social construction of masculinity depict men as stronger physical forces of humanity than women. Darias (2016: 1) corroborates that “men are physically stronger than women, who have, on average, less total muscle mass, both in absolute terms and relative to total body mass and men also have denser stronger

bones, tendons and ligaments.” This alludes to their physical strength, which, in most cases gives them leverage against women in a physical combat. It is the women who are widely known to be the victims of physical abuse given their lesser strength compared to men’s. Nevertheless, the modern-day South Africa marks the case of physical violence against men by women and other men. It becomes difficult for the society to believe that men could be victims of physical abuse especially when it is administered by a woman given the belief that men are naturally stronger than women. Would this mean that physical abuse does not only require physical strength to issued out? Adebayo (2014: 16) postulates that “the tragedy is that men who find themselves in this situation hide and do not talk openly about their experience, as talking about it will bruise their ego and expose them to ridicule in a patriarchal society. *I was beaten by my wife* is a misnomer! It is unheard of in a male egoistic society.” For those who break the silence, the concern is that “the police think that you cannot be abused as a man, because you are the one who is powerful, the head of the household” (Clarfelt, 2014: 12). Some of the male victims of physical abuse claim that abusive women tend to use different tactics to physically abuse them such as ‘a woman is always the victim’, ‘nobody will believe you’, ‘police will just laugh’ (Clarfelt, 2014: 20). Further confirmatory information could be drawn from the story of a victim of male domestic violence by Nkosi (2002) published on IOL newsletter where it is noted that the man went to the Protea police station to lay a charge of domestic abuse against his ex-girlfriend who was allegedly beating and posing

death threats to him but the police laughed at him. He said, “when I tried to explain that she was, in fact, abusing me and that I was there to lay charges against her, they just laughed at me. They refused to open a case and said it would be thrown out of court.” However, the woman laid counter-charges of assault against him and he was arrested in a blink of an eye. He said, “I was arrested in the charge office and detained for two days for something I did not do...” It is these notions that bind and force the men to endure the abuse silently if not exit the relationship in a marital. A male participant in Adebayo’s (2014: 17) study said, “she changed from my loving wife to an abusive spouse calling me different names. On that fateful night, we had an intense argument, and around 1.00am, [she] came into my room and poured hot boiling vegetable oil on me. It was our neighbours from the other flats that took me to the hospital and I was there for a whole month.” Furthermore, not only are men physically abused by wives but also both female and male children. Fathers and grandfather appear to be vulnerable to physical abuse at the hands of their children. In an article on Dailysun newsletter by Shivambu (2019), a daughter has allegedly abused his 67-year-old father and ultimately killed him for his social grant: “She’d demand she be given a share of our grant every Sassa payday, saying her dad never took care of her. When he refuses she’d insult and assault me and her dad. [She] confessed she killed my brother because he refused to give her grant money.”

### Methodology

This qualitative study has predicated on a minimum of 5 snowballed cases of male

domestic violence in the South African society extracted from dailysun. As qualitative studies do, this study sought to comprehend the life experience of South African men who are confronted with physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse. Thus, Defranzo (2011) maintains that qualitative research aims to provide insight into the problem and also acquire a comprehension of underlying views, reasons and opinions. The snowball sampling technique has aided the researcher to use case 1 to find more other applicable cases in the same company. The data collected from the 5 cases are presented through the qualitative narrative analysis which enables the researcher to “reformulate stories presented by respondents taking into account context of each case and different experiences of each respondent” (Dudovskry, 2019: 3).

## Results

The data collected from the sampled cases of male domestic violence in South Africa is arranged and presented in line with the outlined data analysis technique in the section of methodology:

### **Case 1: Daughter kills dad for grant (Daily sun 09 December 2019)**

The Ngoveni family is reportedly shocked after a 38-year-old woman beat up her father aged 67 and hacked him with a Panga to death. The mother of the murderer noted that sometimes her daughter would forcefully take her father's grant to buy alcohol and gamble. The father when advised to open a case against her would refuse and say he can't send his daughter to jail. The suspect allegedly confessed to killing his father because he did not give him money. This came after

the woman got furious when her father couldn't collect the grant due to the queues being too long for him.

### **Case 2: Husband's Gatvol of Abuse (Dailysun 10 April 2019)**

A man aged 52-years-old is reported to have been abused by his wife. His confession comes after his last beating impelled him to report to a local clinic to treat the injuries he's sustained. He said, “my eye was injured, and I received treatment at the local clinic. But I was later referred to Tshilidzini Hospital.” The man admitted to having been unhappy in his marriage as he has endured the abuse for quite some time. He said, “I kept quiet for a long time because I was scared of being embarrassed, but now I feel it is time to speak out.”

