

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

## The Role of Traditional Leadership in Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Seke Community, Zimbabwe

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Received: 31 July 2023 | Revised: 09 December 2023 | Published: 12 January 2024

Reviewing Editor: Dr. Olajumoke Ogunsanya, Durban University of Technology

### Abstract

*This study examines the role of traditional leadership (village head and chiefs) in curbing gender-based violence (GBV) in rural communities. GBV disproportionately affects women in rural areas. The paper argues that traditional leaders have a role in addressing GBV in rural communities and posits that given the limited presence of formal institutions in rural communities, traditional leaders actively address and prevent GBV in their localities. This study is part of a 2022 Doctor of Philosophy thesis that explores the role of communal institutions in addressing GBV in Seke District, Ward 8, Zimbabwe. This study relies on qualitative research based on in-depth interviews and observations at the Chief's court. Findings from interviews with two officers and 10 village heads and chiefs and five observations that involved 14 participants indicate that traditional leaders use mediation, the traditional court system, referrals to the police, and awareness campaigns to address GBV. The study also indicates that food insecurity, infidelity, drug abuse, land ownership, and patriarchy are some of the drivers of GBV in the community. The paper recommends that the government, law enforcement, and private stakeholders use education on GBV to empower traditional leaders, who are essential players in addressing GBV in rural communities.*

**Keywords:** gender-based violence; traditional leaders; gender; rural communities

### Introduction

Despite national laws, efforts by civil society and non-governmental organisations (Home Affairs, 2018) to end GBV remain a significant challenge in rural Zimbabwe. Deeply embedded in the social fabric of rural communities, traditional leaders hold a unique position in influencing community norms, attitudes, and behaviours and contributing to the prevention and reduction of GBV. Traditional leaders in Zimbabwe, i.e. chiefs, headmen, and village heads, play a crucial role in community governance and have various responsibilities in community life, including land allocation, dispute settlement, conflict resolution, rural development, education, and the reinforcement of social norms (Elder *et al.*, 2019). The Zimbabwe Traditional Leaders Act (Chapter 29:17) grants traditional leaders the constitutional authority to address conflicts including GBV, particularly in rural areas (Chigwata, 2016). This study examines the role of traditional leaders in addressing and preventing GBV within Seke District, Zimbabwe. GBV can be defined as various forms of violence against an individual based on their gender (EIGE, 2021). The forms of violence are verbal, psychological, emotional, and physical, and include sexual harassment and rape (*ibid*, 2021). This pervasive violence disproportionately affects women. GBV is a global challenge (EIGE, 2021), a World Health Organization (2021) report estimated that one in four women will experience physical and sexual violence in their lifetime. Zimbabwe suffers from high rates of GBV. Statistics from the 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey underscore the gravity of the situation, revealing that 39.4% of girls and women aged 15–49 years have experienced physical violence (Zimbabwe Statistics, 2019). The adverse consequences of GBV include loss of life, loss of employment, and mental and physical health issues (Campbell, 2002).

GBV victims often encounter a significant barrier to seeking justice through formal institutions such as the police because the act of reporting incidents is perceived as a potential threat to relationships that hinders the prospects

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of reconciliation (Chireshe, 2015). As a result, victims are reluctant to disclose instances of gendered violence to formal authorities and opt instead for alternative avenues such as confiding in family members or turning to traditional leaders for conflict resolution (SAFAIDS, 2015). Traditional leaders' emphasis on reconciliation in marriages over separation (Chadambuka and Warria, 2022) make these leaders more appealing to people who seek to maintain family ties. However, the effectiveness of traditional leaders in mitigating and resolving gender-based issues within their communities remains underexplored. Existing studies of GBV in Zimbabwe predominantly focus on individual and relational factors and less on the community level. Community factors encompass the contexts – such as schools, neighbourhoods, villages, and workplaces – in which social relationships occur. Additionally, factors such as weak community sanctions against GBV perpetrators and low social capital are associated with elevated levels of GBV perpetration and victimisation (Heise, 1998). This study sought to address this gap by examining the role of traditional leaders, who play a pivotal role in shaping the community's response to GBV. By exploring how traditional leaders address GBV in Ward 8, the study investigated the influence on women's vulnerability of community factors such as accepted gender norms, the normative use of violence, and weak informal sanctions against GBV. The study further explored how traditional leaders, as one of the community factors, shape how individuals respond to GBV through the methods they use to address GBV.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1997) was further developed by Heise (1998) to explain the interplay of various risk drivers of GBV. The theory elucidates the interconnectedness of individual, relational, community, and societal levels. The theory portrays these levels as open systems that mutually influence and depend on one another. At the individual (microsystem) level, instances of violence are often observed in immediate relationships, such as in intimate and familial interactions. The relational (mesosystem) level encompasses the broader social environment in which men and women navigate various influencing factors and includes connections between families in the community. The community (macro-system) level represents the broader social structures and institutions in which factors such as gender dynamics, social expectations, cultural practices, and identity groups are embedded (Heise, 1998). These elements significantly contribute to the likelihood that individuals become victims or perpetrators of violence and emphasise the negative or positive impact of the interactions between these systems on an individual's development.

