

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Enduring Abuse in Matrimony: An In-Depth Analysis of Women's Experiences in Underprivileged Communities of Mankweng in Limpopo Province

Wiseman Ntlhari Mathebula¹, Katekani Sibise² and Eleanor Alvira Hendricks³

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Abstract

Domestic violence is a pervasive global problem that affects individuals, particularly women, regardless of their status, class, or ethnicity. It is especially prevalent in marginalised communities across the African continent, where the abuse poses severe physical and mental health risks for survivors. This research examines the widespread problem of enduring domestic violence within the institution of marriage, with a specific focus on the experiences of women living in the marginalised communities of Mankweng, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Utilising a qualitative research design, the study conducted in-depth interviews with women who experienced various forms of abuse in their matrimonial homes. Through thematic analysis, the researchers uncovered these women's complex narratives, shedding light on their encounters with different types of abuse, the coping strategies they employ, and the challenges they face when seeking intervention. The findings highlight the urgent need for community-based support systems, legal reforms, and awareness campaigns to empower women and safeguard their rights within marriage. The insights gained from this research are intended to catalyse change, and your role as academics, policymakers, and advocates is crucial in the development of strategies that can help women in underprivileged communities break free from the cycle of enduring abuse in matrimonial homes.

Keywords: matrimony; women; experience; domestic abuse; marginalised communities

Introduction

The prevalence of enduring abuse within the confines of marriage remains a pervasive and deeply rooted problem, casting a shadow over the lives of countless women worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (2021), the global prevalence estimates of lifetime intimate partner violence range from 20% in the Western Pacific area to as high as 33% in African and South-East Asian regions. These figures underscore the alarming scale of gender-based violence (GBV) globally, but they also point to its regional concentration in contexts, where socio-economic inequalities and entrenched patriarchal norms are prevalent. In South Africa, the scourge of domestic violence remains particularly pronounced in underprivileged and rural communities, where systemic problems, such as poverty, low literacy, and limited access to social services, exacerbate women's vulnerability. Research conducted in Limpopo, the Eastern Cape, and Mpumalanga shows that a significant percentage of women—19%, 27%, and 28%, respectively—have experienced physical abuse from their intimate or marital partners (Aborisade and Shontan, 2017; Bhandari, 2020; Mathebula, Mbhalati, and Sithole, 2022). These statistics not only indicate the magnitude of the problem, but they also highlight the regional disparities and the urgent need for context-specific investigations.

¹University of Limpopo, wiseman.mathebula@ul.ac.za | <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9322-1413>

²University of Limpopo, 201522265@keyaka.ul.ac.za | <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6629-7829>

³North-West University, eleanor.hendricks@nwu.ac.za | <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3367-8638>

The literature suggests that women in disadvantaged communities often endure abuse silently, shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic hardship, cultural expectations, and structural inequalities (Mathebula, Makhubele, and Singwane, 2022; South African Government, 2021b; Wanger, 2020). In many African societies, traditional practices such as *lobola* (dowry) reinforce patriarchal power dynamics, and normalise verbal abuse and coercive sex within marriage. Studies have shown that a substantial proportion of married women in these contexts do not perceive such acts as punishable or abusive, rooted in the belief that submission to one's husband is a cultural obligation (Mulaudzi, Nkhwashu, and Shilubane, 2022). These enduring beliefs contribute to a culture of silence, where women are socially conditioned to tolerate abuse rather than seek redress. Despite growing awareness of this problem, there remains a notable gap in empirical studies that deeply explore the lived experiences of married women enduring abuse, particularly in rural communities such as Mankweng in the Limpopo Province. While national and regional statistics provide a broad picture, they often fail to capture the nuanced and deeply personal realities of women in such localised contexts. This study seeks to fill this gap by focusing specifically on the patterns, types, and socio-cultural underpinnings of domestic abuse in this community. The research aimed to uncover: (1) the types of domestic abuse women experience within their marriages in Mankweng; (2) the socio-economic and cultural factors that influence these abusive dynamics; and (3) the barriers that prevent women from seeking help or escaping abusive relationships. Through this study's findings, the study contributes new insights into how abuse is experienced and perpetuated in contexts marked by poverty, patriarchal traditions, and limited institutional support. Understanding these localised experiences is crucial for shaping effective interventions, policies, and support mechanisms that are responsive to the specific needs of women in Mankweng and similar under-resourced settings.

