

Research Article

DISRUPTING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: THE ROLE OF PRIVATE SECURITY

Sarah Oeschger*, Reema Nunlall-Hiralal**, and Francois Steyn***

South Africa suffers from pervasive gender-based violence that finds expression in, amongst others, domestic and intimate partner violence, rape, sexual harassment, and femicide. While the government and civil society organizations have implemented various measures to combat gender-based violence, the private security sector has traditionally been overlooked in prevention and mitigation strategies. This qualitative study set out to determine how private security can partner with the South African Police Service and community organizations to assist in the fight against gender-based violence. Data were collected from 12 managers of 5 private security companies operating in Pretoria East, South Africa. The participants stated that their companies receive calls related to domestic violence daily, but that they are often unable to meaningfully intervene because the sector does not have specific guidelines and policies on how to assist in such cases. Nevertheless, where possible private security officers aim to defuse the domestic conflict, ensure the physical safety of victims, and support the police when arrests are made. Since security companies have more resources (vehicles and personnel) than the police, they are frequently first to respond when called upon to intervene in domestic violence. The study suggests that, in addressing the gap in policy, the private security sector can be a vital partner in the fight against gender-based violence

Keywords: *gender-based violence, domestic violence, private security, private security sector, disrupting, partnership, policy guidelines, South Africa*

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a term used to capture various forms of unlawful behavior including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm, directed at individuals or groups based on their gender (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023). Typically, women and girls are at a higher risk of experiencing GBV, but men and boys are not exempted from GBV (Ward et al., 2018). GBV includes crimes such as rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence (DV), and femicide. DV is the most common form of GBV among partners in South Africa (Government Communications, 2018) and it occurs within domestic relationships (i.e., being married, living together, parents of a child, family members related by consanguinity, affinity, or adoption, engaged or dating, or sharing the same residence). Acts of DV may take one or more forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, psychological, and

* University of Pretoria, South Africa.

** University of Cape Town, South Africa.

*** University of Free State, South Africa.

economic abuse, intimidation, harassment, and stalking (Domestic Violence Act [DVA]116 of 1998).

Experiencing and witnessing DV can have profound and lasting consequences for individuals, both physically and psychologically (Troisi & Cesàro, 2021). For those directly subjected to violence within the home, the immediate physical effects may include injuries, chronic pain, and potential long-term health issues. However, the psychological toll is far more complex, leading to emotional trauma, self-blame, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Speranza et al., 2022; Herman, 2015).

Witnessing DV, especially for children, can result in a range of negative outcomes, including behavioral problems, social difficulties, and an increased likelihood of perpetuating the cycle of violence in adulthood (Roberts et al., 2010). The trauma associated with DV can have enduring effects on mental health, influencing one's ability to form healthy relationships, cope with stress, and engage in daily activities.

While official crime statistics lack detail on DV as a distinct victim typology, recent data on sexual crimes reveal a staggering prevalence. The latest figures released by the South African Police Service (SAPS) show that 41 739 cases of rape were reported between April 2021 and March 2022, which represents a 14% increase from the previous period, and 7 798 cases of sexual assault were reported over the same period, which is an increase of 11% (SAPS, 2023). It is estimated that 62% of rape incidences occur at the residence of the victims or perpetrators (SAPS, 2022) thus suggesting that the most dangerous place for women and children are their homes. However, the response from the SAPS about DV is reportedly inadequate because police officers are often insufficiently prepared to assist victims, they do not fully understand their responsibilities toward victims under the DVA, and they lack the skills to effectively deal with DV (Kholofelo & Tirivangasi, 2022; Stone & Lopes, 2018). The insensitive treatment of victims contributes to the non-reporting of DV to the police (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022). Another contributor to non-reporting is the unwillingness of police to assist victims of DV because they see the incident as a private matter between two partners or lovers (Matthew & Abrahams, 2003). The inadequate response from the SAPS highlights the importance of exploring alternative security networks to safeguard vulnerable groups and effectively prevent and address GBV.

A neglected spear in the fight against GBV is the private security (PS) sector (Isaksson, 2014), this despite the growing PS industry in South Africa (Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority [PSiRA], 2023) and despite the National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) (1996) emphasizing the role of partnerships in combating crime. The conversation about PS and DV began in 2017 in Australia (Harkin & Fitz-Gibbon, 2017), yet the matter has thus far received minimal local attention despite the burgeoning of PS and the increasing rates of GBV. Within a community psychology framework, we explored the potential of PS partnering with the public sector (including the SAPS, and non-government organizations [NGOs]) in tackling GBV in South Africa. Community psychology highlights the importance of understanding the sociocultural context and engaging with community members to bring about social change. Community psychology principles can be applied to promote collaboration between the PS sector, the SAPS, and other stakeholders in the community.