## Literature Review

GBV affects women in rural communities because of limited social support from governmental agencies and scarce resources (Bob *et al.*, 2022; Ceccato, 2015; Chuma and Chazovachii, 2012). A study in South Africa by Bob *et al.* (2022) posited that rural areas often lack psychosocial support agencies, shelters, and adequate services including police stations where abuse can be reported. In addition, the long distances to police stations compound women's challenges in rural areas by making it difficult for women to access formal support services (Conroy, 2014; Chadambuka and Warria, 2022). Furthermore, the interlinking of cultural norms with various disadvantages such as limited social support facilities, long distance, poverty, and entrenched patriarchy amplifies the impact of GBV (Fidan and Bui, 2016). The situation is no different in Zimbabwe, a country characterised by the limited number of police substations and shelters in rural areas (Chuma and Chazovachii, 2012; Chadambuka and Warria, 2022). Within these rural communities, deeply ingrained patriarchal norms perpetuate male dominance and gender inequality and cultivate environments in which GBV thrives. Scholars such as Bob *et al.* (2022), and Chireshe (2015) underscored that rural areas serve as bastions of patriarchal norms and hegemonic masculinity that significantly heighten the risk of GBV, particularly when women deviate from prescribed gender roles. Notably, the manifestation of hyper-masculinity – which is often expressed as control – emerges as a defining characteristic in GBV settings, which are further complicated by the societal acceptance of violence. As evidenced by studies by Bob *et al.* (2022) in South Africa, Ceccato (2015) in Sweden, and Chuma and Chazovachii (2012) in Zimbabwe, the normalisation and internalisation of violence by women in such environments exacerbate the complexity of the issue. In these contexts, the normalisation of violence by women, coupled with an unwillingness to leave or report abusive partners, amplifies the vulnerabilities faced by women in rural settings.

Bosilong and Mbecke (2019) indicated that GBV is more prevalent in poor households compared to their urban counterparts. Rural areas, which have more poor households, are associated with an increased risk of violence against women. Studies in South Africa, Asia, and Afghanistan have indicated that poverty leads to less gender-equitable attitudes (Gibbs *et al.*, 2020; Jewkes *et al.*, 2017). Scholars have highlighted that women's food insecurity (an indicator of poverty) is associated with GBV (Gibbs *et al.*, 2018; Jewkes *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, the confluence of limited infrastructure, deeply rooted patriarchal norms, and economic disparities in rural areas

intensifies the risk factors that are associated with GBV. Traditional leaders in rural areas are considered immediate leaders in local governance (Chigwata, 2016) who are responsible for the maintenance of peace at the family and community levels. Traditional leaders in their communities wield considerable support and respect that often surpass that of elected leaders (Chigwata, 2016). According to Twikirise (2014), before colonisation, African 'ways of helping and solving problems...were largely informal, micro-level operations carried through the family, kinship, and local chiefdoms and based on mutual aid and collective action facilitated by traditional customs and culture'. Twikirise illustrates traditional leaders' active role in addressing problems in their communities. Despite the changes ushered in by colonisation, traditional leadership has managed to remain influential in rural areas.