Cultural Aspects Related to Domestic Violence in the Matrimonial Home

There is no culture that is above the law, and cultural rights are protected in the South African Constitution (1996). Section 31 acknowledges the cultural rights of groups and communities; however, this recognition should not allow for the deprivation of the social, economic, and personal freedom of women, particularly when it comes to enduring abuse in matrimony. Cultural practices that demean women can vary widely across different societies and contexts, but some common themes often emerge. According to Mulaudzi, Nkhwashu, and Shilubane (2022), these practices can be firmly rooted in traditions, social norms, and legal systems, and they frequently overlap with other types of discrimination, such as race, class, and religion. The researchers contend that activities that uphold conventional gender roles, wherein women are anticipated to display submissiveness, prioritise household duties, or conform to male-dictated dress codes, have the potential to erode women's independence and self-confidence. Moreover, women in certain areas face gender-based discrimination in the form of laws and legal systems that unfairly limit their property rights, inheritance rights, and access to justice (Bhandari, 2020). For instance, in specific cultural contexts, women and girls could be coerced into marriages against their will, depriving them of their independence and authority over their own lives. These practices frequently sustain gender inequity and restrict opportunities for women. This paper examines the socio-economic, cultural, and religious factors that support patriarchal tendencies, leading to the ongoing mistreatment of women in disadvantaged communities.

Worth noting is that societal conventions and gender roles have a profound impact on how individuals perceive and navigate their lives, affecting various aspects, such as job decisions and personal relationships. Societal norms refer to implicit guidelines and anticipated behaviours that individuals are expected to adhere to within a certain society (Chung and Rimal, 2016). They are acquired through the process of socialisation and can exhibit significant variations across many cultures and communities. Societal norms and gender roles significantly influence individual behaviour and social structures by delineating expected patterns of conduct based on gender (Nnoli, Rogers, and Ali, 2023). Also, societal norms are implicit rules that guide behaviour and maintain social order, often reinforcing traditional gender roles that prescribe specific behaviours and responsibilities for men and women (Fotaki and Pullen, 2023). These roles are deeply embedded in cultural, historical, and social contexts, shaping expectations around career choices, domestic responsibilities, and personal identity. For instance, norms that emphasise masculinity as synonymous with assertiveness and femininity with nurturing can restrict opportunities and perpetuate inequalities in both professional and personal spheres. The reinforcement of such norms often results in differential access to resources and opportunities, reinforcing systemic gender disparities. Addressing these problems requires a multifaceted approach, including educational initiatives, policy reforms, and shifts in cultural representation, to promote greater equality and challenge the constraints imposed by entrenched gender roles.

Culture plays a significant role in shaping individuals' lives and societal roles. Cultural traditions and socialisation play a crucial role in moulding individual identities and social behaviour by passing on values, conventions, and practices from one generation to another (Montle, 2020). Socialisation is the process by which individuals internalise the rules and values of their society (Nnoli, Rogers, and Ali, 2023). This process is strongly affected by cultural traditions, which establish the standards for acceptable behaviour and societal duties. Moreover, cultural traditions are perpetuated and reinforced by several agents of socialisation, including family, school systems, and the media (Bhandari, 2020). These agents play an important role in directing individuals in their comprehension of social expectations and roles. For instance, cultural practices and rituals often incorporate traditions related to gender roles, family structures, and social hierarchies, which, in turn, shape individuals' self-perception and their perception of others in their social environment. While promoting cultural continuity, these practices can also uphold social disparities and restrict individual agency by reinforcing conventional roles and expectations. Analysing the relationship between cultural traditions and socialisation is essential for comprehending the maintenance of social norms and the potential for challenging them to foster more social equality and individual agency. The study conducted by Lawrence and Hensley (2023) demonstrates that cultural norms and advantages associated with marriage have a substantial impact on women's choice to tolerate abuse. Nnoli, Rogers, and Ali (2023) propose that deeply ingrained cultural and socio-economic factors significantly contribute to women's enduring experience of marital abuse, as patriarchal systems hinder women's advancement and personal growth. For instance, patriarchal principles prevalent in numerous cultures foster male supremacy within familial and societal institutions. Bhandari (2020) affirms this concept, highlighting that patriarchy has historically influenced cultures and remains prevalent in the present day. These societal norms frequently validate the exercise of authority and superiority over women, thereby normalising, or even anticipating, marital abuse. Therefore, conventional notions of gender roles might perpetuate or downplay the seriousness of abuse, dissuading women from seeking assistance.