### **Case 3: I was raped by another man for 23 hours (Dailysun 26 February 2019)**

A 50-year-old man confesses that he has been raped by another man. The man asked for a lift only to shockingly end up in a strange house where he was raped for 23 hours. This is because a fellow church member dropped him off at Braamfontein, Johannesburg at 3 am and has to seek a lift as there no taxis at the time. He said, “when they removed the blindfold, I was in a bedroom with a Sotho-speaking woman and an Indian man who was wearing nothing but red boxer shorts.” Subsequently, he was given a pill to erect his manhood and then the sexual abuse commenced while the woman was filming them.

### **Case 4: Two women rape man (Dailysun 03 October 2016)**

A 27-year-old man that is reported to have been forced him to have sex with two

women who also film the entire act. The video went viral and it is noted on this newsletter that it displayed man held down by a woman in a pink underwear whilst another woman in white panties attempted to get his manhood erected. Moreover, the man is said to have told the woman he doesn't want to have sex and the women threatened to beat him with sticks, and ending of the video is said to show the woman in white panties helping the other woman to insert the man's manhood into her private part.

#### **Case 5: Killed by his own son (Dailysun 08 October 2013)**

A father of four in his 50s was allegedly killed by his son at a relative's house where he went with him to eat and drink Zulu beer. The father was said to be strict and did not let his son sit with him and the elders, and this infuriated the son. A relative said, "he was upset that his son wanted to drink with the family elders. He told him to go drink with other youngsters. He was a traditional man who was strict on respect." As a result, a fight broke out between the father and the son that left the father lying on a floor bleeding with his nose and died.

#### **Discussion**

Male domestic violence is a vexing issue in South Africa given its sluggish impact to 'come out of the closet'. It is when an appalling fatality has occurred when it surfaces. For instance, case 2 victim has confessed to having endured the domestic violence meted out by his wife for quite some time. He only broke the silence when he sustained an injury that forced to seek consultation from medical facilities. Some of the reasons that cause the reluctance to

report cases of male abuse as case 2 victim attests, is the embarrassment inspired by socio-cultural constructions of masculinities in societies. It is a taboo and a far-fetched case when a man claims to be abused by a woman. The victim in case 3, an adult aged 27 years old was overpowered by two women who managed to rape him. This is a circumstance that is often doubted and of less interest to talk about in communities. Clarfelt (2014: 20) notes that "knowing the reaction of community (perpetrator) knowing that it will difficult to report." The same goes for the mystery that surrounds case 3 where a man is raped by another man. It gets worse when the victims are not only haunted by the abusers but also negative remarks from society. There seems to be societal stereotypes and taboo "around homosexual acts or men who have sex with men was also said to be a significant barrier in addressing male-on-male rape...as he is ashamed of what happened to him and is facing abuse from his peers who accuse him of being gay" (Clarfelt, 2014: 20). Moreover, the data reveals that men aged 50 and above are more vulnerable to domestic violence. Victims in Cases 1, 2, 3 and 5 were abused and two amongst them (Case 1 and 2) murdered by their children. They all above aged above 50. According to Krans (2016) on Healthline, men at the age 50 or older experience a drop testosterone production, thus, reach male menopause which involves reduced muscled mass, feelings of weakness, lowered self-confidence and low energy. This noted, men above 50 are not as strong as before reaching 50 and this makes them vulnerable. The victim in Case 1 aged 67 was abused by his daughter who eventually killed him. She was able to

physically overpower him and beat him to death. Likewise, the victim in case 5 in his 50s was also physically overpowered by his son who also beat him to death. The perpetrators in both case 1 and case 2 took advantage of the descendance of physical strength come with ageing as corroborated by Krans (2016).

### Conclusion

Gender-based violence in South Africa goes beyond marginalizing women. Men are also threatened by this dire challenge with less hope to defeat it by virtue of societal hesitation on the side of men. It is such doubtful remarks that make male victims of domestic violence to come out of the closet and report the abuse. Therefore, the plight of men needs to be visited and revisited. The unaddressed leg of gender-based on the side of men has been attested to be the cornerstone of the appalling abuse against women. It appears that most men who abuse women have learned this behaviour at a certain point either through observation or being a victim of it before victimising another person. This is confirmed by scholars such as Gass et al. (2010: 10) who states that “men who commit domestic violence in intimate relationships are 3.5 times as likely to have experienced physical abuse in their homes and 4 times as likely to have witnessed violence between their parents than men who do not commit domestic violence,” as well as Holt et al. (2008); Krug et al. (2015) who aver that abuse is taught phenomenon and people who emerge from domestic violence-orientated families are most like to perpetuate it later in their lives. This leads to the clarion call to fight gender-based unconditionally. This would require both

men and women’s rights equalised in all walks of life by creating platforms to raise their challenges which should be responded by the society, imposing equality from girls and boys from childhood as well as re-defining manhood such as the saying *Monna ke nku o llela teng* (A man is a lamp and cries inwardly).

