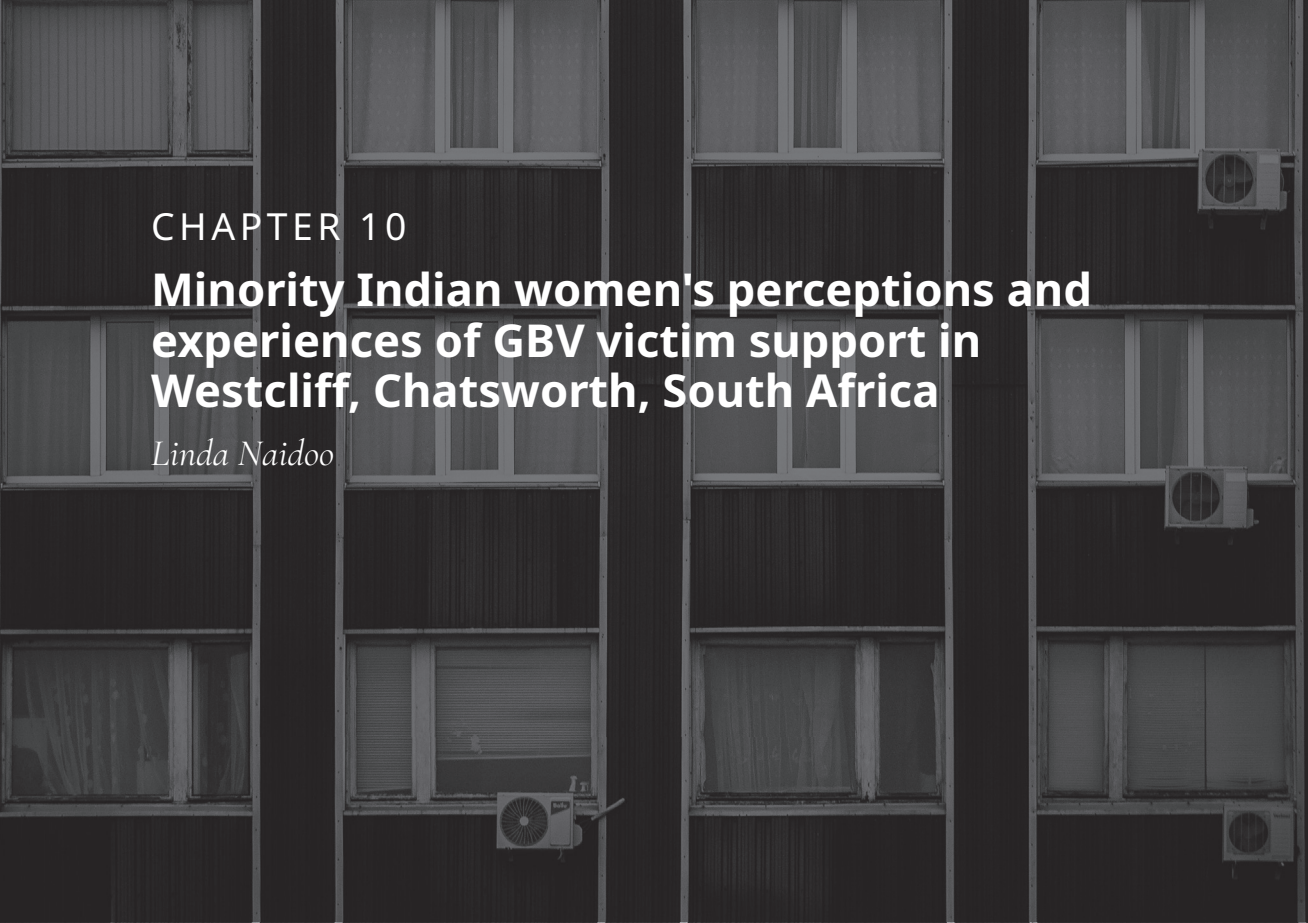




CHAPTER 10

Minority Indian women's perceptions and experiences of GBV victim support in Westcliff, Chatsworth, South Africa

Linda Naidoo

Introduction

Culture is crucial in shaping individual values, attitudes, and behaviours. Hofstede (2001) defines culture as the collective programming of the mind, while Kalra and Bhunga (2013) emphasise how cultural norms influence gender role perceptions, contributing to the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV). As defined by the UN Women (1995), GBV includes acts likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm to women. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is the most common form of violence against women, particularly affecting adolescent girls, with 27% of women aged 15-49 experiencing IPV since age 15 (Sardinha et al., 2022; WHO, 2021).

In patriarchal societies, women are often viewed as inferior, which normalises their subjugation and often results in violence against them (Kakwata, 2024; Jebeli-Bakht-Ara, 2024). GBV is rooted in structural inequalities perpetuated by cultural beliefs and practices. Minority women often face compounded discrimination, including racial and gender-based exclusion (United Nations, 2010; Desai & Vahed, 2013). In South Africa, Indian women in areas like Westcliff

and Chatsworth have historically experienced marginalisation due to their minority status and the socio-political effects of apartheid (Singha & Singha, 2024), making them particularly vulnerable to GBV.