The study used a qualitative approach to explore the potential of PS partnering with the public sector to address GBV. The investigation allowed us to identify obstacles to PS involvement in

mitigating GBV, as well as the support PS needs to enhance their effectiveness in addressing GBV in the communities they serve. We first position the complexity of GBV in South Africa by demonstrating how GBV is enmeshed with sociocultural dynamics, followed by a discussion on how PS can navigate these dynamics.

2. Gender-based violence in South Africa

Despite progress in legislation (i.e., the Domestic Violence Act Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998, the Domestic Violence Amendment Act 14 of 2021, and the, Service Charter for Victims, 2004), policy (i.e., National Crime Prevention Strategy, 1996, and The Minimum Service Standards for Victims of Crime, 2004), and government interventions (i.e., the Thuthuzela Rape Care Centres), South Africa is still underperforming in the fight against GBV. The latest report by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 2022) indicated that the scale of DV, including femicide, in South Africa is disturbingly high (CEDAW, 2022). The most common type of DV complaints received by the courts is emotional and verbal abuse (38%), followed by physical abuse (20%) (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2019). The latest South African Demographic and Health Survey (National Department of Health, 2019) showed that one in four women aged 18 or older has experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence committed by a partner in their lifetime.

GBV does not occur in isolation but is influenced by a complex web of interconnected individual, social, economic, cultural, and political factors that systematically disadvantage women (Snodgrass, 2016). Victim characteristics, such as lack of education and unemployment, have been identified as risk factors for victimization within the context of DV. These factors contribute to a limited ability to challenge societal norms that perpetuate violence and maintain power imbalances in relationships (Idris et al., 2018; Cools & Kotsadam, 2017). A lack of education can result in constrained understandings of individual rights, limited knowledge about available resources, and a diminished capacity to assert oneself in an abusive relationship. Similarly, unemployment can exacerbate dependency on the perpetrator, making it more challenging for victims to leave abusive situations due to financial limitations and fear of economic instability. Studies show a relationship between unemployment and DV, where acts of DV increased with the increase of male unemployment attributed to financial and psychological stress (Bhalotra et al., 2020; Mshweshwe, 2020). Studies also show that men commit DV to counteract the increased power that women attain through employment (Cools & Kotsadam, 2017). However, compared to employed women, unemployed women experience significantly higher rates of abuse (Mokgatle & Dauda, 2014). These factors can contribute to an increased risk of conflict within relationships and may also lead to a reluctance to seek help due to the fear of secondary victimization.

In addition to victim characteristics, various relationship, community, and societal factors contribute to the occurrence of DV. Relationship factors encompass elements such as financial instability, complicated family dynamics, ongoing relationship instability, and power struggles (Naik & Naik, 2016). These factors create an environment that fosters conflict and increases the likelihood of DV within intimate partnerships. Financial instability can amplify stressors within a relationship, leading to heightened tensions and potentially escalating into abusive behaviors.

Complicated family dynamics, such as intergenerational patterns of violence or dysfunctional relationships, can influence individuals' understanding and behavior within their partnerships. Ongoing instability within the relationship, characterized by inconsistent or unpredictable behaviors from one or both partners, can contribute to a cycle of abuse (Rakovec-Felser, 2014).

Community factors influence the rate of victimization and possible interventions (Gouws, 2021). Insufficient responses to GBV at the community level can perpetuate a culture of silence and impunity, thus further enabling abusive and DV behaviors. Cultural practices that normalize or condone violence within relationships contribute to the prevalence of DV. For example, in patriarchal societies where males assert dominance over women, violence against women becomes normalized (Lawson, 2012). A comprehensive review of the literature on DV in a South African context showed how gender hierarchy – in which men believe that they are entitled to, for example, special marriage privileges – contributes to DV (Mshweshwe, 2020).

There is a strong link between alcohol consumption and DV (Curtis, et al., 2019). Alcohol consumption is also related to the severity of DV and in patriarchal societies alcohol consumption is associated with masculinity and an expression of manhood which can contribute to violent behavior (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2020). This cultural association can contribute to a sense of entitlement, aggression, and a distorted perception of power and control among some individuals.

