

Title

Social inclusion amongst the survivors of gender-based violence in Zimbabwe. A case study of survivors from Ascot, Gweru

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Abstract

With the continuous increase in gender based violence cases in Zimbabwe, social inclusion of the survivors becomes a lasting solution to ensure that they regain their social functioning. The study explored social inclusion amongst the survivors of gender based violence in Zimbabwe's Ascot suburb of Gweru. The study utilised a qualitative research methodology. In-depth interviews and key informant interviews as data collection methods were employed. The research results showed that survivors of gender based violence were socially included through social support, social integration, economic emancipation, access to information, accessibility and availability of health services. However, cultural norms within the community were sometimes an impediment to the realisation of the socially inclusive benefits for survivors of gender based violence. The study recommends adoption of strategies to correct discriminatory cultural norms and practices, training of professionals on the wider understanding of gender based violence to include men as survivors and building on the already available services to achieve universal access of socially inclusive benefits for gender based violence survivors.

Key words

gender based violence, social inclusion, survivors, Zimbabwe

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Introduction

This article seeks to interrogate social inclusion amongst the survivors of gender based violence in Zimbabwe. This is because the factors within the Zimbabwean context that result in perpetuation of gender based violence are inherently social, economic, cultural, religious and historical. Hence, it becomes complex for survivors of gender based violence to experience social inclusion at the behest of the society that supports the perpetrators and is part of the wider problem. Consequently, the article seeks to look at the challenges and opportunities to social inclusion amongst the survivors of gender based violence in Zimbabwe.

Background and context

Igiamoh and Ogunwemimo (2013), maintains that social inclusion refers to the policy and process of ensuring that people are able to participate in society, without discrimination. Individuals should be able to participate in the political, social and economic aspects of their lives based on equality of rights and dignity. However, due to the nature of gender based violence in Zimbabwe, it is difficult for the survivors to be able to enjoy the benefits of a socially inclusive society. This becomes more important as social inclusion plays a key role in the attainment and regaining of social functioning for the survivors of gender based violence.

Gender based violence constitute acts of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life (Makanangana et al., 2014). Consequently, gender based violence includes but is not limited to trafficking, domestic violence, forced marriages, forced prostitution, sexual exploitation and abuse. Gender based violence in Zimbabwe has been increasing despite various intervention strategies to curb it. The Zimbabwe demographic survey of 2015, found out that more than one in every three women are survivors of gender based violence (Redcross, 2017). The most common perpetrator of gender based violence in Zimbabwe has often been a current partner, family member or former husband. One in every two women without an education has experienced spousal abuse (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2016). This is because of the economic dynamics within the household, the husband being a breadwinner of the family cannot be challenged, questioned

or seem to have been disrespected hence, resort to violence. Prevalence of life time experiences of gender based violence within the Southern Africa Development Community range from 50% to 86% (SADC, 2018).

In Zimbabwe gender based violence arises from the social, cultural and religious practices that look upon women as inferior beings. This makes it unacceptable for individuals to step out of their gender roles without censor from the society or their extended families. Within various African societies patriarchy has been a breeding ground for gender based violence especially against women. Patriarchy results in a society where men control the political, social and economic rites hence, women become vulnerable to various forms of abuse (Redcross, 2017). Zengenene and Susanti, (2019), maintain that Zimbabwe has a patriarchal society that is steeped in misogyny and regards women and the issues that affect them as anathema. Break down in the norms and social structures has often been a cause of gender based violence (Zengenene and Susanti, 2019). This amongst other things includes the acceptance of violence as a conflict resolution strategy, weak social support structures, economic challenges and failure to fulfil expected roles within the family and society. Gender based violence in Zimbabwe has also chiefly been a function of societal norms of sexual rights through the payment of bride price. The payment of bride price has resulted in the socialisation process that promotes the superiority of men over women (Redcross, 2017). However, despite the historical understanding in Zimbabwe of gender based violence being primarily against women, men are increasingly becoming victims of gender based violence. As a result, the scope through which gender based violence is understood has deviated from the narrow approach to a broader understanding to include both males and females as survivors. The economic factors that contribute to gender based violence include restricted access to the factors of production such as land, poverty and exploitation.

The understanding of the gender based violence laws amongst the generality of the population is a reflection of the attitudes individuals and societies may have in creating a socially inclusive society for survivors. Jura and Bukaliya, (2015), are of the view that despite the Domestic Violence Act Article 5:16 being put in place to protect those who are domestically abused, domestic violence in Zimbabwe is on the rise. The laws can only be as effective as the people who are protected by such laws understand them. According to Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (2016), 50% of

women and 43% of men are unaware of the provisions of the Domestic Violence Act. More so, 44% of women and 52% of men were specifically unaware of the various protection orders under the Domestic Violence Act (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2016). To ensure access to justice and other help within the Zimbabwean context there is the victim friendly unit within the police services. This is meant to ensure that survivors of gender based violence overcome the barriers presented by their immediate society to accessing justice and being socially reintegrated into their societies.