It has been found that women in positions of power or authority in society or religious institutions might feel obligated to defend their abusive relationships as being a result of cultural and religious factors (Few-Demo and Allen, 2020; Fotaki and Pullen, 2023). Some studies indicate that women frequently turn to religious authorities instead of other professionals, such as law enforcement, because they are afraid of jeopardising the trust of their community or disrupting family cohesion (Bhandari, 2020; Montle, 2020; Nnoli, Rogers, and Ali, 2023). Few-Demo and Allen (2020) describe the church's involvement in this situation as regressive, noting that pastors frequently mirror societal endorsement of patriarchal standards that force women to tolerate abuse. Societal views also play a role, as women who remain in violent marriages are often praised, while those who leave "too soon" face condemnation (Mathebula, Makhubele, and Singwane, 2022). Research reveals that women's choices to remain in abusive relationships are influenced by extrinsic factors, such as tangible resources and family dynamics (Bhandari, 2020; Mathebula, 2021; Voith, 2019). According to Aborisade and Shontan (2017), extrinsic factors, such as familial expectations, limited finances, and concerns for the children's welfare have a major impact. Extended family members frequently promote the idea of persistent marital problems by using comments such as "You made your bed, now lie in it". This reflects the historical and cultural acceptance of patriarchal norms that continue to perpetuate abuse. To comprehend the reasons behind women enduring abuse in marriage, it is necessary to analyse the complex interaction between societal standards, cultural traditions, and religious doctrines. The historical and ongoing patriarchal inclinations have established and sustained these abusive patterns, which persistently affect women's encounters in the present time.

Theoretical Framework

This research employed the resilience theory as the guiding theoretical framework to explore how women in underprivileged communities endure and navigate the challenges of marital abuse. Rooted in behavioural, psychological, and socio-environmental perspectives, resilience theory emphasises individuals' capacity to adapt, recover, and thrive despite adversity (McFadden *et al.*, 2015). Initially conceptualised in the 1970s within social work and psychological literature, resilience refers to the process by which vulnerable individuals, such as survivors of domestic abuse, confront trauma and rebuild their lives. It provides a holistic lens through which to understand not only the risk factors associated with abuse but also the protective mechanisms, both internal and external, that enable women to persist and, in some cases, reclaim agency in oppressive marital contexts. In the case of women in Mankweng, resilience was observed through the coping strategies they adopted, including emotional detachment, spirituality, focusing on children's well-being, and silent endurance. These coping mechanisms and support systems serve as crucial tools that either strengthen or weaken a woman's resilience, depending on factors

that include access to emotional support, economic independence, and psychological readiness. For instance, women who could access informal support from trusted friends or neighbours demonstrated greater resilience than those who were completely socially isolated. Conversely, factors such as economic dependence, fear of social stigma, and entrenched patriarchal norms often undermine their ability to seek help or exit abusive relationships.

Consequently, the cultural, economic, and environmental context of Mankweng directly shaped how resilience was expressed and constrained. Culturally, the belief in enduring marriage "for the children", or because of **lobola** payments contributed to women's decisions to remain in abusive settings. Economically, the lack of an independent income or secure employment that seems impractical or even impossible makes it extremely difficult for these women to break out of abusive marriages. Environmentally, geographic isolation and underdeveloped infrastructure limit these women's access to safe shelters or support centres. These factors collectively weakened women's resilience by reinforcing their dependency and limiting their options. Thus, targeted interventions, including economic empowerment programmes, culturally sensitive counselling services, and local awareness campaigns, are essential to build women's resilience in a way that is grounded in the realities of these women's lives. Therefore, the resilience theory provides a powerful framework to interpret the experiences of abused women in Mankweng not just as victims, but as active agents navigating hostile environments. It shifts the discourse from pathology to potential, offering a constructive basis for developing interventions that support women's capacity to cope, survive, and eventually transform their circumstances.

