STIGMA, NORMS AND MASCULINITY: SOCIO-CULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF MEN'S GBV REPORTING IN NYAMAGANA WARD, TANZANIA

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Abstract

This study explored the socio-cultural dimensions shaping the reporting of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) cases among men at the Police Gender Desk in Nyamagana Ward, Mwanza Region, Tanzania. Social Learning Theory guided the study. A cross-sectional study design was adopted. A total of 12 participants were purposively recruited for in-depth interviews, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were used to complement the findings and ensure validity. Data were analysed thematically. The study found that social stigma, societal norms, and men's involvement in productive activities influence their reluctance to engage with the Police Gender Desk. The study concludes that entrenched socio-cultural beliefs and practices significantly deter men from reporting GBV, underscoring the need for community sensitization, policy interventions, and gender-inclusive support systems to address these barriers

Keywords: Stigma, Norms, Masculinity, Gender-Based Violence

Introduction

Despite the establishment of Police Gender Desks in Tanzania to address Gender-Based Violence (GBV), most studies and institutional interventions have primarily focused on women as victims, often overlooking men's experiences, attitudes, and responses within the reporting process (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Mbughuni, 2016). GBV against men continues to be largely unreported despite the presence of Police Gender Desks, creating a gendered gap in understanding how men engage with, perceive, or resist mechanisms of accountability, particularly in urban contexts such as Nyamagana Ward. Cultural norms, social stigma, and patriarchal constructions of masculinity shape men's silence or reluctance to report or support the reporting of GBV cases (Jewkes et al., 2015). Furthermore, limited empirical data exist on men's interactions with these state institutions, impeding the development of inclusive and effective GBV interventions (Duvvury et al., 2013).

Across regions including Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa specifically East Africa there is growing recognition of the need to address male victimization and the socio-cultural and institutional barriers that inhibit reporting (Kitundu, 2023). Africa presents unique challenges in addressing GBV against men. In countries such as Ethiopia, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), socio-cultural norms and traditional views of masculinity

often prevent men from disclosing experiences of abuse (Graaff & Heinecken, 2017). This study therefore explored the socio-cultural dimensions that shape the reporting of GBV cases among men at the Police Gender Desk in Nyamagana Ward, Mwanza Region, Tanzania.

Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional research design was adopted to collect data from different groups of participants at a single point in time (Bryman, 2016). A total of 12 participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diversity within the population. The study also included social workers, community development officers, and police gender desk officers as key informants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The interviews provided detailed personal accounts of men's experiences and perceptions regarding GBV reporting, while the FGDs allowed participants to discuss shared experiences, social norms, and community attitudes. Employing both methods enriched the data and provided multiple perspectives on the research questions (Author, Year).

Data were analysed thematically using QSR NVivo 14, a flexible tool for managing qualitative data. Thematic analysis enabled the identification, organization, and interpretation of patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS

Social Stigma

Social stigma refers to the negative labelling and shame men face when reporting GBV. Participants repeatedly stated that men who report abuse are viewed as weak, which undermines their social status and masculinity. Eleven out of twelve participants described reporting as socially unacceptable. A 58-year-old participant explained:

> "A man is supposed to persevere, not be someone who complains. We would ask ourselves, is there really a man here? If you go and report, people will talk, laugh, and question your strength. You are expected to handle problems on your own and keep the family's honor. No one wants to see a man crying or admitting he has a problem. That is why many of us suffer in silence and do not approach the police or anyone else

Another participant emphasized religious and cultural interpretations:

> "That's why even God created man and woman; their behaviors are different. Now the woman cries, and you, a grown man, also cry? People will judge you, saying you are weak or not a real man. It is embarrassing to admit you need help, even if the problem is serious. Everyone expects men to endure and solve problems themselves. So, most men choose to stay quiet rather than face ridicule or shame. This pressure makes it very hard to report any abuse formally."

The same view was to a 48 year old with primary level of education

> "I never thought I could tell anyone about the abuse I faced. Even my close friends, I feared they would mock me or say I am weak. I imagined my neighbors laughing and questioning how I let this happen. The shame kept me locked inside my home, trying to solve everything myself. I only spoke to a friend much later, but even then I was nervous about what he would think. This fear and embarrassment are the main reasons why men like me do not report abuse.

Societal Norms

Societal norms emerged as a powerful barrier influencing men's willingness to report GBV cases at the Police Gender Desk. These norms position men as heads of households who must be strong, self-reliant, and capable of solving domestic issues privately. Seeking external help or expressing vulnerability is interpreted as weakness and a violation of culturally accepted masculinity. Participants repeatedly described how these norms discouraged them from approaching the PGD.