Traditional leaders are key figures for women who seek help in rural Zimbabwe (Chadambuka and Warria, 2022; Chuma and Chazovachii, 2012; SAFAIDS, 2015). Studies in other rural communities across Africa have emphasised the role of traditional leaders as sources of help for women who experience GBV (Odero *et al.*, 2014; Kholi *et al.*, 2015). A study by Kholi *et al.* (2015) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo highlighted the supportive role of traditional chiefs as providers of advice for preventing and reducing GBV. Counselling includes strategies for rediscovering love and commitment, fostering respectful communication within the couple, and addressing the well-being and needs of children and the entire family. Similarly, traditional leaders in rural Tanzania play a crucial role in counselling and reconciling couples that are affected by violence (Simons *et al.*, 2020). Odero *et al.*'s study (2014) in Kenya emphasised the authority of local administrators, including chiefs and community elders, who act as judges in cases of GBV. Chiefs hold the power to summon and punish perpetrators of intimate partner violence and convene community meetings to arbitrate between parties. Although the discourse about GBV in Zimbabwe in general and the Seke District in particular has received considerable coverage, this study adds to the existing knowledge by providing a nuanced grassroots perspective from the study area. There is no available information on how indigenous systems, i.e. traditional leaders, respond to GBV in Seke district, Ward 8 rural setting. This study sought to address this gap by exploring the role of traditional leaders in addressing and preventing GBV in Seke District, Ward 8.

## Methodology

This study focused on Ward 8 in Seke District, which is located within Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe. Although Ward 8 encompasses 30 villages, the researcher encountered challenges in accessing participants in ten villages and managed to engage with nine village heads, two headmen, and one chief. Some village heads declined participation, citing their chief as a more knowledgeable authority. Given their ability to delve into participants' emotions and behaviours, qualitative research methods were used to probe and explore emerging topics (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The findings were based on in-depth interviews and observations in the chiefs' courts between April and December 2022. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in the Shona or English languages and were based on a semi-structured interview guide that explored participants' perspectives on GBV, its manifestations and causes, and preventive measures. The audio recording of interviews enhanced efficiency. Interviews were held at participants' chosen locations, which mostly consisted of their residences. Purposive sampling was employed to select 12 information-rich Key Informants (KI) including traditional leaders and two officers from the Victim Friendly Unit (VFU) of the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) – all of whom had experience addressing GBV within Ward 8. This sampling strategy ensured the inclusion of individuals who were well-versed in the study area (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Targeting community leaders enabled an in-depth exploration of the role of traditional leaders in GBV mitigation. Five observations of the Chief's court proceedings related to GBV that involved 14 participants were also conducted. This approach provided valuable insights into the traditional court's contribution to addressing gendered conflicts.

The observations allowed the researcher to witness the participants in their social environment and capture subjective and objective human behaviour (Gillis and Jackson, 2002; Mulhall, 2003). The selection criteria for the 26 study participants included having experience in addressing GBV; being a traditional leader, police officer, or victims/perpetrators at the traditional court; residing in Seke District, Ward 8; and being available for participation in the study. Research approval for the study was secured from the Seke Rural District Council; the Ministry of Women Affairs; Community, Small and Medium Enterprise Development; and the Institutional Research Ethics Committee at the Durban University of Technology (No: 304/21). Prior consent was obtained from all the participants. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher provided consent forms and an information sheet that explained the purpose of the research and that participation was voluntary. The participants were asked to indicate their willingness to participate by signing the consent forms. In the court hearings, the participants were asked

whether they agreed to have the court proceedings used for a study and were asked to provide verbal consent, which was audio recorded. Real names were replaced with pseudonyms (alphabetic letters) for privacy. Upon completion of data collection from the interviews and court hearings, the data collected were transcribed in Shona and translated into English. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis because of its flexibility in identifying and analysing themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

## Findings and Discussion

The analysis of key participant interviews and data collected from observing traditional court proceedings yielded an understanding of conceptualisations in the community of GBV, its underlying causes, the methods employed to address or prevent GBV, and recommendations for the future. The findings indicated that traditional leaders understood GBV as conflicts between men and women and as conflicts between intimate partners. Additionally, the findings revealed that alcohol, food insecurity, infidelity, and patriarchy are the drivers of GBV. The results further indicated that traditional leaders provide support to victims and perpetrators through counselling and advice, further referrals to the police, the use of traditional courts to mediate gender-associated conflicts and problems, and awareness campaigns to prevent GBV. The following section presents findings according to three themes identified from the analysis: (i) understanding of GBV; (ii) causes of GBV; and (iii) traditional leader-driven response to GBV.

### *Understanding of GBV*

The study revealed that traditional leaders conceptualise GBV as conflicts that occur between men and women and within intimate partner relationships.