Research Methodology

The researchers chose a qualitative research approach to explore and understand the lived experiences of women enduring abuse within marriage in the underprivileged communities of Mankweng. According to Bryd (2020), qualitative research seeks to examine human behaviour from the participants' perspectives. Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2020) further note that qualitative research is anti-positivistic, interpretive, idiographic, and holistic, seeking to understand social worlds by exploring participants' experiences, perspectives, and histories within their material and societal contexts. As Marshall and Rossman (2016) emphasise, qualitative research typically occurs in natural settings and involves methods that respect the participants' humanity and lived realities. This approach was selected for its ability to capture in-depth, contextually rich data that reveals the complexity of abuse experienced by women in marriage. In alignment with the qualitative paradigm, the study adopted an exploratory multiple-case study design. This design is particularly appropriate for answering "what" and "how" research questions (Hennink *et al.*, 2020), and it was chosen to unpack the multifaceted experiences of women facing abuse in matrimony within the localised setting of Mankweng. Byrd (2020) states that an exploratory case study is most effective when the aim is to understand how phenomena occur in specific social contexts.

To ensure a representative and diverse sample, the study employed purposive sampling. This technique allows researchers to deliberately select participants based on predefined criteria relevant to the research objectives (Byrd, 2020). Participants for this study were selected based on specific inclusion criteria to ensure relevance to the study's objectives. Eligible participants were women who had resided in Mankweng for at least two years, were between the ages of 28 and 55, and were either currently or formerly married. They also had to self-report experiences of domestic abuse—whether physical, emotional, sexual, or financial—and be living in socio-economically disadvantaged conditions, characterised by limited access to necessities, such as food, secure housing, or stable employment. The study focused on the poorest areas of Mankweng—Mamontintane and Makanye—to better understand how poverty and marginalisation shape women's responses to marital abuse. A total of 10 women were selected to participate in in-depth interviews (IDIS). Gatekeepers, such as local NGOs and community health workers, helped identify participants who met the inclusion criteria. Efforts were made to include participants with varied educational levels, household sizes, and marital statuses (for example, separated, cohabiting, widowed), to reflect a broader range of experiences.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured IDIS. This approach allowed for flexibility and depth, encouraging participants to speak freely about their experiences, while it enabled the researchers to probe further for clarity and insight. The interviews were guided by an interview schedule consisting of open-ended questions, designed around the study's objectives, specifically addressing the types of abuse, coping mechanisms, cultural beliefs (for example, *lobola*), and barriers to seeking help. To ensure the reliability, validity, and ethical integrity of the data collection process, several key measures were taken. The interview guide was pilot tested with two women from a neighbouring community not included in the main sample, and their feedback was used to refine question wording for clarity, cultural sensitivity, and emotional appropriateness. All interviewers received training in trauma-

informed interviewing techniques, ethical research practices, and active listening skills, and were fluent in both English and Sepedi to accommodate participants' language preferences. Before each interview, informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of strict confidentiality and anonymity. Interviews were conducted in private, safe environments selected by the participants, with each session lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcriptions, and researchers also took detailed fieldnotes to capture contextual observations.

The data were analysed using Inductive Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), a method that allows themes to emerge from the raw data rather than imposing preconceived categories (Hennink *et al.*, 2020). The data analysis followed a rigorous and systematic process. First, audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, with Sepedi transcripts carefully translated into English to preserve meaning. Researchers then engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to ensure deep familiarisation with the content. Line-by-line manual coding was performed to identify significant phrases and statements, which were then grouped into categories based on similarity and relevance. These categories were further developed into broader themes, including the normalisation of abuse, economic dependency, cultural silencing, and emotional isolation. The identified themes were reviewed and refined for internal consistency and alignment with the study's research objectives and theoretical framework. Finally, the themes were interpreted through the resilience theory framework, offering psychological and structural insights into the persistence of abuse experienced by women in the Mankweng community. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, member checking was conducted by inviting participants to verify the key interpretations for accuracy. Peer debriefing was undertaken with experts in gender studies and qualitative research to provide feedback and critical reflection, and an audit trail was maintained, documenting coding decisions, theme development, and analytic memos to ensure transparency throughout the research process.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee. All participants received detailed information about the purpose of the research and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any point. Confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage. Upon completion of the data collection, a debriefing session was offered to participants who requested it. This included a summary of the study's aims and findings, clarification of the participants' role in contributing to the research, and referrals to local support services where necessary. This process helped build trust, transparency, and closure for those involved in the study.