This chapter explores the perceptions and experiences of GBV victim support among minority Indian women in Westcliff, examining how cultural, social, and structural factors contribute to GBV. It employs a mixed-method approach within an interpretive paradigm to investigate the implementation of the KwaZulu-Natal 365-Day Policy Framework. Chatsworth, with its predominantly Indian population of over 450,000, was selected for its unique socio-economic challenges, which are often overlooked in broader research.

Participants were Indian women aged 18 to 55 residing in the Westcliff flats, possessing a basic command of English. Data collection employed non-probability sampling methods, including convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling, which involved surveys, individual interviews, and focus group discussions with 115 participants, comprising Indian women, officials, and representatives from civil society. The study prioritised confidentiality and addressed the stigma surrounding GBV.

The chapter is structured as follows: an introductory section discusses the prevalence of GBV, its causal factors, and its global impact, followed by a background section that contextualises GBV in South Africa and the KwaZulu-Natal province. Next, it analyses policy implementation theories related to the KwaZulu-Natal 365-Day Framework. The findings and discussion section evaluates the effectiveness of these services based on participant insights. Finally, the conclusion synthesises findings, emphasising the need for culturally sensitive interventions tailored to the unique needs of minority Indian women in Westcliff flats.

Background: Gender-based violence in South Africa and KwaZulu-Natal

Gender-based violence (GBV) is an entrenched issue in South Africa, impacting women across all racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups. The historical legacy of apartheid contributed to this landscape of violence, as the white minority politically and economically oppressed the black African majority while also marginalising other racial groups, including Indians (Desai & Vahed, 2013; Naidoo, 2022). KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) consistently reports some of the highest murder rates nationally, with 1,603 murder cases reported between July and September 2023. The primary causes of these

murders include arguments, misunderstandings, road rage, or provocation, often occurring in public spaces or within the residences of either the perpetrators or the victims (SAPS, 2023).

South Africa is among the countries with the highest rates of GBV, with 40-50% of women experiencing violence at the hands of intimate partners (Deane, 2024; Enaifoghe et al., 2021). Crime statistics from July to September 2023 revealed that 881 women over the age of 18 were murdered, while 1,514 women survived attempted murders (SAPS, 2023). KZN also reported 2,582 cases of sexual offences and 2,127 cases of rape in the same quarter, with most incidents occurring in the private residences of either the perpetrators or the victims (SAPS, 2023). Moreover, KwaZulu-Natal leads the country in violence against women and children, with Chatsworth Police Station ranking among the top twenty police stations nationwide for crimes against women, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and femicide (SAPS, 2023).

In areas like Westcliff in Chatsworth, a predominantly Indian township in Durban's Southern basin, the effects of GBV are exacerbated by socio-economic hardship. These communities, established under apartheid's Group Areas Act, face chronic unemployment, economic deprivation, and social challenges such as gangsterism and substance abuse (Vahed & Desai, 2012). Indian women in these areas face double marginalisation: first within their own communities due to patriarchal cultural norms and then in broader South African society due to racial and social discrimination. This dual oppression makes accessing GBV support services particularly difficult, as cultural expectations often demand silence around domestic issues to preserve family honour, further isolating these women (Hossain et al., 2021; Subramoney, 2015).

The high rates of violence, particularly in private residences, underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions that address both public and private spaces. Although South Africa has enacted national laws such as the Domestic Violence Act (1998), the Sexual Offences Act of 2007, and the GBV and Femicide National Strategic Plan (2019), the inconsistent enforcement of these laws, coupled with limited access to services, particularly in marginalised and minority communities, has hindered progress (Bridger, 2021; Mathur-Helm, 2005). The situation in Westcliff and Chatsworth highlights this challenge, as Indian women in these areas struggle to access resources and support due to socio-economic barriers and cultural norms.

Addressing GBV in these communities requires culturally sensitive and accessible services tailored to the unique needs of minority women. By considering both the socio-economic realities and the cultural dynamics at

play, interventions can more effectively break the cycle of violence and provide meaningful support to women in vulnerable communities like Westcliff.

KwaZulu-Natal's 365 strategic framework for the eradication of gender-based violence (2014–2019)

The KwaZulu-Natal 365 Strategic Framework for the Eradication of GBV (2014–2019) was developed in consultation with provincial stakeholders to strategically direct gender-based violence programming at the provincial, district, and local levels in the province, in line with South African law, policies, and international commitments, as outlined in the National Plan. The activities and indicators in the framework aligned with the CEDAW, the BPFA, the AU documents, the SADC protocol, and South African policy commitments, which include the National Development Plan 2030, the National Gender Policy Framework, the 'White Paper on Population Policy, Social Development Guidelines for Services to Victims of Domestic Violence', the Integrated Social Crime Prevention Strategy ('White Paper on Safety and Security'), and the Victim Charter. The Framework adopted an integrated, multi-sectoral, and multi-stakeholder approach to eradicate GBV in the Province.

The cascading implementation of international commitments into national-, provincial-, district- and local-level plans is evident on paper. The goal of the Framework and the built-in action plan was to ensure zero tolerance for GBV, along with a plan to achieve this. The provincial plan encompassed the entire range of activities that should help make women and girls less vulnerable to violence and its consequences through poverty reduction, access to shelters, safe and supportive education systems, the provision of appropriate health services and promotion of the rule of law, as well as equal rights and economic and political support.