Furthermore, the lack of practical support from the criminal justice system for survivors of DV hinders efforts to prevent and address domestic violence effectively. For example, Artz (2011) found high attrition in DV cases due to personal and systemic reasons. Personal reasons relate to the complainant withdrawing the case, and systemic reasons relate to the performance of the criminal justice system, for example, delays with forensic evidence and long waiting times for cases to be put on the court schedule. However, systemic reasons overlap with personal reasons to withdraw cases because sometimes the protection order was not served, and complainants lost confidence in the system (Artz, 2011). In the absence of supportive structures, victims may feel isolated and unable to seek help, while perpetrators may face little to no consequences for their actions.

DV impacts the victim and the children in domestic settings. For the individual, DV leads to low self-esteem, increased substance abuse, the infliction of cruel behaviors on others, suicidal behavior, mental illness, such as depression and anxiety, as well as death at the hands of the victim's intimate partner (United Nations, 2021). Children who are exposed to witnessing DV are at higher risk of long-term mental and health problems (Pingley, 2017), including disruptions or delays in social, emotional, physiological, and physical development. It is important to recognize that observing and witnessing DV can potentially perpetuate the cycle of abuse by leading individuals to become either abusers or victims in their adulthood as it may contribute to future perpetration of violence in the future (Harrison, 2021). This effect is particularly noteworthy among children, where boys may exhibit externalized behaviors such as aggression or disobedience, while girls tend to display more internalized behaviors such as anxiety and depression. These distinct behavioral responses could potentially increase the likelihood of boys becoming perpetrators of violence later in life, while girls may be at higher risk of experiencing victimization (Pingley, 2017).

Isaksson (2014) argues that GBV must be understood as a security issue, mandating a security-orientated response because GBV is about power and control. Vetten (2014) asserts that DV is a complex issue matter due to the emotional, familial, and economic connections between the parties and individuals involved. As a result, addressing DV cannot be effectively resolved solely through singular criminal justice interventions, as is the case with crimes perpetrated by strangers. Further, experiences of GBV must be understood in the context of the victim because some interventions, such as social work responses, may be regarded as punitive rather than supportive (Lloyd, 2018). Recently, the South African government released the National Gender-based Violence and Femicide Strategic Plan (NSP) (2020,) the aim of which is to ensure that South Africa is free from GBV, especially for women, children, and the LGBTQIA+ community (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2020). The Plan recognizes a multi-sectoral approach utilizing the roles, responsibilities, resources, and commitment of various stakeholders, including the private sector. Furthermore, the Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority's (PSiRA) strategic plan for the fiscal year 2020/21- 2024/25 identifies a key target of reduction in violence against women and children (PSiRA, 2020). The role and ability of the PS sector should be explored to determine the potential role PS can play in the fight against GBV in South Africa.

3. Private security in South Africa

PS sector in South Africa operates under the regulatory framework of the Private Security Industry Regulation Act 56 of 2001. The sector is a profit-driven segment of the economy, consisting of individuals and companies engaged in PS services. Unlike state-controlled entities, the PS sector functions independently, catering to the security needs of various clients and businesses. The Act makes provision for the operations, licensing, and conduct of PS companies and personnel. PSiRA was established in terms of section 2 of the Act with the primary objective of regulating the PS services in the country. The industry operates under specific guidelines regarding the operations, licensing, and conduct of PS companies and personnel (Berg, 2003). The Code of Conduct for Security Service Providers (2003), as prescribed by the Act, provides binding rules that all security service providers and employers must obey, including professional conduct in accordance with the law. The Code delineates various responsibilities of PS entities concerning the public, including the commitment to strive for crime prevention and the efficient protection of individuals and property. In practice, PS is contracted to safeguard property, assets, and personnel from various forms of crime, encompassing both property crime and violent offenses (Button, 2014). Therefore, PS service providers' role entails a dual nature, with PS engaging in both proactive and reactive crime prevention. Routine patrols conducted by PS in designated areas contribute to the deterrence of criminal activities. Additionally, the PS responds to burglar alarms of paid clients, a responsibility typically associated with the police (Minnaar, 2004). However, PS officers have limited powers compared to the SAPS, for example, they can detain an offender but cannot make an arrest, which is the responsibility of the police. They do, however, work closely with communities offering support to community policing forums (CPFs)

and the SAPS (Wantenaar & Govender, 2023). The multifaceted approach emphasizes the crucial role that PS plays in the wider context of enhancing security and preventing crime.