*'GBV kunetsana kwababa nama'* (conflicts between father and mother; KI A, B, C, D).

*'GBV is when there is violence between husband and wife because of disagreements'* (KI E, F, G).

*GBV imhirizhonga mudzimba, inonyanya kubata vakadzi* (GBV is violence within the home affecting women more; KI H, I, J).

*GBV kushungurudzwa kwamadzimai* (GBV is the abuse of women; KI K, L).

The responses from the participants offer valuable insights into their comprehension of GBV. Notably, these responses identify the home as the predominant setting for GBV occurrences and frequently implicate spouses. Given the patriarchal norms that condone the subordination of women in Africa, high rates of domestic violence are observed (McCloskey *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, the participants' understanding may have been shaped by their interactions with those seeking conflict resolution, particularly within marital relationships.

### *Causes of GBV*

Traditional leaders identified causes or key factors that contribute to the pervasive issue of GBV. Food insecurity, drug and alcohol abuse, instances of infidelity, and the deep-seated influence of patriarchy emerged as prominent root causes.

**Food insecurity:** Village heads KI A and KI D indicated in an interview that economic hardship causes GBV in their communities.

*'nzara yakaipa inokonzera bopoto mumba'* (poverty is not good; it only causes conflicts in families; KI A).

*'nyaya dzechikafu dzokonzera mhirizhonga'* (issues to do with food cause violence; KI D).

*'When there is no food in the house, women often pressure their husbands to provide, resulting in verbal exchange that may lead to physical violence in some cases because the man will think the wife is being disrespectful'* (KI A).

This study's findings corroborate with those of Chivasa and Harris (2019) on the assertion's prevalence of poverty in Ward 8, underscoring the pivotal role of poverty in rendering women particularly vulnerable. Conflicts related to food distribution, which often manifest as both verbal and physical violence, escalate in households that grapple with food insecurity. This correlation is substantiated by the work of Gibbs *et al.* (2018) and Jewekes *et al.* (2017), who posited a direct association between food insecurity and the incidence of GBV. Furthermore, the findings

indicated that societal expectations and norms often socialise men to assume the role of providers. When circumstances hinder their ability to fulfil this role and women take on the role of breadwinners, a power shift occurs as men attempt to retain authority which may result in violence.

**Drug and alcohol abuse:** Traditional leaders in Seke District, Ward 8 identified drug and alcohol abuse as a cause of gendered violence.

*'vakomana vari kutora mutoriro'* (youths are taking methamphetamine, causing violence; KII B, C).

*'unotaurei nemunhu akasticker, imhirizhonga chete'* (what discussions can you have with an intoxicated person? It is only noise and violence; KII J).

'The villages near Ziko are affected by drugs, increasing GBV.' (KII L)

'When the man returns home drunk, yet there is no food or the school fees for the children are not paid, the wife will question it, and unfortunately, this results in physical fights.' (KI A)

*'mazuva apfuura vakomana vechidiki vairova madzimai kuzvibhorani nekuda kumhanyira guka'* (the young boys were physically manhandling women at the waterholes because of drugs; KII H).

The findings in this paper indicate the link between GBV and alcohol and drug abuse. Although drugs in rural settings are limited or absent, some villages in Ward 8 are near the Chitungwiza Urban District, making the proliferation of drugs possible. Studies indicate that drug and alcohol abuse are factors that drive GBV by increasing the rate of conflict between partners, which often results in violence (Gibbs *et al.*, 2019; Heise, 2011). Given the cultural and historical traditions that encourage heavy drinking, substance abuse is widespread in Africa (UNODC World Drug Report, 2020). In addition to alcohol, common substances used in Africa include cannabis, methamphetamine, heroin, and other opiates (Donnenfeld *et al.*, 2019). Substance abuse, combined with gender norms that discriminate against women, increases the risk of violence against women.

**Infidelity:** Because the conflicts associated with cheating often resulted in the use of violence, infidelity was also identified as a cause of GBV.

*'I once helped a woman who was thrown out of her matrimonial home because her husband had brought another woman. She was staying in the nearby forests with the children.'* (KII C)

The paper found that both men and women were involved in extramarital affairs that led to physical and emotional violence. Infidelity was also revealed in Traditional Court Hearing 4:

*'I got a call from Mrs. B alerting me that my wife is having an affair with her husband. When I returned home and seized my wife's phone, I discovered messages between my wife and Mr. B that proved they were having sexual relations. My wife acknowledged the affair when I questioned her about it afterwards.'* (Traditional Court Hearing 4)

During the question-and-answer session by Mrs A and B's Chief, it was revealed that the husbands physically and emotionally abused their wives because of the infidelity.

