

# Battling Gender Based Violence in Somalia: The Need for Qualified Community Social Workers and Psycho-trauma Counsellors

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**Abstract: Purpose:** This study investigates the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) in Somalia, a scourge which has silently consumed the social fabric of the Somali society and Somali women in particular. The study argues for the need to train and recruit professional community social workers and psycho-trauma counsellors to assist survivors of the GBV menace. **Methodology:** The study conducted a systematic review of select secondary sources on GBV which included reports, book chapters, journal articles and books. These sources were clustered into three main thematic areas: (1) Prevalence of GBV in the Somali society; (2) The cultural burden on GBV survivors; and (3) The need for qualified community social workers and psycho-trauma counsellors to combat GBV. **Results:** The findings show the social contexts in which GBV occurs, how cultural practices impede GBV interventions, and the need to deploy qualified community social workers and psycho-social counsellors to provide psycho-social support to GBV victims and implement GBV interventions across country. **Conclusion:** Gender-based violence is national problem which requires a multisectoral approach to combat. State and non-stake actors, religious organizations, non-governmental organizations and the international community need to develop joint interventions to battle GBV in Somalia. There is need for a national GBV policy legislation and effective enforcement of the ensuing laws in order to address the GBV scourge in Somalia.

**Keywords:** Gender cultural bias, Gender discrimination, Gender studies, Sexual abuse, Women Studies.

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## Research Paper

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Scholars engaged in research on women's studies have interrogated gender-based violence from multiple perspectives. A section of the scholars has focused on the nature of GBV and its cultural and psychological impact on victims (Bhati & Sharma 2024; Hussain-Abubakar 2024; Hossain *et al.* 2021), while others have concentrated on the economic and developmental factors related to the violence (Cameron & Tedds 2021; IMF 2024; NGEC-Kenya 2016; Ouedraogo & Stenzel 2021). Yet, another section has explored the role of social work education, social work policy and social workers in the global quest for preventing and containing gender-based violence and related abuses (Leburu-Masigo 2020; Olsson *et al* 2024).

Gender-based violence, also known as sexual abuse against women and girls, or violence against women, has been recognized as a crime against humans and a social menace in society. Prevention and other related efforts to combat the vice have been hampered by the fact that, in many cases, a vast majority of incidents relating to sexual abuse and gender violence are not reported to the law enforcement agencies or to the public and therefore miss out in reports and response mechanisms (Gordon 2009; Pitts and Schwartz 1997).

In such circumstances, the victim's emotion towards the perpetrator, her relationship with him and the abuser's position in the society may cause the victim to hesitate on whether to reveal the culprit and report the assault (Herman 1997). Collins (2014:284) agrees that although "violent stranger rapes certainly happen

frequently, they are less common than sexual assaults between acquaintances,” whose violence and abusive acts may not be known beyond the survivor.

Other studies conducted in countries in different geographical locations reveal how rape victims more seemingly tend to report their ordeal when assaulted by strangers since survivors assume that the experience they undergo fit the general characterizations that define what a real rape is than when such an act is committed by an acquaintance or a close relative (Frazier & Seales 1997; Wood *et al.* 2008; Collins (2014).

As global technology is advancing, GBV and other related sexual crimes are similarly advancing in tandem with the technology as virtual spaces have become common avenues to lure unaware females and young girls (Pande 2024). The concern to problematize violence committed in the virtual spaces emerged as a consequence of the growing incidents of technology facilitated (TF) GBV in different parts of the world.

Brown and Hegarty (2021) elaborate that violence of this nature is often experienced by girls and/or young females in their early adolescent ages i.e. before they reach their 15<sup>th</sup> birthday—a matter that calls for the immediate intervention of social workers and trauma counselors alongside law enforcement agencies. Observed from its vast occurrences, GBV needs urgent attention not only after a survivor’s report but a common designation that it constitutes a very serious crime which calls for a collaborative societal effort to prevent it and deal with the culprit in an appropriate manner that delivers fair justice to the survivor.

## 2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

### 2.1 Research Design

A descriptive design was used in order to fulfill the objective of investigating the prevalence of GBV in Somalia and the need for qualified community social workers and psycho-trauma counsellors to intervene and prevent the GBV pandemic, silently consuming Somali women and affecting the entire Somali society in general.