Findings and Discussions

The table below shows the demographic data of 10 female participants, including their age, primary language, employment position, and greatest level of education. The participants' ages span from 28 to 55 years. The predominant language among the participants is Sepedi, while there is a lesser presence of Xitsonga and Tshivenda speakers. The employment situation of participants varies, with a significant proportion being unemployed, while a minority is employed. The educational attainment of the participants encompasses a range of academic levels, ranging from Grade 10 to a Higher Certificate, indicating a wide variety of educational backgrounds. This overview provides a concise summary of the fundamental socio-economic and educational attributes of the group.

Table 1: Biographical information by age, language, employment status and qualifications

Participants	Age	Spoken Language	Employment Status	Highest Qualification
1	35	Sepedi	Unemployed	Grade 12
2	40	Sepedi	Unemployed	Grade 12
3	50	Xitsonga	Unemployed	Grade 10
4	28	Sepedi	Unemployed	Higher Certificate
5.	33	Sepedi	Unemployed	Higher Certificate
6.	45	Tshivenda	Unemployed	Grade 12
7	40	Sepedi	Unemployed	Grade 12
8.	28	Sepedi	Employed	Grade 11
9	50	Sepedi	Employed	Grade 9
10	55	Sepedi	Unemployed	Grade 10

Table 2: Themes identified during this research

Main themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Types of domestic violence	a) Physical abuse b) Emotional abuse c) Economic abuse
Theme 2: Barriers experienced by women seeking intervention	Cultural belief systems as norms and barriers to seeking assistance help

The research uncovered various forms of abuse within marital relationships in the underprivileged communities of Mankweng. Physical, emotional, and economic abuses were identified as significant elements of women's experiences, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

Physical abuse

Physical violence, its determinants and its health effects have been widely studied. It is estimated that globally, one in every three women faces either physical or sexual violence (World Health Organization, 2021). Literature indicates that physical violence is the most obvious form of intimate partner violence and hence, it garners the maximum attention (Lansford *et al.*, 2021; Lawson, Piel, Simon, 2020; Milner *et al.*, 2022). However, as domestic abuse becomes a punishable offence, there is a rising trend of women reporting incidents of physical violence (Fredin, Letson, Rust, and Crichton, 2023). The study found that the husbands' alcohol intake was significantly associated with the wife's physical abuse experience. This finding is supported by Lansford *et al.* (2021), who stipulate that in numerous countries, significant connections have been established between alcohol consumption and the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV). Evidence suggests that alcohol use increases the occurrence and severity of domestic violence (Lawson *et al.*, 2020). The relevant alcohol effects include a reduction in cognitive and physical functions that impair self-control, with the consequent effect of reducing the ability to resolve conflicts non-violently. The findings are expressed as follows:

Participant 4: *"You know I do not love wearing make-up, but because of these scars on my face, I am forced to wear make-up. I always get beaten up every time he comes home drunk. He often tells me that I make him sick, and I do not listen to him that is why I will always get punished."*

Participant 5: *"I hate weekends because he'll hit me when he gets home drunk. I was hospitalised after being violently battered by him. He gave me money, gifts, and sincerely apologised and pledged to never touch me, so I closed the case."*

A notable general finding among the participants is the repeated experience of abuse and a consequent feeling of entrapment. Many participants, such as those described in the statements, express a sense of inevitability regarding their abuse, indicating that they have come to accept violence as an unavoidable part of their lives. Gosangi, Park, Thomas, Gujrathi, Bay, Raja, and Khurana (2021) state that domestic violence survivors are more likely than other women to have had head, face, neck, and stomach injuries. Other direct and indirect health repercussions of domestic violence include permanent impairment, chronic pain syndromes, such as migraines and backaches, gastrointestinal disorders, and neurological symptoms such as seizures, which can occur because of head injury or partial strangulation (Almıř, Gümüřtař, and Kütük, 2020).

Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse is the worst kind of abuse, as it leaves no bruises; yet, the scars remain for years when counsel is not sought. All the participants disclose that they have experienced emotional abuse numerous times in their marriages and could not report it to authorities because they had no proof. Participants articulate the following:

Participant 10: *"He often tells me how ugly I look. Ever since I gained weight after giving birth to our two children; he constantly tells me that he feels like he lives with an elephant in the house because I am too big for him. That is why he even lost interest in touching me."*

Participant 3: *"Every day, he reminds me that I am a failure because I haven't been able to get back to my pre-pregnancy weight. He says that I'm not attractive anymore and that no one would want me. Sometimes, he makes comments about how I am lazy and unworthy, which just makes me feel like I'm not even human."*

A common finding among the participants is the pervasive and damaging nature of verbal and emotional abuse inflicted by their partners. Each participant reports consistent patterns of derogatory comments and criticism related to their appearance, capabilities, and overall worth. This abuse manifests itself as a constant undermining of their self-esteem, with partners using body image/ body shaming, lacking personal achievements, and domestic responsibilities as points of contention to belittle and devalue them. This ongoing emotional degradation serves to reinforce their feelings of inadequacy and helplessness, highlighting the profound impact of such abusive behaviour on their self-perception and mental well-being. Survivors of domestic violence often adopt positive adaptation methods to adversity, such as overcoming highly stressful events or trauma, or challenging situations, and maintaining mental health are examples of psychological resilience routes (Machisa, Christofides and Jewkes, 2018). Lansford *et al.* (2021) describe emotional abuse as undermining a person's sense of self-worth through constant criticism; belittling the person's abilities; name-calling or other verbal abuse, which influences a person's thoughts and actions within their everyday lives.

The study reveals that married women are often emotionally abused by their partners within their homes. Literature reports that women who are married to controlling spouses have three times higher odds of facing emotional abuse (Tomaz Paiva, da Silva Lima, and Gomes Cavalcanti, 2022). Moreover, the researchers postulate that in the context of women facing emotional abuse in matrimony, it is essential to understand the profound impact that emotional abuse during childhood can have on their long-term well-being.

Economic abuse

The Domestic Violence Amendment Act 14 of 2021 (the Act) recognises economic abuse as the deprivation of economic or financial resources to which an abused person is legally entitled, or which the abused person requires out of necessity. According to the definition in the Act, this could include tuition expenses, household necessities for the abused, repayments of a mortgage bond, or payment of where the abused and abuser share a residence or accommodation. The study identifies that coercive and controlling behaviour is the core of most economic abuse and it addresses a gendered pattern of behaviour to make a person subservient and dependent through isolation, manipulation, constant fear, intimidation and to take away the inherent freedom and human rights that the victim or abused might have. The findings indicate a strong correlation between socio-economic factors and the perpetuation of abuse. Women in these underprivileged communities face heightened vulnerability because of their limited access to resources, education, and economic opportunities. Economic dependence emerges as a noteworthy factor hindering their ability to escape abusive situations. Therefore, economic abuse includes but is not limited to restricted access to funds and credit, controlling access to healthcare, employment opportunities, and education, as well as discriminatory practices concerning inheritance and property rights (Eze-Ajoku, Fakeye, Atanda, and Sosina, 2022). The findings are expressed as follows:

Participant 8: *"I lost my job during Covid-19 and have struggled to find work. I am frequently denied a say in financial decisions made at home."*

Participant 6: *"I feel trapped because he controls all the money and I can't even buy groceries without his approval."*

Economic abuse within marriage is a multifaceted problem that encompasses various forms of financial control and exploitation aimed at maintaining power over women (Barzilay, 2017). This form of abuse is often less visible compared to physical or sexual violence, but it has profound implications for women's autonomy, health, and well-being. The literature reveals that economic violence against women is deeply rooted in patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequalities (Nduka *et al.*, 2024). Such inequalities are further exacerbated by societal norms that endorse male dominance over financial resources, while they relegate women to secondary roles within both the domestic spheres and broader socio-economic contexts (Barzilay, 2017). Therefore, economic abuse can lead to significant psychological distress for victims.