*'Has he stopped beating you for sleeping with his friend?'* (Traditional Court Hearing 4)

*'Mrs B, is your husband still beating you for telling Mr A about the affair and asking you to look for money to pay Mr A?'* (Traditional Court Hearing 4)

The findings supported that infidelity is a driver of GBV and results in emotional and physical violence. Notably, instances such as a woman being forced to live in the forest after her husband expelled her from their home because of his involvement with another woman illuminate the profound impact of the abusive dynamics of infidelity. In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, the link between infidelity and gender roles is explained, stressing prevailing notions of male dominance and conquest (McCloskey *et al.*, 2005). Within this cultural framework, it is deemed acceptable for men to have multiple sexual partners, a practice that symbolises men's masculinity and power. However, such behaviour is not culturally permissible for women, further reinforcing the unequal power dynamics. This belief consequently sanctions male dominance and control over female sexuality, which is

exemplified in this study by the demand for repayment to the husband whose wife had cheated, illustrating the exertion of control over women's sexuality by their spouses.

**Patriarchy:** Strong patriarchal beliefs also emerged as a cause of GBV in the community.

*'A man who reports that he is being beaten or abused by his wife is laughed at even by the police.'* (KI C, E)

*'Gender equality is the cause of GBV; back in the day, women knew their places within the home, but now, because they are working, they sometimes forget their role in the home. In some instances, the men will not be working, causing violence with the men wanting to assert dominion or authority.'* (KI G).

*'Lack of respect by women to the men of the house'* (failing to respect the men of the house; KI F, I).

*'We have cases where women are being chased away from the land they were using with the husband in the event of divorce or death. This is because the land is family-owned and controlled by the men of that family.'* (KI A)

The intersection between GBV and patriarchy was explored by Makore-Rukuni (2017), who posits that patriarchy fundamentally underlies GBV and establishes and perpetuates uneven power dynamics between men and women. This study indicated that structural inequality sanctions male dominance and control over female behaviour and insists on the maintenance of gender roles. Furthermore, the insistence that GBV is caused by gender equality and traditional leaders' insistence on gender roles underlines the need to maintain the uneven power distribution. Studies by Chadambuka and Warria (2022) in Chimanimani Rural District, Zimbabwe, asserted that traditional leaders' belief systems are embedded in cultural norms that reinforce power imbalances between men and women. Consequently, these beliefs negatively affect how traditional leaders address GBV. These beliefs make traditional leaders likely to reinforce male dominance.

#### **Traditional leaders' driven responses to GBV**

As revealed by the data, traditional leaders play a multifaceted role in responding to GBV. Their interventions encompassed providing support to both victims and perpetrators by providing counselling and advising the community to speak against violence and child marriages.

*'I teach people in my court sessions about the importance of respect in relationships.'* (KI A)

*'The title "traditional leader" does not refer to me as a person stuck in the past, and I understand the changes asi **vanhu ngavadzidziswe vasati vapara dzimhosva kuitira kana munhu opinhwa mutongo asashamisike** (but people need to be taught about these changes and how to adapt to them before they commit crimes).'* (KI A)

*'I quote the proverb, "Regai drive shiri mazai haana muto" (let them grow because children are more valuable when they are grown) to speak against child marriages.'* (KI C)

*'We counsel the conflicting parties so that they avoid using violence in the future.'* (KI H, KI I)

*'Village head, can we not find some piece of land to give to this woman.'* (Traditional Court Hearing 5)

The traditional leaders in Seke District, Ward 8 use counselling, advise, and, in some cases, offer land to women who would otherwise have been disposed of their land. The decision to give land to the widow speaks to traditional leaders' role in offering solutions to gendered land disputes by considering the broader social context and potential consequences of their rulings. These findings related to counselling and advice as part of the solution to prevent GBV concur with those from studies in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania (Simons *et al.*, 2020; Kholi *et al.*, 2015).

**Mediation:** The findings suggested that mediation was the most popular method for settling disputes in families and communities. KI I said that 'people that experience difficulties turn first to their families, and if it does not help, they come to us where we will call for a village meeting/dare, or we refer the Chief's court'.