The duty of crime control and prevention is shared among various entities, extending beyond the exclusive domain of the police to involve statutory, private, and voluntary agencies (Matthews, 2002). Although there is a contention that PS primarily serves the affluent areas (Goodenough, 2007), its indirect crime prevention impact through visibility extends benefits to a broader population, including those who may not have access to armed response services. In 2022, there were approximately 557,703 registered and active PS officials in South Africa, while the SAPS had 176,180 personnel employed in the same year (PSiRA, 2022; SAPS, 2022). The SAPS has resource constraints (such as insufficient vehicles) which limits their response to crime, including DV complainants (Molebeleli, 2018; Govender, 2015). The significant difference between the manpower available in the PS sector versus the SAPS suggests that PS is well-positioned to collaborate with the police in combating crimes, including DV.

The latest PSiRA Strategic Plan (2020) highlights reducing violence against women and children as a key target for the medium-term strategic framework. However, when responding to calls relating to DV, there is limited explicit guidance within their legislative framework on how to prevent, protect, or react to DV. The Domestic Violence Act (116 of 1998) (DVA) sets out the duties of the SAPS when responding to complaints of DV as well as the arrest procedure. Failure to comply with the DVA is treated as a form of misconduct in terms of the SAPS Act of 1995. This means that the SAPS is legally obligated to respond to DV and ensure the safety of the victims. However, research shows the inability of the police to respond, prevent, combat, and effectively investigate DV complaints (Govender, 2015).

Since 2010, there has been a significant decline in public trust in the SAPS. As of 2021, only 27% of the surveyed public in South Africa expressed trust in the police (Roberts & Gordon, 2022). A key contributing factor to this decline is the perception of inefficiency and ineffectiveness in addressing crime and ensuring public safety. Escalating crime rates, instances of police corruption, misconduct, and inadequate responses to criminal incidents have eroded the credibility and trustworthiness of the police force. In contrast to the diminishing trust in the SAPS, the PS sector has witnessed substantial industry growth, boasting a 13% annual growth rate (Minnaar, 2007). This growth can be attributed to the public's perception that PS providers present a more efficient and reliable alternative for personal safety and property protection compared to the police. The PS sector is viewed as responsive, accessible, and often equipped with more resources and advanced technology than the police force. The swift and effective response by PS to emergencies, as emphasized by Chinwokwu (2018), in conjunction with the strategic plan of the PSiRA aimed at diminishing violence against women and children, indicates that PS can contribute to reducing DV. However, this highlights the necessity for establishing clear guidelines for such contributions.

Presently, there is a dearth of studies investigating the possible connection between the PS sector and the SAPS, particularly concerning the policing of GBV. The insufficient research on this subject creates a void in our understanding and comprehension of how these two entities cooperate or engage in addressing GBV. Hence, it is essential to delve into the potential roles and collaborations between PS and the SAPS in the fight against GBV.

4. Method

4.1 Participants

The research was situated in Pretoria East, Gauteng, South Africa, known for its substantial concentration of registered security businesses (PSiRA, 2023). Specifically, the area is home to a diverse range of PS organizations, including those offering services such as rapid response, patrolling, private investigations, and security technology installation. The choice of Gauteng, recognized as the province with the highest number of registered security businesses in the country, provided a multifaceted context for investigating the role of PS in addressing GBV. These PS organizations, through their varied services, played a crucial role in shaping the safety and security landscape of the community in Pretoria East, making them significant actors to study in the context of GBV prevention.

The study focused on personnel from five PS companies operating in Pretoria East. A total of 12 participants were included in the study, all of whom were male. One of the participants noted that the PS industry is a mostly male-dominated industry. While the gender homogeneity among participants may limit the diversity of perspectives, it reflects the current composition of the PS sector and highlights the need for future research to explore gender representation more comprehensively.

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to select participants. Potential participants were identified through visits to the selected PS companies' websites. Managers were contacted by the first author, briefed about the research, and asked to participate or refer other potential participants. Inclusion criteria required participants to have a minimum of three months of experience in the PS industry and some interaction with the SAPS.