Cultural belief systems as a barrier to seeking assistance

The study identifies cultural norms as powerful influencers in the endurance of abuse, shaping societal perceptions and responses. The study reveals that prevailing cultural attitudes often discourage women from seeking help or reporting abuse. Stigma, fear of reprisal, and a lack of support services contribute to a reluctance to break the silence surrounding abusive marriages, emphasising the importance of culturally sensitive interventions. The (African) women who participated in the current study are of a Christian faith. They explain that Christianity lays

down strict rules for married women on how to treat their husbands. Ways of encouraging women to endure are imparted through the principle of Christianity. The researchers argue that God-fearing women of the Christian faith will not wish to go against the will of God; thus, the strengthening of patriarchal tendencies that oppress women in marriage are maintained by pastors, elders and mothers, who use verses from the Bible. A study conducted by Boesak (2011) and Mathebula, Sibise, and Hendricks (2024) agreed with this finding, stating that using certain biblical scriptures lowers women's dignity as advocated by religious leaders. The relationship between the husband and wife is referred to in the Bible in the book of Colossians 3:18 (King James Version 2018: 725), which states that "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord". The findings are expressed as follows:

Participant 6: *"Being a young woman in our community, I faced different expectations than older women. I felt judged for considering leaving as if I was being rebellious. It's not just about culture; it's about age and traditions, too."*

Participant 7: *"Growing up, I saw my mother endure a lot. It was always swept under the rug as something normal in a marriage. So, when it happened to me, I didn't even realise it was abuse. I thought it was just how things were."*

These participant's experiences highlight how cultural and generational expectations profoundly shape perceptions of abuse and influence personal responses. Participant 6 underscores the added burden of age-related expectations and cultural norms, which can amplify the sense of judgement and resistance faced when contemplating leaving an abusive situation. Meanwhile, Participant 7 reflects on the normalisation of abuse within familial and cultural contexts, illustrating how learned behaviours from one generation to the next can obscure recognition of abuse as a serious problem. Together, these narratives reveal how deeply ingrained cultural and generational norms can perpetuate the cycle of abuse by normalising and minimising its impact. The expectation to conform to traditional roles and the internalisation of abusive dynamics as 'normal' conditions significantly influence individuals' perceptions and responses to their experiences. Addressing these cultural and generational factors is crucial for effectively supporting individuals in recognising and breaking free from abusive patterns, highlighting the need for comprehensive interventions that challenge and transform these entrenched norms.

Discussion

The discussion section integrates the study's findings with existing literature, offering critical insights into the multifaceted nature of abuse endured by women in underprivileged communities of Mankweng. The high prevalence of physical, emotional, and economic abuse described in the study echoes global and national research on IPV, particularly in low-resource settings. The association between alcohol abuse and physical violence aligns with the findings of Lansford *et al.* (2021), Mathebula, Sibise, and Hendricks (2024), and Lawson *et al.* (2020), reinforcing the need to address substance use as a key driver of violence. Similarly, emotional abuse—often overlooked because of its invisible scars—emerges as a pervasive and psychologically damaging form of control. This abuse, manifested through derogatory remarks, body shaming, and belittlement, is consistent with prior studies' findings, including those by Tomaz Paiva *et al.* (2022) and Machisa *et al.* (2018), who emphasise its lasting impact on self-esteem and mental health. Added to this is economic abuse, reinforced by patriarchal norms and legal loopholes, which reflects broader socio-structural inequalities, contributing new insights into how financial control entrenches dependency and entrapment.

The findings also carry important practical implications for both policy and practice. Stakeholders—including policymakers, local leaders, religious institutions, and non-government organisations (NGOs)—must urgently address the social and structural dimensions of abuse. The evidence underscores the importance of multi-sectoral responses: implementing trauma-informed support systems, expanding economic empowerment initiatives, and launching culturally sensitive education campaigns that dismantle harmful norms. The influence of religion and tradition, particularly in normalising submission and endurance in abusive marriages, highlights the need for faith-based reform and community dialogue. This study advocates for interventions that are both preventative and restorative, urging collaboration among government departments (for example, social development, community safety), religious leaders, and civil society organisations to ensure that women are protected, empowered, and heard. Furthermore, this research might inform legislative revisions, resource allocation, and community programming tailored to the needs of marginalised women. While the study contributes valuable perspectives, its limitations—such as potential underreporting caused by expected stigma and the localised sample—must be

considered when generalising findings. Nonetheless, the insights generated are instrumental in shaping future research directions. Further studies should explore similar dynamics in other socio-cultural contexts to enhance the robustness and applicability of the results. Additionally, longitudinal designs could better capture the evolving nature of abuse and resilience among survivors. Theoretically, the study's use of the resilience theory provides a multidimensional lens to understand abuse, revealing how individual, relational, and societal factors interact. This framework not only contextualises the women's experiences, but it also guides comprehensive interventions. Overall, this discussion highlights the urgent need to situate abuse within broader social, economic, and cultural systems, enabling a shift from reactive responses to proactive, transformative change.