The strategic goals of the KZN 365 Plan are that GVB in the districts is prevented, reduced and ultimately eliminated, legislation to protect against GBV is implemented by all stakeholders, and survivors of gender-based violence in the district are provided with adequate services and support. Strategic Goal 3 is the Victim Empowerment Programme. The Victim Empowerment Programme is implemented by the following departments: the Department of Social Development, the Department of Health, the Department of Justice, the National Prosecuting Authority, and the South African Police Service, together with relevant civil society organisations.

Findings and discussion

Socio-economics and demographics of Westcliff

Westcliff is a residential area under social and economic pressures because of high unemployment and low income for those employed, particularly women, and is characterised by crowded households and drug abuse. Under these circumstances, and as is often the case, all sorts of crimes, including murder, assault and sexual offences (see below for details), have become integral to the social fabric of Westcliff and Chatsworth as a whole. Being a victim of gender-based violence was not a criterion for the sample respondents, yet the majority indicated having directly experienced gender-based violence. It is worth noting that most of the respondents in this study have a secondary education. However, the high rate of unemployment leaves them disempowered despite their levels of education. Besides all this, moral decadence and its repercussions have become not only rife but also nearly impossible to address due to structural constraints such as unemployment, drug abuse and the fear of stigma, as shown in the extract below:

The Westcliff area is predominantly inhabited by Indian people – accounting for 95% of the population. Most of the men are unemployed, and the men who do work, most of them inherit the houses. Even the women who are there inherit the houses from their parents, but sometimes the parents are alive. So, they live in a squashed environment, overpopulated houses like many families are basically there, it is 120 plus, about 110 or 115 flats. In each of those flats, there are five families per flat. However, most of these men are based at home; they drink, smoke zoll and take drugs, and the wives, the few that do have jobs, go to work and come back, and it is a normal thing. However, the wives who sit at home are middle-aged people. (Community leader, Westcliff, Chatsworth, 17 August 2021)

The description closely reflects the area's demographics and socio-economic characteristics, as indicated by the 2011 census data (Table 1). The 2011 Census statistics show that the total population of the Westcliff area was just a little above 30,000, of which 91% were Indian/Asian, with the majority (52%) comprising women.

Table 1 Westcliff area demographics, 2011

Characteristic	KZN	RSA	Westcliff
Population	10,267,300	51,770,560	31,436
Black African	87%	79%	6%
Coloured	1.00%	9%	2%
Indian/Asian	7%	2%	91%
Other	0%	1%	1%
White	4%	9%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Sex			
Male	48%	49%	48%
Female	52%	51%	52%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Age category			
Under 18	39%	35%	22%
18-64	57%	60%	69%
65 and over	5%	5%	9%
Households			
Head of household			
Female			34%
Male			66%
Employment status			
Employed			46%
Unemployed (Official)			8%
Unemployed (Unofficial)			46%
Income			
Average annual household income			ZAR57,300
Average annual income			ZAR57,500
None			6%
Below ZAR4,800			1%
ZAR5,000-10,000			2%
ZAR10,000-20,000			6%
ZAR20,000-40,000			18%
ZAR40,000-75,000			26%
ZAR75,000-150,000			20%
ZAR150,000-300,000			9%

Characteristic	KZN	RSA	Westcliff
ZAR300,000-600,000			2%
ZAR600,000 +			0%
Unspecified			9%
Highest educational level (Persons 20 years and older)			
None			3%
Some primary			8%
Primary			3%
Some secondary			33%
Grade 12 (Matric)			45%
Undergraduate			4%
Postgraduate			2%

Source: StatsSA (2012)

Prevalence and lived experiences of GBV in Westcliff

On the question of the prevalence of GBV in the Westcliff area, Chatsworth, and how serious the phenomenon was, an overwhelming majority of the sampled respondents (96%; n=110) and all the in-depth interview participants acknowledged that GBV was not only prevalent but also a serious problem in the Westcliff area. A participant who sounded petrified opened up, saying:

Women need help. There are 126 flats in this part, 800 houses, and an estimated 600 women are experiencing gender-based violence. If they speak up, they will have no home to live in. Mothers are also getting abused by their sons, substance and drug abuse. Mother forced to beg; physical, emotional and verbal abuse is rife in Westcliff; constant intimidation. (Telephone interview, woman from community, Westcliff, 9 September 2021)

Others shared their personal experiences:

Domestic violence is high in this area. I experienced it. I am now divorced. I experienced every form of gender-based violence (Telephone interview, woman from community, 7 September 2021).

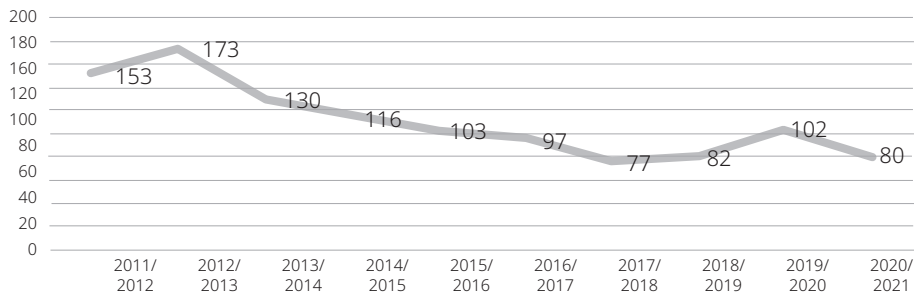
I was abused when I lived with my ex-husband. I experienced every form of gender-based violence: physical, emotional, and sexual. It ended in a divorce