### 2.2 Data Collection

A systematic review was conducted on secondary sources which include reports, book chapters, journal articles and books on GBV. As such, this study synthesized these sources and presents a review of the selected works pertinent to the topic under discussion. It explored through a broad range of secondary data specifically selected for relevance and that significantly contributes to a varied understanding of the complex faces and natures of GBV in the Horn of Africa, its impact on the survivors, the nation, and strategic policies that could be pursued in order to confront, contain, and scale down the spread of the pandemic.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

A thematic approach was used in data analysis. The materials were clustered into three thematic areas, which form the various sub-sections of the findings. The first section under the subtitle Prevalence of the GBV Scourge in Somalia describes the prevalence of the GBV problem in the country while the second segment, subtitled The Cultural Burden on Victims of GBV in Somalia, discusses the cultural issues that impede the appropriate legal and therapeutic interventions necessarily required to assist the survivors. The third section focuses on Interventions to Combat GBV in Somalia, a much-needed factor in the fight against GBV in the country which include well-trained psycho-trauma counsellors and social workers who can effectively deliver the sensitive services required to assist the survivors.

## 3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Prevalence of GBV Scourge in Somalia

A UN report reveals that among the numerous problems caused by the prolonged period of war and instability in Somalia is the persistence of “sexual violence against women, men, boys and girls, with women and girls particularly affected,” (UNOHCHR 2017:19). The report illuminates that factors such as ineffective legislation, disparities in the balance of power, prevalent forms of insecurity, and inaccessibility to humanitarian aid have contributed to the enduring prevalence of sexual violence and abuse in the country. Attributed to the aforementioned problems are the “slow progress in fulfilling Somalia’s obligations under international human rights treaties, displacement of large populations as a result of both the conflict and the drought, as well as the return of refugees from Kenya to mainly Baidoa, Luuq and Kismayo,” (Ibid).

As the report enlightens, it is the amalgam of these natural and man-made cycles of catastrophe that facilitate the deterioration of the social environment in Somalia which has made “women and girls more vulnerable to gender-based violence, including conflict related sexual violence and sexual exploitation and abuse.” It further emphasizes that “women and girls who are displaced or from marginalized groups suffer the most due to inadequate protection mechanisms, lack of or limited access to available formal and informal justice mechanisms, and weak clan protection” (UNOHCHR 2017:19). In addition, poor feedback mechanism on aid distribution, linguistic unintelligibility and language problems are accentuated as among core challenges more specific to minorities and internally displaced persons (IDPs), according to recent reports by Eno (2021), Thomas and Eno (2022), and Isack *et al.* (2025a, 2025b).

Somalia is a patriarchal society. Like in most patriarchal African societies, women suffer from cultural bias as a result of male prioritization and domination. Although certain states in Somalia have developed some

sort of legislation to contain violence and sexual abuse against women, it has to some extent produced ineffective results in most of the incidences affecting the female segment of society. For instance, a report by the State Department of the United States of America (USSD 2017) avers that a criminal convicted of rape may in some circumstances be sentenced to a jail term between 5-15 years or may be condemned to death if convicted in a military court; although despite their existence, such laws are not implemented due to ineffective enforcement by the authorities. On the other hand, no clear law exist that deals with violence by perpetrators who are intimate partners like the husband. As a consequence, NGOs based in Somalia are actively involved in cases of gender abuse and sexual violence where intimate partners and minority groups are involved. These NGOs have registered various forms of sexual assault in which the culprits are left with impunity, especially when the victims are “female IDPs and members of minority clans,” (USSD 2017:32) [1].

While there is high prevalence of GBV in Somalia, accountability is often ignored in most of the occurrences and incidences of GBV cases and in circumstances where “government forces, militia members, and men wearing uniforms raped women and girls.” More astonishing in the Somali situation is that even in situations where the culprits were identified and apprehended and “the army arrested some security force members accused of such rapes; impunity was the norm,” (USSD 2017). Reports by agencies working in the country acknowledge inadequacies and limitations that make “statistics on cases of gender-based violence in [the country] ...unreliable,” despite the fact that NGOs operating in the country “characterized such violence as pervasive,” (USSD 2017, quoting Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2016). Constrained by the lack of proper archiving and reporting system, many incidents remain unreported and, consequently, unknown beyond the survivors. Not so surprisingly, the incidents often take place in areas inhabited by poorer groups of the society such as minorities, immigrants, returned refugees, and displaced people from upcountry who sought refuge in urban areas and remain vulnerable to all forms of abuse.