Participants included individuals at different hierarchical levels, such as site managers, heads of operations, and managing directors. Most of the companies had two individuals who participated in the study. The participants' experience and duration in the PS ranged from three months to 35 years. The determination of an adequate sample size was guided by the concept of information power (Malterud et al., 2016). This approach aligns with the qualitative nature of the research, prioritizing the depth of insights over a larger number of participants.

4.2 Instrument and data collection

The study utilised a qualitative method with semi-structured interviews guided by an interview schedule. The interview schedule was developed by the first author and cross-checked by authors 2 and 3. The interview schedule centred around three fundamental inquiries: i) the feasibility of establishing partnerships between PS and the SAPS to tackle GBV within the communities they operate, ii) the identified obstacles and challenges linked to engaging PS in GBV prevention, and iii) the envisioned interventions and support mechanisms necessary to bolster the capability of PS in addressing GBV effectively. The interviews, lasting between 30 minutes and an hour, were conducted in English by the first author and recorded with participants' consent. An informed consent form was signed by all participants. After obtaining

ethical approval, the researchers conducted face-to-face interviews on the premises of the selected PS companies.

4.2 Data analysis

The collected data underwent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following an inductive approach. The first author transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim. Authors one and two began coding the data by assigning labels to core concepts and ideas. The initial codes were then reviewed and verified by all three authors. The coding process allowed for the creation of categories with no predetermined categories imposed. Thematic analysis facilitated drawing general conclusions from the data, aligning with the inductive nature of the approach. Authors one and two arranged the themes according to the research objectives. Author three provided feedback on the developed themes which allowed for refinement and validation of the interpreted themes.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee at the University of Pretoria. Strict ethical protocols were followed, ensuring voluntary participation, explicit consent for recording interviews, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Anonymity was guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms for each participant. No compensation was offered for participation in the study.

5. Findings

The findings come from a homogenous sample of all male participants, which may limit the generalizability of the results to the broader population. This homogeneous group, while providing in-depth insights into the specific experiences and perspectives of men, might not capture the diversity of experiences, attitudes, or behaviors that could be present in a more varied sample including women, non-binary, or other gender identities. Consequently, while the themes identified offer valuable understanding of the subject within this specific demographic, caution should be exercised when applying these findings to different groups. Four main themes emanated from the qualitative data. Theme one addresses the context of GBV and PS; theme two features the challenges PS faces when responding to GBV calls; theme three contains the integrated support that PS offers; and theme four encompasses interventions for PS that will be useful for PS to partner with the public sector.

5.1 Context of gender-based violence and private security

Participants provided the context of their experiences with GBV. It is crucial to point out the high volume of calls received by PS on issues related to GBV, especially DV. One participant mentioned the company receives about 2 or more calls daily on DV. He further added that the calls are higher during the weekend and calls are usually received in the mornings.

Several participants mentioned instances where victims withdrew their reported cases to the police shortly after initially reporting the incidents. In terms of the socioeconomic status of victims, participants indicated:

GBV can occur in any household, regardless of the socio-economic standing of the community.

However, it is critical to highlight that despite the limitless boundaries of GBV, individuals from lower socio-economic households potentially experience higher rates of victimization and lower protection because they are not subscribed to a PS company:

The lower the earning ability, the higher the problem [of falling victim to GBV]. So, the issue is the people most at risk can't pay for it.

The lack of response from the SAPS further compromises protection. Participants highlighted the SAPS to be unresponsive to DV calls because they lack the necessary resources. Participants indicated:

SAPS will not respond to domestic violence. They will, but they don't have petrol for it. It's not a priority.

SAPS do not respond or can't respond because they don't have vehicles. They say that those people must go to the police station.

In addition, the SAPS have high workloads which add to these constraints:

The SAPS have heavy workloads and therefore are unable to respond to domestic issues.

Participants highlighted that a contributing factor to DV is alcohol:

Alcohol plays a big role in DV, most of the time perpetrators are under the influence of alcohol or other substances.

An important experience by PS is the presence of children during a domestic dispute:

It gets more dangerous when children are involved because when husband and wife have a dispute they open a case against each other for assault, which means that they both will get locked up. Then the children are left alone, and then you sit with the children.

5.2 Challenges in responding to gender-based violence calls

Two main challenges were identified by participants, namely restricted access, and a lack of training.