A 52-year-old participant explained:

> "You know the man is the head of the family. How can he then start crying at the gender desk? Situations like this make men sit silently, saying it will pass. Everyone expects men to take responsibility and protect the family. If you admit there is a problem, people will question your ability to lead. It is not just about shame; it is about losing respect in the eyes of your family and community. These unwritten rules make men feel trapped, with no safe way to report abuse."

A 24-year-old participant, single with informal education, shared a similar view:

> "We are socialized from childhood to be patient and endure without complaining; it is therefore surprising to see a man complain to the police. Everyone around us says men must be strong, handle their own problems, and not show weakness. When you report, people will judge you, and your status is reduced. That is why many men silently suffer and do not seek formal help. Even when help is available, the cultural expectations make it seem impossible to use it. We are trained to stay quiet no matter how bad the situation gets."

These findings indicate that the societal norms shapes men's attitude and perception which undermine police gender desk

Men's Involvement in Productive Activities

Men's involvement in productive activities emerged as a practical and social barrier. Heavy engagement in income-generating and household-supporting work limits time, energy, and willingness to engage with formal reporting mechanisms. Because men are socially expected to act as primary providers, they often prioritize work over personal or family matters.

A 48-year-old boda boda rider, married with primary education, attested:

> "These incidents do happen, I do not deny that, but we, the leaders, do not have time to go report someone. The time to go to the gender desk is not suitable; I prefer to focus on my work. I spend long hours earning for my family, and taking time off is difficult. Going to report might mean losing income or facing delays. Most men like me just endure and handle things on our own. Work takes priority even when the problem is serious."

During FGD conducted at Nyamagana ward one participant held the same view

> "We men have no free time. That's why they sometimes get a chance to go. Even if we go and wait there, the allowances are still the same. I cannot leave my work for hours to report something, only to come back and have nothing. The pressure to provide keeps men busy and silent. Most of us just hope problems solve themselves. That is why productive responsibilities are a bigger barrier than anything else sometimes."

Another participant seemed to have more information on that

> "I would like to report, but my work is demanding. I wake up early, ride all day, and get home late. If I take time to go to the gender desk, my customers lose trust, and my earnings

drop. The family depends on me, so I cannot leave my work. Even when I think about reporting, I realize I have no time or energy. This is why men prioritize work over seeking help, even when the abuse is ongoing."

These findings entail that the way men are keeping busy in productive activities like boda boda riding limits their time of reporting GBV cases at police gender desk

Discussion Of the Findings

Social Stigma

The study also found that men often fear being perceived as weak or less masculine if they report experiences of GBV, reflecting deeply ingrained stigma rooted in social and cultural norms. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) offers insight into this behavior: individuals learn not only skills and knowledge but also social attitudes through observation of others. When men witness peers or community members avoiding reporting due to fear of ridicule, shame, or social disapproval, they internalize these behaviors and replicate them, perpetuating silence.

Kihiyo and Msoka (2024) and Thobejane et al. (2018) similarly highlight that stigma functions as a powerful deterrent, discouraging men from seeking help even when it is available and necessary. This social pressure reinforces harmful gender norms, framing vulnerability as unmanly and discouraging engagement with formal support mechanisms. The consequence is a cycle of underreporting, continued victimization, and limited access to justice and psychosocial support.

Policy and intervention implications are significant. Efforts to address stigma must go beyond simply providing services they must actively reshape social norms. Interventions should engage local leaders, respected community members, and male peer educators to publicly model non-stigmatized help-seeking behaviors. Such normative change strategies can demonstrate that seeking support is compatible with masculinity, gradually reducing shame and social barriers. By leveraging social learning, these interventions can foster a cultural shift in which male GBV victims feel empowered to report abuse without fear of judgment, enhancing both service utilization and broader community recognition of men's experiences

Societal Norms

Societal expectations of men as household heads and primary providers emerged as a compelling socio-cultural barrier that reinforces endurance, silence, and avoidance of formal reporting mechanisms for GBV. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) provides a useful lens to understand this phenomenon, explaining that individuals internalize behaviours by observing others in their social environment. In this case, men observe elders, community leaders, and peers who model stoicism, resilience, and the suppression of vulnerability, creating a powerful template for behaviour that equates male strength with endurance and discourages expressions of distress or help-seeking. Over time, these observed patterns become deeply ingrained, shaping men's perceptions of acceptable conduct and reinforcing the notion that seeking assistance is socially inappropriate.