UNFPA report 2021 indicates that women, girls, children and adolescents represent 93% of the reported cases of incidence in GBV in 2021 while 74% of that total comprise the vulnerable population living in IDPs (UNFPA 2022). In terms of location of violence, data collected in 2021 demonstrated that more than half (53%) of the incidents took place right in the residential compound of the abused victim. The report added that some of the incidents mentioned have occurred in the forest, in gardens, on the streets, in the bush, and in the markets and areas of commerce, in the residence of the perpetrator, as well as around the latrines in camps. The report documents various types of GBV which include rape, sexual assault, physical assault, forced marriage,

denial of resources, opportunities or services, and psychological/emotional abuse. GBV abuses in 2021 were frequently committed by intimate partners of the victims, while sexual violence was also among the oft-reported cases. The GBV information management system (GBVIMS) elucidates “an increase of sexual violence involving children, and an increase in FGM, from the cases reported to service providers,” (UNFPA 2022:7).

### 3.2 The Cultural Burden on GBV Victims in Somalia

The US State Department explicates that about 55% of reported GBV cases in Somalia involve minors while a considerable number of the incidents are not usually reported (USSD 2017). The problem is easily aggravated by dominant cultural beliefs because, although awareness on rape, gender violence and related sexual abuses are suggested to have increased over the years, there is persistent disinclination among the women to open up, report, and discuss the abuses. Thus, intervention becomes complicated in a situation where, according to British Home Office (2018:13 citing a UNICEF report), “76% of women 15–49 years old consider a husband to be justified in hitting or beating his wife.”

Women explain that such physical assaults are justified if, for instance, the “wife burns the food, argues with him, goes out without telling him or neglects the children or refuses sexual relations,” (USSD 2017). The cultural bias, compounded with societal belief of male supremacy, deteriorate the survivor’s situation, leading to loss of self-esteem, feeling of disgrace, and a psychologically damaging self-degradation. These anomalous cultural beliefs, which often are missed in the analysis of the social discourse on GBV, have made women to live a submissive life and accept all gender abuses and related grievances as a normal cultural pattern.

In fact, women have for long bowed to cultural beliefs, which are basically non-developmental to any society including Somalia, a country where Islam is cherished as a fundamental religious doctrine. However, contrary to Islamic principles, where respect for women and their safeguarding is paramount in the Holy Scripture, women in the Somali peninsula are targets of “high levels of conflict-related sexual violence and domestic violence, where rape is often used as a weapon of war.” The deplorable acts are aimed at ashaming, disgracing and embarrassing the sub-clan or clan the raped female victim belongs to, while she is the sole victim tolerating the intolerable physical and psychological trauma associated with the violence, in addition to all the others she shares with her kinsfolk.

Probing the situation from the perspective of operation and provision of assistance, 74 partners consisting of local and international NGOs were engaged in GBV activities in Somalia in 2022, up from 59 who

provided services in 2021. They work in diverse geographical areas and submit their reports to a log-frame known as “5Ws matrix reporting,” although among these “only few are specialized service providers.” The 5Ws matrix is a tool which the service providers use for important information such as which organization (who) is implementing which activity (what) and in which geographical area (where) as well as which specific period (when) the activity is carried out and to which beneficiaries (whom), (UNFPA, 2022).

In addition to the efforts made to scale up the combat against the GBV scourge, effective measures have not been employed that address the dysfunctional cultural beliefs and other underlying biases against women. A collective social campaign is required that puts special attention on the reformation of the biased cultural attitudes as another endeavor in the social quest to contain the predicament. While there are various approaches and tools to confront cultural biases, there is need to consider the role of training and engaging professional practitioners who are capable of undertaking and implementing necessary interventions.

### 3.3 Interventions to Combat GBV in Somalia

Based on the systematic review of related literature, it is apparent that GBV in Somalia is a worrying menace which requires various intervention as outlined.