Restricted access. One participant noted that when they are informed of a DV case involving non-clients, PS officers cannot enter the premises because it is illegal, and according to the participant, the property owners can take legal action against the PS company:

Most of the time we get refused to enter the premises. So then, things get worse. And we try. The police take very long... they just don't have vehicles, they don't come out to take the complaints, people must go through to the station.

Another participant indicated that PS personnel are bound by the law and cannot get involved in a DV case. He says, "we call the SAPS to assist, we just stand off and ensure everyone is safe."

Lack of training. In addition to physical restrictions, PS have limited knowledge of how to deal with GBV because they often do not have adequate training on DV. One participant reiterated that PS does not have guidelines on how to handle GBV:

...it's not addressed in the industry. So, we're kind of exposed to develop our own guidelines and definitions... because the regulator never really addressed that in terms of the gradings and the training, that's mandatory for everyone in the industry.

It is worthwhile to report that one of the PS companies from the study sample provides training to their personnel to enhance their ability to identify and respond effectively to incidents of GBV. While the exact content and scope of the training are not specified, it indicates the company's commitment to equipping its officers with the necessary skills and knowledge regarding GBV. However, there are no clear guidelines on GBV training for PS nationally suggesting irregular training.

5.3 Integrated support

A theme that highlights how PS can assist in the fight against DV is integrated support. Participants highlighted the multiple support they can provide to the SAPS, and communities in terms of responding to GBV calls and preventing GBV. Integrated support includes DV prevention, victim assistance, community mobilization, unbiased response, and conflict resolution.

Prevention. PS has a strong crime-preventive demeanour because they disturb crimes in progress:

We play a huge role in preventing crime by notifying SAPS there is a crime in progress. And our success with SAPS is very high. The arrest rate, I would say is 20%

when we report the crime in progress, that they do respond and apprehend and arrest criminals.

Victim assistance. In terms of GBV, PS can offer immediate support to the victim:

When we see that the victim requires assistance, specifically assistance from a female, we call the trauma counsellors.

Participants highlighted that they are usually the first to respond to DV which necessitates their ability to assist victims. It is also important to note that besides aiding the victims, PS offers a form of protection to the victim. A participant noted that “the victim in most cases is glad to see us because they feel protected.”

Community mobilization. As PS share close relationships with the community, they can receive information about incidents as it is occurring. In the same light, PS responds regardless of whether a call is from a client or community member:

We work with the community police forum, who are in community WhatsApp groups, which aid in faster information dissemination about issues affecting the community.

We serve the community; we respond to incidences even though they are not a client.

However, a participant mentioned that although they do serve communities, they are still loyal to their clients. They have mentioned that they can assist the broader community while focusing on certain topics, such as GBV, but they require the assistance of other stakeholders, including NGOs:

So, the issue there is with PS is the people most at risk, can't pay... a lot of it is government NGO driven of organizations that would actually fund access to services to these potential victims.

Neutral response. Participants emphasized maintaining a neutral and unbiased response when handling GBV calls. They highlighted the importance of not taking sides in DV cases, as they may not be aware of the circumstances or who is at fault. The approach involves treating each situation with impartiality to avoid escalating tensions:

When I deal with a domestic violence case, I do not choose sides between the husband and wife. We just keep things neutral.

Conflict resolution. It appears that when PS responds to a DV call, the domestic issue is sometimes resolved just by having PS present. Participants highlighted that they would try to

deescalate the situation by conversing with the relevant parties because they do not have much mandate to perform any other interventions:

Sometimes when we respond to a call, we talk to the husband and wife and sometimes they go back to and then they go about their business as usual.

5.4 Interventions

Participants expressed the need for clear guidelines to address GBV and the need for training on how to handle DV or GBV. The following quotes highlight the need for policy intervention:

If we could put together a code of good practice of how to handle domestic violence of GBV will prove fruitful... If we can clarify the blueprint of how things should be done, I think it can work.

In terms of gender-based violence and specific incidences, that are outside of the jurisdiction of private security, it will assist us greatly to know how we can escalate the matter and still get the response and incident management required.

In addition, a participant indicated that if PS had more power in terms of assisting the police, PS can take some workload off the police. The participant suggested a pilot project to test the partnership between PS and the SAPS.

An important aspect mentioned by one participant is the sustainability of interventions. One way to sustain and enforce guidelines is through training. The participant went on to say that training will uplift the involvement of PS in DV cases.