The problem

Despite the law and the support structures such as the police services in implementing the law, behaviour change amongst communities has remained a key challenge. This makes it difficult for the survivors of gender based violence to be socially included within the environment that considers them as deviant and social outcast. It is in this light that the article seeks to look at social inclusion amongst the survivors of gender based violence in Zimbabwe and proffer strategies to achieve a more inclusive society.

Literature scoping

The social acceptance of gender based violence (GBV) within the African societies make social inclusion and integration of survivors a complex process. A study in Tanzania revealed that among intimate partners, sexual and physical abuse is considered acceptable by 53.3 % of women and 38% of men (McCleary-Sills et al., 2013). This shows how gender based violence has become entrenched in the societal fabric that many consider it a token of love within the intimate partner relationships. Hence, forms of gender based violence such as physical abuse, emotional abuse and insults, forced marital sex and restricted freedoms were more acceptable (McCleary-Sills et al., 2013). Thus women who share their experiences with others or seek support from various social support structures quickly learn that their traverse are never an anomaly but widely experienced (UNFPA, 2010). Social inclusion reflects on the quality and extent of the social connections within any age group and social support structure. This cultivates interdependency as opposed to inequality and exclusion, may foster social identification, aptitude to fulfil roles, recognition by a community or group one belongs to and enhance the individual self-esteem (Scharlach and Lehning, 2012). Thus lack of social support results in systematic exclusion of the survivors of gender based violence, ultimately alienating

them from the otherwise therapeutic gains of social inclusion. Restricted freedoms may involve amongst other things barring individuals from having freedom of movement and association. However, refusal to look after one's children and public humiliation of your partner were less acceptable. The same communities however, do not condone the use of weapons, rape and life threatening beatings and fights.

Violence against men is rarely talked about because of the existing social norms and stigma around masculinity. This makes men a key population in gender based violence as they are less likely to seek help, to be supported by the community and be integrated into their society without attached stigma and discrimination. Access to information, health, social support and social integration are critical services that enhance the social inclusion of gender based violence survivors (McCleary-Sills et al., 2013). Social inclusion for survivors of gender based violence includes medical examination, treatment and follow up (UNFPA, 2010). However, in most instances in the global south staff shortages and resource constrains compromise the access to health for survivors of gender based violence. The psychosocial components for the survivors of gender based violence to ensure their social inclusion include social and community reintegration, emotional support, restoring self-esteem and self-sufficiency to reduce vulnerability (UNFPA, 2010).

Methodology

The study setting is located within the central part of Zimbabwe. Ascot is a high density suburb in the Midlands capital, Gweru. The area is a convergence of the various cultures, religions and economic activity which makes it a haven for gender based violence. An interpretivist qualitative approach was adopted for this study. The 11 participants within the study were purposively sampled. The 11 participants constituted nine survivors of gender based violence and two key informants. Of the nine survivors of gender based violence, two were male whilst the rest were female. The key informants included an officer with the victim friendly unit and a social worker. Pseudo names were given participants for the purposes of data presentation. The key informant and in-depth interview guides were utilised for collecting research data on social inclusion amongst the survivors of gender based violence. Thematic data analysis was used to analyse research results. This involved using the thematic framework to categorize data into major themes

and sub-themes. Comparison between conceptual data was achieved within the thematic framework through use of categories to group, display and discuss data contents (Vaisamoradi, 2013). The thematic examination was accomplished using a thematic index category which brought data together in thematic collections. Thematic analysis offered a more flexible approach to understanding social inclusion amongst the survivors of gender based violence in Ascot, Zimbabwe.

Findings and discussion

The following are major themes that arose from the study on social inclusion amongst the survivors of gender based violence in Ascot high density suburb, Zimbabwe that is social support, social integration, economic emancipation, access to information, accessibility and availability of health services. The following are pseudo names given to the participants for the purposes of data presentation that is Mary, Jongwe, Silvia, Jane, Tendai, Sarudzai, Susan, Grace and Karikoga.

Social support

The study findings revealed that social support amongst the survivors of gender based violence in Ascot, Zimbabwe was central to their social inclusion.

Silvia from the in-depth interviews noted that:

“When I was nursing wounds from a fight with my husband, my church was a source of strength. They made me feel I was not alone despite my family living in Bocha”.

Susan concurred that:

“My sisters and my parents never blamed me for being beaten by my husband they were always by my side. Their support is what gave me strength and healing during the difficult times”.