*'We have a village committee of seven that calls both parties in a conflict to a meeting by the musasa tree. The purpose of the meeting is to help them settle their differences.'* (KI G)

'Community members can also use a *sahwira* (family friend) to help in mediation'. (KI B)

*'We, as Shona people, have relied on sahwiras for family conflict resolution since our ancestors' time. The reason why "vanhu vachinopotera kwasahwira" (people report conflicts to the family friend) is because in the family, there may not be anyone who can rebuke the offender "nekuti pamwe ndibaba kana kuti munyarikani" (because the offender could be the head of the family or a respected person). We address violence in the community by using the sahwira in mediation to condemn it.'* (KI B)

The use of mediation emerged prominently as a pivotal measure for the prevention and addressing of GBV within Seke District's Ward 8. Mediation, characterised by the involvement of a neutral third party, featured traditional leaders as arbiters in intimate gendered conflicts. This observation was consistent with Mboh's (2022) findings in Mahikeng, South Africa regarding the role of traditional leaders' use of mediation techniques in conflict resolution.

**Traditional court system:** The data collected from observations indicated that traditional court systems are a very important platform for the resolution of conflicts including GBV. To identify the root cause of the violence, both the victim and the perpetrators are questioned in such meetings. The court sessions revealed gendered violence that was caused by inheritance and land conflicts that affected widows.

*'My late husband's family is chasing me out of my matrimonial house and the land we used when he was alive. They are accusing me of killing my husband and cheating on my late husband'. (Traditional Court Hearing 2)*

When the Chief questioned the family on why they were chasing the woman away, the response was:

*'Often I overheard them quarrelling, and she would say "une mvura dzega dzega hauzvare"' (your semen is weak, and you are infertile).*

On the allegations that the woman killed her husband, the husband's brother said,

*'She came back home one day when we were still looking for Fidelis and "akanogeza asina kupfeka kumakura pakati pehusiku" (she went to bathe in the fields by the midnight hour), and to me, it is a sign that she was trying to prevent the avenging spirit of my brother from coming after her'. (Traditional Court Hearing 2).*

After hearing both sides and asking necessary questions to understand the dynamics of the conflict, the Chief or village head provided advice and made a judgement to address the conflict. For instance, in the above matter, the Chief said:

*'You need to do a paternity test, wait for the murder investigations by the police, and until then, the surviving spouse should be allowed to use the house and land'. (Traditional Court Hearing 2)*

In another land-associated dispute, a widow was disposed of her land by her caretaker.

*'I received a call from the village saying that X had taken down my kitchen and claimed that my land was his. I was told that X had convinced the community that he was the rightful owner of the land since people had not seen me for years. I immediately reported the matter to the police, hoping they would help me recover my property and land. X insisted that the land was his and that I had no proof that it was mine. Indeed, I had no proof because all my witnesses had died. The police could not help me, so they told me to return to the village head. I am a widow; I am not working and cannot afford to buy another piece of land. I want my land back'. (Traditional Court Hearing 5)*

The observations in the traditional court revealed the prevalence of land ownership disputes that disadvantaged women. The dispossession of widows' land resulted in emotional and economic violence. The observations revealed that women cannot directly own land but can only access land through their husbands and children. In addition, widows are exploited by men because of their gender. This finding confirms that of Shumba (2011), who observed that men predominantly determine women's rights to land. Therefore, access and control over land predominantly rest in the hands of men, perpetuating gender-based disparities in land ownership and use.

Some cases appeared before the magistrate, or police would be brought back to the traditional court, signalling dissatisfaction with the outcome. This was observed at the Chief's court. For instance,

*'According to our traditions, "munhu akarara nemukadzi vemunhu anofanira kuripa" (when a person sleeps with another man's wife, he is supposed to compensate the husband with a cow). I told them I needed three cows. Mr. B gave me his car instead. However, the police summoned me the following day. When I arrived, they asked me to return the car to Mr B. He had given me a car that he and his wife had jointly purchased, and they had not agreed to give it to me as restitution for having sex with my wife. I am here, Chief, so that you can assist us'. (Traditional Court Hearing 4)*

The Chief indicated that in some cases of GBV, traditional leaders visit people to better understand the dynamics of the conflicts. For example, the Chief narrated the background story of Mr and Mrs D to *Machinda* (advisers), who appeared in Traditional Court Hearing 3:

*'You see, this is not the first time these two are in my court. Mr. D once reported that Mrs D was cutting his trees and prohibiting him and his other wife from fetching water from the well in the yard. These two have a peace order from the formal courts prohibiting Mr D from entering Mrs D's house. When I visited their compound to resolve their problems, I asked Mrs. D to allow Mr. D to fetch water from the well within the perimeter set by the Protection Order because I did not want the water to be poisoned. So, what is it again?'*

This study found that community members can approach the police but in the end return to traditional leaders to seek a resolution. The study further suggested that some people seek compensation and reconciliation – services that may not be provided by the police. The Chief's court and village assemblies serve not only as platforms for addressing incidents of GBV but also as arenas in which victims and perpetrators are granted opportunities to present their perspectives. This interactive process, in which leaders actively listen to both sides, fosters an environment of open communication and fairness. The process aligns with the concept of social support and includes providing emotional assistance through empathetic listening, advice, information, and tangible aid (Banyard, 2019).

**Referrals to the Zimbabwe Republic Police:** Traditional leaders refer criminal cases such as rape, murder, and physical violence to the ZRP's VFU.

*'Nyaya dzerape and murder hadzisi dzedu idzo dzinoda mapurisa' (issues involving rape and murder are not in our jurisdiction, it is a police matter, so when I encounter such cases, I call the police, KI A)*

*'I once advised a woman to report her husband to the police because the abuse was too much'. (KI C)*

*'We advise people to report cases to the police'. (KI G)*

*'Cases of rape, murder, and physical injuries must be reported to the police'. (KI D, E)*

In an interview, a member of the ZRP VFU said:

*'We have meetings with the traditional leaders once every month, and they update us on the activities in their communities; they help us apprehend criminals. We educate them about GBV and the constitution's provisions in the Shona language, so they understand'. (KI K and L)*

This quote underlined the cooperation between the traditional leaders and the ZRP in curbing GBV. The findings also revealed that traditional leaders combine the traditional customs of addressing GBV and constitutional provisions by referring GBV victims to the police. Teffo-Menziwa *et al.* (2010) suggested that traditional leaders play a dual role in mitigating such cases and, to some extent, combine judicial and advocacy functions in accordance with customary practices and statutory law. Traditional leaders' engagement with the ZRP revealed their understanding that GBV is a criminal offence.

**Awareness:** Awareness campaigns also emerged as a method used by traditional leaders to address and prevent GBV.

*'We collaborate with behaviour change motivators and the children's rights committee to teach people about GBV and child marriages.' (KI C)*

*'We take advantage of ward meetings, village meetings, and agricultural field days to talk about challenges in the community, including GBV and drug abuse'. (KI H)*



'We work with the police, civil society groups, and government to mobilise people for awareness campaigns and workshops on GBV issues.' (KI A)

This study found that traditional leaders conduct GBV awareness campaigns in their communities by utilising village meetings and field days to educate the community on GBV. Drawing on the insights of Lederach (2003), the paper underscores the importance of education as a catalyst for change. Lederach (2003) advocates for education as a process that is rooted in consciousness-raising in a context that is conducive to individual growth and societal transformation. Thus, education is needed to increase awareness of GBV and facilitate positive social change within a community.

## Conclusion

This study underscores the significant role of traditional leaders in addressing GBV in Ward 8, Zimbabwe. The study further establishes that to address GBV, traditional leaders use their leadership position and conflict management methods such as mediation, counselling, traditional court systems, awareness campaigns, and referrals to the police. However, the study acknowledges that traditional practices may perpetuate inequality given traditional leaders' belief that gender equality causes GBV. The study reveals that traditional leaders actively address and prevent GBV within their communities. Furthermore, the study advocates for recognising and leveraging the role of traditional leaders in combating GBV and empowering these leaders with the appropriate training to address the challenge of GBV and promote equality in rural areas. Crucially, although traditional leaders play a pivotal role in addressing GBV within their communities, the tendency to adhere strictly to traditional roles, which is accompanied by misunderstandings regarding gender equality, must be acknowledged. Therefore, the following recommendations are proposed:

- A pressing imperative exists for governmental bodies, law enforcement agencies, civil society organisations, and non-governmental organisations to actively engage with and enlighten traditional leaders.
- Traditional leaders must be trained in the use of nonviolent methods which they can teach to people through workshops and seminars in their communities.

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