... I used to overlook things. The police helped me to get my stuff and my children out of the house. My case took a long time, and I decided not to continue with the relationship. We have been divorced since. Courts need to prioritise cases of gender-based violence. (Telephone interview, woman from community, 10 September 2021)

I live in the Westcliff flats. I witnessed gender-based violence growing up; my father was a drug addict, and he abused my mum. I am not in an abusive relationship, but I do know a number of people who are experiencing gender-based violence right now in this community; the biggest cause here is drug abuse, and that is why GBV happens so often in our community. Gender-based violence is happening right now as we speak. You can probably hear the screaming going on in the background. (Telephone interview, woman from community, 8 September 2021)

The perception that GBV prevalence in Westcliff is a serious problem indicates the trend of the phenomenon in the Chatsworth community and, by inference, in KwaZulu-Natal and South Africa as a whole. Figure 1 shows the trend of the total reported cases of sexual offences in Chatsworth from 2012 to 2021. Interestingly, the data show a steady decline in reported cases of sexual offences from 173 in 2013 to 77 in 2018, although the figures are high. However, the downward trend is interrupted as cases increase to 82 and 102 in 2019 and 2020, respectively, followed by a sharp fall of 21.6% in 2021. A breakdown of sexual offences shows a similar trend in all kinds of sexual offences, with the exception of attempted sexual offences, which remained unchanged during the period 2019-2021 (Table 2).

Figure 1 Reported sexual offences in Chatsworth, 2012-2021



Source: South African Police Service (2022)

Table 2 Sexual offences in Chatsworth, 2012–2021

Sexual offences	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Difference % 2020-2021	Change 2020-2021
Rape	103	123	92	75	74	69	57	55	80	55	-25	-31.3
Sexual assault	42	41	33	30	27	22	18	22	19	21	2	10.5
Attempted sexual offences	2	1	2	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0.0
Contact sexual offences	6	8	3	11	2	5	2	4	2	3	1	50.0
Total	153	173	130	116	103	97	77	82	102	80	-22	-21.6

Source: SAPS (2022)

While the veracity of the data may be questioned due to non-reporting, the increase in cases of sexual and GBV in Chatsworth during the period 2018–2020 is consistent with national and global trends. In the global context, the spiralling cases of GBV and its effects, particularly the effects of unintended pregnancies on women's health and choices, and the psychological trauma, which could have psychosocial, behavioural and physical consequences for survivors, spawned a sense of urgency for action.

At the 2019 Nairobi Summit to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD25) in the Kenyan capital, sexual and gender-based violence were not only included as one of the five thematic areas prioritised for action by the world body (See Box 1 (*Emphasis added*)); it was also the theme with the most commitments globally, totalling 143 commitments across all regions (IPPF, 2020).

Thematic areas of the ICPD25:

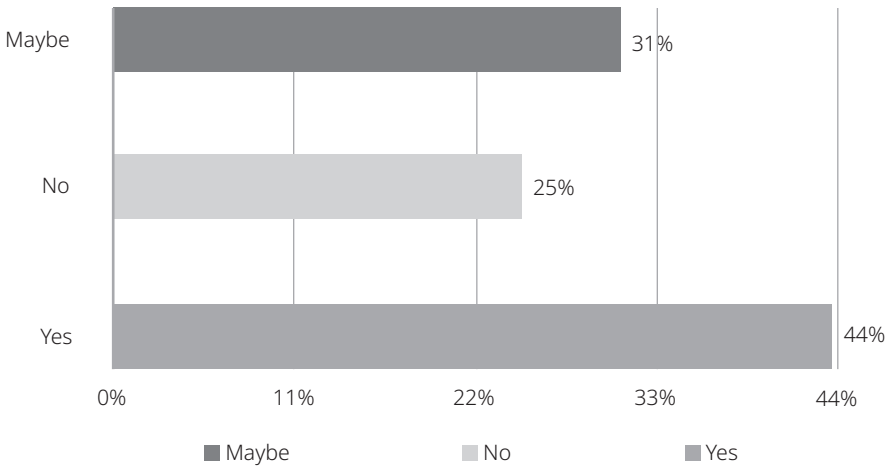
- Universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights as a part of universal health coverage.
- Financing required to complete the ICPD Program of Action, and to sustain the gains made.
- Drawing on demographic diversity to drive economic growth and achieve sustainable development.
- Ending gender-based violence and harmful practices.

- Upholding the right to sexual and reproductive healthcare even in humanitarian and fragile contexts. (IPPF, 2020)

Causes and drivers of GBV

There were diverse viewpoints among the respondents of the online survey and participants of the in-depth interviews regarding the underlying causes and drivers of gender-based violence in the Westcliff area. The viewpoints ranged from culture to unemployment. Most respondents (44%) believed that culture had an influence on the phenomenon, while the majority (56%) either did not think so (25%) or were unsure (31%).