The family and religious support structures were critical for the inclusion of survivors of gender based violence. These support structures gave survivors a sense that they were not alone, that despite their families being far away they were people who cared and understood their plight. In instances where the family of the victims was supportive without blaming the victims the effect was therapeutic. This was in tandem with the findings by UNFPA (2010), that the psychosocial components for the survivors of gender based violence to ensure their social inclusion include social support, restoring self-esteem and self-sufficiency to reduce vulnerability. Thus when individuals have robust

social support structures they are able to regain their self-confidence and overcome the stigma associated with being a survivor of gender based violence.

In contrast however, Jongwe a male survivor had this to say:

“When my wife would, physically beat me and swear at me, I would receive backlash from the community. One of the people who witnessed the abuse accused me of being sexually dysfunctional hence, my wife was beating and swearing at me”. “More so the law enforcement agencies would make fun of me when I attempted to report the matter, then I knew I was alone”.

This finding showed that gender based violence against men is rarely talked about because of the existing social norms and stigma around masculinity. In Zimbabwe, gender based violence has often been synonymous with abuse towards women. As a result, because of the cultural norms on masculinity male survivors of gender based violence are often accused of being weak in many aspects pertaining to the expected roles. These societal expectations that man ought to be strong often result in the systematic social exclusion of male survivors of gender based violence. The problem emanates largely from the identification of breeding grounds for gender based violence for example, that Zimbabwe has a patriarchal society that is steeped in misogyny and regards women and the issues that affect them as anathema (Zengenene and Susanti, 2019). This cast men as perpetrators and women victims of gender based violence. Hence, social exclusion of male survivors becomes more generally the accepted norm.

An interviewed key informant reported that:

“Survivors of gender based violence who reported their cases often suffer isolation from the community and family. They are accused of involving third parties in their family affairs, hence destroying their own homes while the community considers them a bad influence to the young mothers.”

The sacred nature of family and marriage within the African cultures means that individuals are not usually supported for involving third parties in their affairs. As a result, survivors of gender based violence often suffer in silence so that they can be more acceptable with their immediate and extended families. Accordingly involving the police and seeking professional help leads to social isolation within the family and community coupled with labelling and defamation.

Social integration

The study findings showed that survivors of gender based violence benefited from social integration. Social integration for survivors of gender based violence provided a sense of community and social capital.

a) Sense of community

The support that survivors of gender based violence get when being reintegrated into their communities is an important socially inclusive structure.

Mary an interviewed survivor noted that:

“Surviving gender based violence has left me living with a disability. However, my local community and church groups have always been supportive. When I was discharged from hospital the community pulled resources to purchase a wheelchair for me, paid my rentals and supported my children. Despite my permanent disability now I never felt a lesser part of my community”.

Rumbidzai from the in-depth interviews concurred that:

“The support group that I joined which constitute survivors of gender based violence has become a community within a community for me. This group of people has strengthened me, taught me to let go and improve my life. If it were not for the encouragement and strength rendered I would have committed suicide.”

These findings were in line with what McCleary-Sills et al, (2013), noted that social integration constitutes part of critical community structures that enhance the social inclusion of gender based violence survivors. Communities and religious organisation play a critical role in ensuring that individuals who are survivors of gender based violence are accommodated and given supportive care in order for them to regain their social functioning. Consequently, support groups that are community based often end up becoming small communities that act as gate openers to the wider community.

b) Social capital

The study results showed that seeking help for the survivors of gender based violence ensures that individuals widen their aspirations and have models who have trod their path.

Susan from the in-depth interviews noted that:

“When I joined a support group for survivors, I met individuals who have become my role models today. These were people that went through the worst experiences yet they have emerged stronger and resilient”.

An interviewed key informant noted that:

“A lot of gender based violence survivors increase their social capital within support groups than when they are just attending therapy session. This is because they meet individuals who are coping well with the challenges that they have or even worse.”

Gender based violence survivors gain social capital within the various support groups that they join. These support groups usually consist of the professionals and other survivors who have made strides in gaining their social functioning. When individuals hear the experiences of others they are better able to reflect on their own experiences and come up with more informed strategies of coping. This information was relatively new as it was less reflected in the literature.

Economic emancipation

The study results revealed that social inclusion for the survivors of gender based violence also constitutes self-reliance. One of the major cause of gender based violence has been economic dependence. Consequently, social inclusion for the survivors of gender based violence should include economic emancipation to be self-sufficient and independent. Unless survivors have economic independence they are often trapped in the vicious cycles of abuse in order to sustain their basic needs.

Grace an interviewed participant noted:

“Despite being in an abusive relationship for the past five years, it was difficult for me to let go because I had no other ways to sustain myself economically. However, an organisation that gave me safe shelter when I was thrown out by my former partner, gave us loans. Ever since I have been free from violent relationships as am now self-reliant”.