### References

- Adebayo, A.A. (2014). Domestic Violence against Men: Balancing the Gender Issues in Nigeria. *American Journal of Sociological Research*, 4(1), pp. 14-19.
- Atmore, C. (2001). *Men as Victims of Domestic Violence some issues to consider. Discussion paper no.2*. Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre, Melbourne.
- Barbelet, V. (2014). *Male gender-based violence: a silent crisis*. <http://odidevelopment.disqus.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.odi.org%2Fblogs%2F8502-male-gender-based-violence-silent-crisis>">View the discussion thread.</a></p> Date of access: 01/04/2020.
- Barber, C. (2008). Domestic violence against men. *Nursing Standard*, 22(51), pp. 35-39.
- Bloom, S. S. (2008). *Violence Against Women and Girls: A Compendium of Monitoring and Evaluation Indicators*. Carolina Population Center, Measure Evaluation, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
- Booyens, K and Bezuidenhout, C. (2014). An Exploratory Study of Sex and Rape Behind Bars in a South African Prison.

*International Criminal Justice Review*, 24(4), pp. 337-391.

Clarfelt, A. (2014). *Men and boys and sexual and gender based violence (SGBV)*, 09 October report. Restless Development.

Darias, W.A. (2016). *Are men physically stronger than women?* <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/are-men-physically-stronger-than-women>.

Date of access: 30/04/2020.

Defranzo, S.E. (2011). *What's the difference between qualitative and quantitative research?*

<https://www.snapsurveys.com/blog/qualitative-vs-quantitative-research/> Accessed: 30/04/2020.

Dempsey, B. (2013). *Men's experiences of domestic abuse in Scotland. What we know and how we can know more.* <http://www.amis.co.za>. Date of access: 27/10/13.

Dudovskry, J. (2019). *Writing adissertation.* <https://research-methodology.net/research-methods/data-analysis/qualitative-data-analysis/> Date of access: 30/04/2020.

Gass, J.D., Stein, D.J., Williams, D.R. and Seedat, S. (2010). Intimate Partner Violence, Health Behaviours, and Chronic Physical Illness among South African Women. *South African Medical Journal*, 100(9), pp. 582–585.

Hartley-Parkison, R. (2017). *Man raped at gunpoint by two women who forced him to drink mystery substance.* <https://metro.co.uk/2017/12/1/man-raped-gunpoint-two-woen-forced-drink-substance-7158441/> Date of access: 01/04/2020.

Holt, S., Buckley, H. and Whelan, S. (2008). The Impact of Exposure to Domestic Violence on Children and Young People: A Review of the Literature. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 32(8), pp. 797-810.

Kaur, P. (2011) Crime, Gender and Society in India. *Higher education of Social Science*, 1(1), pp. 24-32.

Krans, B. (2016). *What is Male Menopause?* <https://www.healthline.com/health/menopause/male>. Date of access: 01/04/2020.

Krug, E., Dahlberg, L., Mercy, J., Zwi, A. and Lozano, R. (2015). *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva: World Health Organisation.

Machisa, T., Christofides, N & Jewkes, R. (2017). Mental ill health in structural pathways to women's experiences of intimate partner violence. *PLoS ONE*, 12(4), pp. 1-19.

Maseko, M. (2015). *Male rape still considered a joke in South Africa.* <https://www.news24.com-Drum-Archive-male-rape-still-considered-a-joke.co.za/> Accessed: 31/04/2020.

Nkosi, K. (2002). *Police laugh at man reporting domestic abuse.* <https://www.iol.co.za>news>South-Africa/> Date of access: 30/04/2020.

Shivambu (2019). *Daughter kills dad for grant.* <https://www.dailysun.co.za>News>daughter-kills-dad-for-grant-20191209>. Date of access: 30/04/2020.

*So Why Do the Numbers Keep Rising? A Reflection on Efforts to Prevent and*

*Respond to Domestic Violence and Rape.*  
(2011). ISS Seminar, 27 October, Pretoria.

Srivastava, J. (2016). Domestic Violence against Men. *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, 5(6), pp. 1193-1196.

World Health Organization. (2013). *Violence against women. Intimate partner and sexual violence against women. Factsheet No. 239. October 2013.* [www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/) Date of access: 01/04/2020.

Zuma, M. (2019). *Woman arrested for raping teenage boy in Bloemfontein.* <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Date> of access: 01/04/2020.