Figure 2 Culture and gender-based violence
(Online survey 25 June–12 August 2021)



A similar pattern was observed among the women in the in-depth interviews, most of whom agreed that masculinity, patriarchy, socialisation of boys and girls and religious beliefs – as elements of culture – were at the heart of GBV. Asserting the role of culture in GBV, one of the female participants from the community highlighted patriarchy as a key driver of GBV. She said:

Patriarchy is the cause of the problem, supported by women and everyone else in the community. This mentality is dominant in the Indian community. Change of mindset is proving challenging. Women are so used to that treatment that they expect it to happen. Men take advantage of women because they're not employed, they don't have finances, they don't have a home, and they [men] feel women are

weak and can be treated anyhow. As women, we take on too much, and we put on ... a mask. We put on a mask knowing that even though we know we're going through so much – to show society that we are not. Indian women hide their feelings. Yes, that is what was taught – you have to stay with one man and stay for your children no matter what. This is our culture. I felt that my children needed a father; they needed to grow up with 2 people. I felt that they would be neglected if I took them away from their father. You understand. That's how we were cultured to believe that once you take a man, you live with him no matter what. Nevertheless, men use the culture to abuse you. (Telephone interview, woman from community, Westcliff, Chatsworth, 9 September 2021)

Cultural drivers: The burden of family honour and religious interpretations

The participant's assertion that "Indian women hide their feelings" due to cultural norms that "you have to stay with one man and stay for your children no matter what". "This is our culture" reveals the profound influence of *izzat*, or family honour, within the Indian community in Westcliff. While the specific term '*izzat*' (from Urdu/Arabic) may not be universally used by all generations or linguistic groups within the South African Indian community, the underlying concept of maintaining family reputation and avoiding public shame is deeply ingrained. This deeply ingrained cultural concept often dictates that private family matters, particularly those involving conflict or violence, must remain concealed to protect the family's reputation and avoid shame.

The fear of bringing dishonour upon the family or being ostracised by immediate and extended relatives acts as a significant deterrent for women seeking external help or reporting abuse. This cultural expectation prioritises a collective family image over individual well-being, compelling victims to endure abuse in silence rather than risk public condemnation or social isolation. This also establishes a norm of silence around GBV, making it a deeply private issue rather than a social problem requiring intervention.

Furthermore, religious interpretations, though diverse across Hindu, Muslim, and Christian faiths within the Indian community, can inadvertently reinforce this silent endurance. Some interpretations of religious texts or community teachings might emphasise the virtues of patience, forgiveness, and maintaining the sanctity of marital bonds, potentially discouraging women from considering separation or divorce, even in abusive situations. This places an additional psychological and spiritual burden on women, who may feel a moral obligation to remain in harmful relationships. The role of religious

leaders in addressing GBV within their congregations is, therefore, crucial, yet often complex, as traditional interpretations can sometimes inadvertently perpetuate patriarchal norms that disadvantage women. This intergenerational transmission of cultural norms can inadvertently normalise violence or silence victims, making it challenging for them to break free.

Community-specific dynamics as drivers of GBV

Figure 3 Excerpts from interview transcripts on how culture influences on GBV

Participant 1

In terms of women being outspoken in this community, it doesn't happen here because they are too scared, and they don't have any back up. Women here are caught between the struggle of 'Do I keep my kids? Do I runaway? Where do I go? Who's going to take me with my children? Who's going to assist me?' Then you have the husband on the other hand who has full control of everything and doesn't want to be met halfway with the wife or girlfriend because some people here are not even married, they just have kids out of wedlock and stuff; and it's been an ongoing thing, especially, with the Indian community here, you get a child out of wedlock, you're [the woman] forced to maintain that relationship because of the culture.

Culture plays a big role in gender-based violence, definitely, because women are supposed to stay at home clean and cook, yes go to church on Sunday. While men can go all night to gambling schools in Unit 3 Westcliff, some men can talk to different women, but women cannot talk to different men. If you see a woman talking to a man then she is a bitch, and if a man is seen talking to a woman, then he is a man. So, it causes those sorts of problems within relationships, within families themselves where families would derail a woman, if a woman is wearing a short skirt and walking on the road then she is a bitch. Even the people that go to church have to be careful otherwise their entire life is ruined. I know people in this community that have ... their entire life ruined because of a small mistake; everyone knows about it. Women in Westcliff, they don't empower each other, they backbite each other because they have this thing that I am better than you or you are better than me. They see other women as threats and there is no support system in this community. Each one wants to show that that their family is the best, no gender-based violence, if it comes out every flat knows about it, your life is ruined with shame and stigma. **(Telephone interview, woman from community, Westcliff, Chatsworth, 11 September 2021)**

Participant 2

Women are abused and many don't come forward to talk about it, it still has a stigma, shame in this community. It's not reported, it's not documented, and it is silenced. It has everything to do with the culture. You understand as an Indian, you know our culture. We had our foremother's way before that have served their husbands, you know the roles didn't change and culture didn't change and the expectations still the same as our foremothers. I mean my mom served my dad just hand and foot you know as she waited at home every day and when he got home from work, even if he came late, he would get the same service you know and as time went on and we're all working and we're working shifts, busy with the same things the expectation was still the same at the home front and times had changed but people's cultures had not. **(Civil Society Organisation, Westcliff, Chatsworth, 6 August 2021)**

The community leader's earlier vivid description of average life within Westcliff, characterised by "five families per flat" in an "overpopulated" and "squashed environment", highlights a critical community dynamic that profoundly impacts GBV experiences and the ability to seek support. This extreme overcrowding intensifies domestic tensions and drastically reduces privacy for victims. In such confined spaces, women have virtually no physical or psychological escape from their abusers within the home. The lack of personal space makes it nearly impossible for a victim to discreetly access help, speak on the phone, or even contemplate leaving without immediate detection, thereby exacerbating their vulnerability and sense of entrapment. The physical environment itself thus becomes complicit in the perpetuation of violence.