#### 3.3.1 Coordinated multisectoral approach to address GBV in Somalia

There are various organizations engaged in the fight against GBV in Somalia. However, these organizations are pulling in different directions. In order to combat this scourge, there is need for a coordinated multisectoral approach in terms of financial assistance, civic engagement, reporting and providing psycho-social support to victims of GBV. There should be coordination among community-based organizations like elders' committees, youth organizations and local NGOs in the provision of gender welfare services and in sensitizing the society for a better participation in the prevention of GBV (Kumari 2023; Kamore 2021). These organizations should deploy joint approaches in awareness raising and campaigns against GBV in order to create an informed, unified society against the vice. Similarly, UN agencies like UNICEF, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Somalia's aid partners such as the Swiss government by way of its development agency should play a leading role in GBV in Somalia by allocating special funds for the initiative for better engagement (Eno *et al.* 2022a, 2022b).

#### 3.3.2 Recruitment of qualified community social workers and psycho-trauma counsellors

Recent social work graduates most of whom are unemployed offer an opportunity to be engaged and recruited to contribute to addressing the GBV pandemic both at national and state levels. Bearing in mind that

they have undergone regular 2-4year academic as well as practical experience, these young men and women have the necessary potential to deal with the problem and offer the required services in a professional manner.

#### 3.3.3 Retooling and capacity building working social work practitioners

The combat strategy can be extended by retooling, retraining and retaining inadequately trained social work practitioners already engaged in the profession in different parts of the country. Advancing the knowledge of these practitioners will ameliorate the intervention both in the quality of service they deliver as well as the increase of the number of reliable social workers operating according to acceptable professional standards and ethical framework set for the global fraternity of social workers and social work organization. Tailor-made trainings and capacity building workshops will advance their skills, subsequently providing invaluable contribution to the fight against GBV. Furthermore, participation in professional development (PD) programs in the country or overseas will give them and other members of the wider Somali social work fraternity needed professional exposure that would reshape and empower them to provide better services. With experience sharing in seminars, workshops, conferences, and other meetings, solid knowledgebase will be built and professional practice enhanced.

#### 3.3.4 Enactment and enforcement of national GBV policy legislation

GBV is one of the most serious ailments in Somalia and a national catastrophe whose intervention cannot bear fruits without enacting appropriate legislation. A clear legal and policy framework is needed which will enable the survivors to pursue legal redress without inference from adverse social and cultural institutions or influential individuals aiming to suppress the rights of the abused women. Further, there is need to create an oversight association that oversees the professional practice of the social workers, their well-being, and, where necessary, represents their interests (Eno *et al.* 2022a, 2022b). Through the professional association, regional and continental expertise can be gained from and shared with established organizations that promote the practice and professionalism of social work in the region, the continent and across the globe.

## 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Conclusion

This article has presented a systematic review of literature regarding the prevalence and contexts of GBV in Somalia. It has shown how cultural beliefs and practices impede the fight against GBV in the Somali society. The practice of GBV is a social menace which endangers the lives and rights of women and girls in Somalia. The study underscores the need for coordinated approaches, tools and efforts in the fight against GBV in all parts of the country. State and non-state actors, both federal and regional, should join hands in battling GBV



in Somalia. A coordinated structure for civic engagement, sensitization and gender welfare involving various organizations at the national, regional and grassroots levels should be instituted as a matter of urgency. There should be a clear joint framework guiding the provision of psycho-social support and financial assistance to victims of GBV across the country. Legal and policy legislations should be put in place to help victims seek legal redress with victimization and reprisal from the society.

#### 4.2 Recommendations

There is need for targeted interventions from various stakeholders in the fight against GBV in Somalia. The Federal Government of Somalia and the Member States need to enact and implement policies and laws against GBV. Academic institutions need to design retooling and capacity building programs for community social workers on GBV and take the lead in seminars and workshops for retooling and retraining community social workers across the country. Countrywide civic education, awareness and sensitization campaigns need to be carried out by NGOs and other organizations involved in gender activism and advocacy.

#### Conflict of Interests

The authors mention no conflict of interest in either the production or publication of the study.

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#### NOTES

1. A Master of Social Work thesis by one of the authors, Shukri A. Ibrahim, which focuses on GBV among minority women in IDP camps in Mogadishu and Afgoe is at its final stages.

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