To ensure the recommendations are practical, impactful, and aligned with the unique needs of women experiencing marital abuse in underprivileged communities such as in Mankweng, the following actionable steps are proposed. First, policymakers within the Department of Social Development should not only formulate but also implement context-specific policies that directly respond to the socio-economic and cultural challenges contributing to marital abuse. These policies must include community-based interventions, such as mobile support units and community liaison officers, who work directly with affected women to ensure access to services. Second, the Department of Community Safety must establish well-resourced, accessible emergency safe houses within or near rural areas, along with 24/7 multilingual hotlines that provide immediate psychological, legal, and logistical support. Third, awareness campaigns should be culturally tailored and delivered through trusted local channels—including churches, tribal authorities, and schools—to maximise outreach and foster an environment, where abuse is no longer normalised or hidden. These campaigns must include information on legal rights, available resources, and ways to seek help without fear of reprisal. Finally, collaboration is essential: local NGOs, community-based organisations, traditional leaders, and government agencies must work together to build long-term, sustainable strategies aimed at women's empowerment. This includes providing vocational training, creating women's support groups, and ensuring ongoing funding and monitoring of gender-based violence interventions. Through such a collaborative and locally grounded approach, systemic change can be initiated to protect and uplift women in marginalised communities.

Attributable to the delicate nature of the subject matter, some individuals were reluctant to disclose their genuine experiences, which might have led to an underreporting of the prevalence and severity of abuse. Additionally, the study focused specifically on underprivileged communities in Mankweng, Limpopo Province, and therefore will not be representative of women in other regions or socio-economic backgrounds, either within South Africa or globally. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights with several practical implications. For stakeholders, such as policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders, the findings suggest the urgent need for context-sensitive interventions that address the unique socio-cultural and economic realities of rural communities. These might include culturally informed awareness campaigns, the establishment of accessible and confidential reporting systems, and the strengthening of local support services, such as shelters and counselling. On a broader scale, the findings highlight the long-term societal impact of enduring abuse, including intergenerational trauma and sustained cycles of poverty, thereby informing future public health strategies and policy development aimed at prevention and early intervention. Theoretically, the study both supports and extends existing frameworks such as the resilience theory, emphasising the complex interplay between individual coping mechanisms, community support systems, and structural barriers. It introduces new insights into how cultural practices such as *lobola* and patriarchal norms affect women's resilience and decision-making processes in abusive marriages. Finally, the study identifies critical areas for further research, such as the long-term psychological impact of marital abuse, the role of informal community networks in victim support, and comparative studies across different cultural or geographic contexts. These directions can help build a more comprehensive understanding of domestic abuse and guide the design of more effective interventions.

Conclusion

This in-depth analysis sheds light on the complex and multifaceted nature of enduring abuse in matrimony among women in underprivileged communities of Mankweng, Limpopo Province. The study has revealed several critical insights that demand attention and action from various stakeholders, including policymakers, community leaders, and support organisations. The findings underscore the alarming prevalence of enduring abuse within marital relationships in underprivileged communities. Moreover, the persistence of such abuse highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to break the cycle and provide effective support to affected women. The role of socio-economic factors in shaping the experiences of enduring abuse cannot be understated. Economic hardships,

limited access to education, and employment opportunities exacerbate the vulnerability of women in these communities. Moreover, cultural norms and social expectations significantly influence the manifestation of abuse and the reluctance of victims to seek help. In summary, this study highlights the urgent need for a coordinated and multifaceted approach to addressing enduring abuse in matrimony within underprivileged communities of Mankweng. By acknowledging the intersectionality of factors influencing abuse, it is important to prioritise the empowerment of women, while working toward fostering healthy relationships and communities. Lastly, there is a need for collective responsibility by communities to create a society, where every woman can live free from the shackles of abuse in their marriages.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This study draws upon multiple academic disciplines to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex phenomenon of marital abuse experienced by women in underprivileged communities of Mankweng, Limpopo Province. By adopting an interdisciplinary lens, the research acknowledges that the issue cannot be fully understood through a single disciplinary perspective but requires the integration of insights from several fields.

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