Furthermore, the pervasive socio-economic challenges, including chronic unemployment, gangsterism, and substance abuse, are not merely co-existing problems but direct drivers and amplifiers of GBV within these households. Male unemployment, often coupled with substance abuse, places immense economic strain on families, frequently leading to violent outbursts when resources are scarce or demands are unmet. The presence of gangsterism in the community also instils a profound fear among victims, deterring them from reporting abuse. They may fear not only retaliation from the direct perpetrator but also from their associated networks, adding another layer of intimidation that formal legal and social services may struggle to counter-act.

Within these challenging dynamics, informal community support networks, such as neighbours, relatives, and local religious groups, play a complex role. While some women may find solace or temporary refuge within these networks, they are often constrained by the same cultural norms around family honour and silence that affect formal reporting (for more detail on which, see Figure 3). The quote noting that "wives who sit at home are middle-aged people" suggests an existing network of women. However, this study reveals that even within these seemingly close-knit communities, internal dynamics may prevent effective support. Older women, themselves potentially conditioned by similar cultural expectations, might inadvertently perpetuate the silence, or may simply lack the resources or knowledge to provide meaningful assistance beyond emotional solace. These informal networks can be a valuable first point of contact but require external support to challenge harmful norms and effectively facilitate access to formal services.

Box 1: Drivers of gender-based violence in Westcliff flats, Chatsworth, Durban

- » This is not about culture but men feeling more powerful.
- » Culture, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse are responsible for gender-based violence in this area.
- » This is the silence Indian women experience, because of the submissive and subordinate role.
- » Our religious customs, make us feel guilty for thinking about leaving. Married for better or worse. Some men are demons, not wanting to change.
- » Men feel superior to women. We are their punching bags. They feel that they are bringing the finance so they can do as they please.

However, some participants challenged the assertion that culture influences GBV and how it manifests in Westcliff. *“Men must stop using their physical strength. Respect each other. It’s not the culture”*, one of them said. Still, others felt that several factors accounted for GBV in Westcliff and not culture alone, including unemployment, unequal power relations and drug and alcohol abuse, as reflected in the extracts depicted in Box 1, which also are indicative of the angst and frustration of women in Westcliff, Chatsworth, and probably, women elsewhere experiencing GBV directly or indirectly.

This finding unequivocally confirms the widely documented drivers of GBV in the literature, not only in South Africa but also globally (e.g. Cruz & Klinger, 2011; Schei et al., 2013; Perrin et al., 2019). For instance, in South Africa, Jewkes (2002) maintains that gendered power inequality rooted in patriarchy is the primary driver of GBV. According to the authors, GBV (and IPV in particular) is more prevalent in societies where there is a culture of violence and where male superiority is regarded as the norm.

The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR), on the other hand, argues “... the cause of GBV cannot be attributed to a single factor, but an interplay of individual, community, economic, cultural and religious factors interacting at different levels of society” (CSVR, 2016, p. 8). Indeed, as the study shows, GBV is not driven by a single factor. Similarly, other studies suggest that the factors encompassing gender inequalities between men and women, as well as social constructions of hegemonic masculinities and societal

perceptions of what it means to be a man, are also relevant (Kurebwa, 2023; Sigsworth, 2009; Sikweyiya et al., 2020).

From this perspective, Perrin et al. (2019) highlight the harmful effects of social norms and personal beliefs that perpetuate gender-based violence, recommending that researchers and practitioners use the GBV Scale to assess how these norms and beliefs influence the effectiveness of prevention programmes aimed at behaviour change. The authors describe the GBV Scale as a 30-item scale with three subscales, “Response to Sexual Violence,” “Protecting Family honour (sic),” and “husband’s right to use violence” in each of the two domains, personal beliefs and injunctive social norms. Although the authors’ recommendation is context-specific (i.e. in humanitarian settings), the Scale can be adapted to address GBV in all social and spatial settings.

Perceptions of the victim support programme

Regarding perceptions of the victim support programme, the study found that the majority (59%; n=41) of respondents who claimed to be aware of the programme (n=70) either reported that it was helpful (27%; n=19) or somewhat helpful (32.2%; n=22). The rest (41%; n=29) indicated that the programme was not helpful. While a good majority had a positive view of the programme, though most of them qualified their perceptions, the proportion with a negative perception of the victim support programme is sizeable and worrying.

Respondents were asked to explain their responses. Table 3 shows examples of explanations given for the responses. For instance, those respondents who felt that the victim support programme was helpful attested to how their problems were resolved. For instance, one of them said, *“The police helped me to get my children and my stuff out of the house”* (Online survey, 10 July 2021). Another person said, *“The services are ok. Takes a long time though, going to the police and the court. But I did get help”* (Online survey, 8 June 2021).

In contrast, a sizeable proportion found the victim support programme “not helpful” and had a different story to tell. Some of them believed themselves to be in “a trapped relationship” as the service, particularly in relation to the police, did not provide any help. One said, *“I am 23 years old, unemployed, and with a one-year-old child. I am in an abusive relationship. I have nowhere to go. My life is hell. I am on my own. There is no one to turn to. Services are unhelpful”* (Online survey, 15 July 2021).