Karikoga a male survivor concurred that:

“My former girlfriend I was cohabitating with was emotionally and sexually abusive. I was constrained as she paid the rent, food and other basic necessities at home including my clothes. She would emotionally blackmail me and made me to feel that I was less than other men. However, when I sought professional help and they facilitated capital for my shoe retail business, I was able to leave the relationship”.

This concurred with the findings by Igiamoh and Ogunwemimo (2013), that social inclusion includes promoting the values, relations and institutions that enable all persons without discrimination to participate in the economic

aspects of their lives based on equality of rights and dignity. However, the case of Karikoga a male survivor was divergent from the expected norm. Redcross (2017), noted patriarchy to be responsible for the male dominance within the political, social and economic rites hence, women become vulnerable to various forms of abuse. However, the increasing number of women owning the factors of production and working has extended gender based violence beyond patriarchy.

Access to information

The study findings showed that access to credible information is key for the social inclusion of gender based violence survivors in Zimbabwe. The survivors of gender based violence noted how access to information shaped their world view and defined how they were choosing to deal with their challenges. The findings were in tandem with McCleary-Sills et al., (2013), who noted access to information on available services as critical for social inclusion of gender based violence survivors.

Mary an interviewed participant noted that:

“The information I received at the department of social welfare on the available services as a survivor of gender based violence changed my life. A path was set before me of the available counselling, medical, justice services and resilience literature in pamphlet form. This proved empowering”.

Silvia on the same note had this to say:

“It took just a poster on getting help as survivor of gender based violence for me to get all I needed. I called the toll free number and was directed to the services near me. These services were efficient, helpful and cost free”.

Accessibility and availability of health

The study results showed that accessibility and availability of health services was critical for survivors of gender based violence in order for them to be socially included. Survivors of gender based violence’s access to and availability of health services were considered essential to their social inclusion. This is because of the health issues and challenges presented by being a survivor of gender based violence hence, the need for urgent health services.

Tendai an interviewed participant from the in-depth interviews had this to say.

“When I presented myself to the general hospital with injuries inflicted by my partner, the support was overwhelming. The hospital authorities

treated me for free when they realised I was a survivor of gender based violence. They also referred me for further services such as counselling and the police service victim friendly department. Considering my social status, I would not have been able to settle such a huge bill. The counselling and intervention from the police service has eradicated violent conflict in my marriage”

Mary concurred that:

“My injuries were severe that had I not been taken to the hospital quickly and attended to on time, the doctors feared I would have died of excessive external bleeding and internal organ bleeding. Accessibility and availability of health facilities was critical in saving my life.

However, in contrast Jongwe a male survivor noted that:

“When I visited the local clinic seeking medication for the injuries suffered at the hands of my wife there was great stigma. I was interrogated because the clinic staff thought I was a fraud seeking to benefit from free medication. I ended up paying because they would not believe my story. No attempt for referral was made”.

Furthermore, Jane a female survivor had this to say:

“Ever since my husband kicked me on my abdomen, I have been having night pains. However, my in-laws refused me to seek medical attention because they thought their son would be arrested. However, when the pain persisted we had to lie on the cause of the injury to protect my husband. My mother in law made sure, she was present to ensure I did not disclose the correct information”.

An interviewed key informant noted that:

“With support from various partners the government has strengthened the health services available to survivors of gender based violence in urban areas such as Ascot high density suburb, Gweru. However, for rural areas long distances to clinics and quality of services provided have remained a challenge”.

The availability of free health services for the survivors of gender based violence from the government and various stakeholders. Survivors highlighted that it was not only the availability of the services but accessibility and quality of care which made the experience worthwhile. It was also the referral system that made all the needed services available from the medical attention, counselling and other material needs.

This concurred with the findings by UNFPA (2010) that social inclusion for gender based violence includes access to medical examination, treatment and follow up. However, discrimination against male survivors was a consistent challenge for their social inclusion due to the attached stigma. More so, families of survivors protected the perpetrators at the expense of the health seeking for survivors.

Implications for development work

Based on the study findings, the article recommends the following that is:

- Adoption of community sensitisation strategies to correct discriminatory cultural norms and practices against survivors of gender based violence.
- Training of professionals and volunteers on the wider understanding of gender based violence to include men as survivors.
- Building on the already available services to achieve universal access of socially inclusive benefits for gender based violence survivors in Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

The article explored social inclusion amongst the survivors of gender based violence in Zimbabwe's Ascot high density suburb. The study revealed that with the continuous increase in gender based violence cases in Zimbabwe, social inclusion of the survivors becomes a lasting panacea to ensure that they regain their social functioning. The article provided the building blocks for ensuring that survivors of gender based violence regain their social functioning and become pillars of strength in communities towards eradicating gender based violence in Zimbabwe.

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