These findings align closely with McKenzie et al. (2022) and Athuman & Munishi (2022), who similarly note that culturally constructed scripts around masculinity strongly influence men's responses to violence and their willingness to engage with institutional support. The consistency across these studies can be attributed to similar socio-cultural contexts, where male authority, provider roles, and public perceptions of strength are emphasized, creating shared behavioural norms that limit help-seeking. In all cases, men learn indirectly through observation of

consequences for deviation from these norms, reinforcing silence and non-disclosure. However, divergent findings emerge in contexts where active community engagement and sensitization initiatives have been implemented. In such settings, men observe alternative behaviours peers or respected figures seeking institutional support without loss of social respect or family cohesion. These observed examples demonstrate that behavioural norms are not fixed; when men witness supportive responses and positive outcomes from reporting, they are more likely to reinterpret traditional expectations, adopt help-seeking behaviours, and challenge the rigid constructs of masculinity. This divergence highlights the importance of social modelling in transforming culturally entrenched norms and underscores the potential for interventions that combine education, peer-led examples, and community advocacy to reshape perceptions of male vulnerability and reporting behaviour.

Men's Involvement in Production

Men's extensive engagement in income-generating and household-supporting activities emerged as a significant practical and socio-cultural barrier limiting their ability to engage with the Police Gender Desk. Bandura (1977) suggests that behaviours are learned through observation; in this context, men observe peers and elders consistently prioritizing work and economic responsibilities over institutional engagement. This observation reinforces a social norm that places economic productivity above personal welfare or help-seeking, signaling that taking time to report abuse may be socially and economically inappropriate. Consequently, male victims internalize the idea that enduring abuse silently is consistent with socially accepted masculine roles.

This finding aligns closely with Sikamikami et al. (2023) and Oparide et al. (2021), who document similar patterns across African communities, where men are culturally positioned as primary providers, and any diversion from these responsibilities—even to seek formal support can be perceived as neglecting social and familial obligations. The shared dynamic across these studies reflects how socio-economic pressures intersect with culturally constructed notions of masculinity, producing behavioural constraints that are reinforced over time through social observation.

However, divergences are noted in contexts where reporting systems are structured to accommodate men's work schedules. For instance, in studies by Wanjoihi (2016) and Govender & Masson (2023), flexible reporting channels, scheduled appointments, and mobile or outreach services facilitated male engagement, demonstrating that structural adaptations can mitigate these socialized behavioural patterns. This illustrates that while men's involvement in productive activities is a deeply embedded socio-cultural constraint, it is not immutable. Observing peers successfully navigating flexible reporting mechanisms can model alternative behaviours, highlighting that social learning processes can be leveraged to shift engagement patterns.

Moreover, this discussion underscores a critical interplay between structural and behavioural factors: men do not simply avoid reporting because of personal choice; they respond to observable social scripts and institutional designs that implicitly de-prioritize male participation. Therefore, interventions must address both social expectations and institutional rigidity. The integration of Bandura's theory here illuminates how economic responsibilities, social learning, and observed behaviours converge to sustain underreporting of GBV among men, providing a nuanced understanding of how practical obligations are socially learned and reinforced, Stigma operated at multiple levels: within families, among peers, and in the broader community. Men feared judgment and ridicule, which discouraged them from seeking support even when needed. Some participants described anticipating the reactions of neighbours or colleagues, noting that the fear of public exposure often prevented formal complaints. This stigma also influenced men's interactions with other male victims, as many were reluctant to advise peers to report, reinforcing a cycle of silence

and non-engagement with the Police Gender Desk (PGD). In Nyamagana Ward, social stigma remained one of the most influential socio-cultural barriers, tightly linked to men's need to maintain social status and adhere to masculine ideals.

Conclusion

The study concludes that socio-cultural norms particularly stigma, rigid notions of masculinity, and work-related pressures are powerful deterrents to male help-seeking. Men learn from family, peers, and community elders that expressing vulnerability or seeking institutional help is shameful and risks social sanction; this learning produces a tendency to endure abuse in order to preserve status, breadwinning roles, or family unity. Economic obligations and time constraints further compound these norms by making it practically difficult to engage with formal services. Together, these socio-cultural forces create a durable pattern of silence in which men prioritize perceived social and economic duties over personal safety, thereby entrenching their exclusion from GBV response systems.

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