Table 3 Perceptions of victim support services online survey (25 June–12 August 2021)

Response	Explanation
Helpful	» The police helped me to get my children and my stuff out of the house. » I was abused by my husband and did not do anything because I am dependent on him financially. The interdict was what stopped the abuse. » The services are ok. Takes a long time though, going to the police and the court. But I did get help.
Somewhat helpful	» Services are there but it must be improved, the bad experiences keep the women away from social welfare and the police. » Yes, we want to see improvement in the services, we want to hear more successful stories from women who have been assisted. I speak to the women in this area through the local church and grocery distribution. There are some who have found the services helpful, but there are also those who did not find it helpful.
Not helpful	» I am 23 years old, unemployed with a one-year-old child. I am in an abusive relationship. I have nowhere to go. My life is hell. I am on my own. There is no one to turn to. Services are unhelpful. » I have a painful story to tell. I am a victim. The first time I withdraw the case, hoping to work things out. There was no change; abuse got worst. I opened a new case. He was never arrested, even though he was in front of the police. My protection order is with the police. The police are not assisting me because I complained about their service. » If we are given the right support and services, gender-based violence can be stopped. Now women are on their own, nobody cares, so we stay in these relationships, hoping someday it will change.

Other respondents narrated their plight, while others shared their observations:

I have a painful story to tell. I am a victim. The first time, I withdrew the case, hoping to work things out. There was no change; abuse got worse. I opened a new case. He was never arrested, even though he was in front of the police. My protection order is with the police. The police are not assisting me because I complained about their service. (Online survey, 30 June 2021)

Yes, we want to see improvement in the services and hear more successful stories from women who have been assisted. I speak to the women in this area through the local church and grocery distribution. Some have found the services helpful, but some did not find them helpful. (Online survey, 5 August 2021)

Too much backwards and forwards, prolonged procedures and delays, you end up giving up hope in getting any help. (Online survey, 27 July 2021)

Everybody knows about the police, they know about social welfare they know everything, but let me tell you something, they are useless. The welfare people will go take a normal child out of a house that is living a comfortable life, and they will go put them in a home, but the women, with a child in the cold, will never go and remove that child. (Telephone interview, 7 September 2021)

At another level, it is essential to understand why some clients tend to be non-committal and deny themselves access to GBV support services, often refusing to open a case against the perpetrator, even in cases where reporting is made. In both instances, the study found that several factors accounted for the behaviour of some clients, including fear of further abuse, poor service, which relates to individual and institutional capacity, and lack of awareness and fear of stigma, as shown in Table 4 below. The data show that the factor mentioned most as posing a serious challenge to accessing victim support services was “fear of further abuse” (40.5%; n=45), followed by “poor service” (30.6%; n=34) and fear of stigma (13.5%).

Table 4 Access to victim support services challenges
(Online survey 25 June–12 August 2021)

Characteristic	Count	Percentage (%)
Fear of further abuse	45	40.5
Lack of awareness of services	17	15.3
Poor service	34	30.6
Fear of stigma	15	13.5
Total	111	100.0

While “poor service,” among other factors, relates to the quality of human factors, such as commitment, accountability, and empathy, which are “environmentally acquired” (Adjibolosoo, 1995, p. 33), “fear of further abuse” will require tactful interventions that target victims as well as perpetrators with the object of creating harmonious, liveable homes. It was documented that about 65% of the women were unemployed, a characteristic of the Westcliff area. This is an indication of the high levels of poverty in this area, despite most of the women having secondary education:

Give us jobs so that we can have a voice and make decisions. Where do we turn to in my situation? There are no jobs. We are forced to live with the violence. We need social services. We are not recognised.

Gender-based violence can be stopped if we are given the right support and services. Now women are on their own; nobody cares, so we stay in these relationships, hoping that someday it will change ... If we are given the right support and services, gender-based violence can be stopped. Now, women are on their own; nobody cares, so we stay in these relationships, hoping it will change someday.

Gender-based violence is out of control, lacks respect, and is influenced by drugs and alcohol. Address these problems in our community ... Even though we go to court and get this interdict, we still say to our partner that we don't have anywhere else to go after that. Having support groups in the community, women stand up for each other and help each other. The government needs to send a strong message that will instil fear in the abusers. Most women here live on child support, they barely have food on the table, and how are they going to have the means to reach justice ... or SAPS? (Online survey, 10 August 2021)

The resonating perception of GBV is that “it is an injustice against women”. Most of the participants agreed that women should be empowered. The government needs to create more awareness of the services and ensure that they are effectively helping women. Address the issues of culture in the empowerment programmes. Indian women feel strongly about staying in a relationship and want to make it work; that is what this society expects. Divorce is regarded as shameful and is therefore stigmatised.

Intersectional challenges in GBV victim support: Race, class and gender

The experiences of Indian women in Westcliff vividly illustrate the profound impact of intersectional marginalisation, where race, class, and gender converge to create unique vulnerabilities and significant barriers to accessing GBV support. The historical legacy of apartheid has entrenched Indian communities in specific socio-economic strata, and while some segments of the Indian population have achieved prosperity, a significant proportion in areas like Westcliff remains deeply impoverished. The fact that approximately 65% of the women in this study were unemployed, despite many having secondary education, highlights chronic economic deprivation. This class-based vulnerability is a critical determinant in their ability to leave abusive situations and access support.

Financial dependence on male partners, often exacerbated by male unemployment and substance abuse, directly traps women in violent relationships. As one participant articulated, *“If they speak up, they will have no home to live in,”* reflecting the stark reality that for many, economic insecurity outweighs the desire for safety and freedom from violence. Due to a lack of independent and financial means, women cannot afford alternative accommodation, legal fees, or even transportation to access distant police stations, courts, or social services. This economic disempowerment renders the promise of legal protection, such as protection orders, practically meaningless if a woman has nowhere to go or no means to sustain herself and her children.

Furthermore, their racial minority status within the broader South African context can introduce additional challenges when interacting with formal state institutions. While national laws exist, their implementation can be inconsistent, particularly for marginalised groups. There is often a critical gap in the cultural competency and sensitivity of service providers – including police officers, social workers, and healthcare professionals – who may not fully understand or address the unique cultural nuances, language barriers, religious beliefs, or the concepts that profoundly influence Indian women’s experiences and their willingness to seek help. This means that even when services are theoretically available, they may not be genuinely accessible or culturally appropriate for the specific needs of these women. The perceived “poor service” (30.6%) and the statement that police are “useless” or “not assisting me because I complained about their service” strongly resonate with the frustration stemming from these systemic gaps in intersectional responsiveness, exacerbating the feeling of being “on their own” as voiced by participants.

Analysis

The evaluation of the 365-Day Policy Framework for the Eradication of Gender-based Violence, specifically focusing on the Victim Empowerment Programme for Indian Women in Westcliff, revealed relevance in terms of content but a lack of full alignment with the contextual needs of these women. The governmental infrastructure in place to support the implementation of the Victim Empowerment Programme for marginalised Indian women in Westcliff exists but requires substantial strengthening in terms of capacity, institutional context, commitment, coordination, and communication. The recipients of this programme, the Indian women in this study, expressed a genuine need for victim empowerment services, yet they felt inadequately empowered to access and utilise these services. While

coalitions endorse the Victim Empowerment Programme, they acknowledge the lack of contextual specificity. They highlight challenges pertaining to governmental capacity in its implementation, communication, and coordination that must be addressed for the effective execution of the Victim Empowerment Programme in Westcliff. These complexities underscore that policy implementation cannot conform to a singular model; it demands adaptability to diverse contexts.

As a political commitment, policy implementation involves multiple stakeholders dedicating resources to address societal issues, reinforcing compliance with laws and policies through targeted interventions. However, the crux lies in context-specific programmatic interventions for meaningful implementation. This study underscores that a robust enabling environment comprising policies and laws remains insufficient if it fails to counteract the cultural, social, and economic forces entrenched in the fabric of violence against women.

The findings suggest that implementation operates within a spectrum, exhibiting varied dimensions, succeeding in some respects while faltering in others (McConnell, 2010). The efficacy and efficiency of implementation, best gauged by the policy's beneficiaries, reveal a mixed reception. While respondents and participants acknowledge successes, such as the establishment of the Thuthuzela Care Centre in Chatsworth and the uptake of services under the Victim Empowerment Programme, several ambiguities require attention from both programme implementers and beneficiaries. There is a need to address these grey areas to enhance the effectiveness of the program and its impact on its intended beneficiaries.

Conclusion

The vulnerability of Indian women in South Africa, specifically in Westcliff, Chatsworth, stems from a complex historical legacy marked by colonialism, indentured servitude, apartheid, cultural imprints, religious influences, and patriarchal structures (Dawood & Seedat-Khan, 2020; Freund, 1991; Gokool, 1994). These factors have left a lasting impact, rendering these women particularly susceptible. Dawood and Seedat-Khan (2020) highlight the multifaceted nature of this vulnerability, emphasising the role of religion, education, family history, political affiliations, socio-economic status, and social connections in shaping the position of Indian families in present-day South Africa.

While a segment of the South African Indian population has achieved prosperity in the post-apartheid era, a significant proportion remains marginalised, residing in neglected conditions with limited access to basic necessities and employment opportunities. This echoes the plight of women living in the Westcliff flats. Landy et al. (2004) contest the characterisation of Indians as a diasporic community, citing factors such as prolonged stay in South Africa, detachment from India both emotionally and physically, and a diminishing connection with the homeland. Nonetheless, Pillay (2015) argues that despite the weakening ties with India across generations, the spatial relationship continues to exert an influence.

The historical convergence of diverse Indian cultural boundaries, including caste systems, languages, religions, dress codes, and music, compelled these communities to coexist and adapt within shared spaces, leading to the emergence of a “Pan-Indian culture” or a coerced unified identity (Govinden, 2000, pp. 37-39), thereby forming a hybrid sense of Indianness. Despite the infiltration of Western ideologies and practices, entrenched identities, patriarchal structures, and minority status contribute to an environment conducive to violence against women.

Given the intricate dynamics within the Indian community, particularly for women, it becomes crucial to ascertain the reach and efficacy of Victim Empowerment Programme, such as those outlined in the KwaZulu-Natal 365-Day Framework, in combating gender-based violence within this population, in Westcliff, Chatsworth.

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