6. Discussion

The study highlights the multifaceted role of PS in DV incidents, emphasizing four critical aspects. Firstly, PS plays a pivotal mediation and protective role in DV situations, acting as a crucial link between the parties involved. Secondly, the study recognizes that resource sharing between PS and the SAPS and building partnerships with various stakeholders can assist in preventing and/or disrupting DV. Thirdly, the study highlights the imperative for specific training tailored to the intricate nature of DV. Fourthly, the study underscores the necessity for clear policy guidelines on DV interventions.

Before dwelling on the study's main findings, it is necessary to discuss other relevant findings. PS companies receive calls about DV daily, peaking over weekends. While studies exist on the geographical exploration and visualization of GBV incidents, enabling the identification of hotspots and patterned behaviors (Davis & Meerkotter, 2017), there is currently no mapping data available from PS on GBV. The participants' indication of a high rate of calls underscores the significance of mapping data from PS concerning GBV. Such information could prove invaluable to PS and the SAPS in preventing DV and strategically allocating resources, emphasizing the need

for a comprehensive understanding of the geographical dynamics and patterns associated with DV incidents reported to PS companies.

The first critical finding of our study is the vital role of protection and mediation in DV situations by PS.

Participants in the study highlighted that PS could offer protection to victims of DV because, upon arrival, they are in close vicinity to the victim. PS are usually the first to respond compared to the police and can diffuse the situation. We found that PS assists in conflict resolution by mitigating tension between the parties involved. This prevents the escalation of harmful or destructive behaviors. Although it was noted that PS cannot enter the property of non-paying clients nor make an arrest, the fact that they are present acts as a deterrent and can potentially interrupt violence. Often, victims seek immediate help to halt a situation rather than reporting to the police or they are caught in intractable personal situations that make it impossible to take legal action or leave the situation (Harkin & Fitz-Gibbon, 2017; Artz, 2011). Because the goal of PS is security-orientated, they are well-situated to offer a pragmatic rather than a prosecutorial response to DV calls. The findings from this study suggest that some victims do not want to make a formal report to the police, but rather require a means to resolve domestic strife and PS is well-positioned to protect and interrupt the cycle of violence. Harkin (2021) found that some DV victims feel more comfortable after speaking to a PS officer because it creates a sense of safety and anxiety relief.

Participants highlighted that women from low-socioeconomic backgrounds have an increased chance of experiencing DV because they lack protection. Literature confirms that DV is higher in low-socioeconomic contexts because women have a limited ability to challenge or escape abusive situations (Dabaghi et al., 2022). The association is related to the lack of access to resources such as education, finances, and employment because women have limited opportunities to challenge norms that perpetuate violence (Cools & Kotsadam, 2017). The research findings highlight that in socially disorganised communities, violence tends to persist due to the breakdown of relationships and community structures. This breakdown increases the vulnerability of individuals, making them more susceptible to becoming victims of violence (Nqopiso, 2017). Further, patriarchal norms assert dominance over women, leading to a normalization of violence (Lawson, 2012). PS can potentially increase surveillance which acts as a deterrent in socially disorganised communities which could prevent and/or disrupt DV.

Studies have shown SAPS to inadequately respond to DV calls, citing a lack of resources such as vehicles and manpower to timeously respond. For example, a study conducted in Ikageng, North-West province by Molebeleli (2018) found that only one police vehicle is available to respond to DV callouts and since only one call can be attended to at a time, several other calls are left unattended. The SAPS has been reported to underperform in terms of response times, with police officials arriving after an incident has occurred (Lamb, 2021). Sharma and Borah (2020) argue that with an increased response rate to emergency distress calls, such as those associated with cases of DV, there may be a reduction in such crimes, as well as indicating to victims that they will receive support. However, unlike the SAPS and NGOs, PS has more resources (i.e., vehicles and personnel) to respond to a call instantly, and thus they are in the position to protect the victim and offer immediate support (Kole, 2017). This highlights the need for relationship building between PS and the SAPS which is the second main finding of our study.

Participants in the study indicated that they deal with DV daily and they have identified substance misuse as a significant factor contributing to DV within the communities they serve. There is a well-established correlation between men's harmful alcohol use and their involvement in acts of violence (Ramsoomar et al., 2021). The finding suggests that PS holds a strategic position to establish partnerships with key stakeholders, including the SAPS, community organisations, and substance abuse treatment centres, amongst others. These partnerships are crucial for facilitating information sharing, coordinating joint initiatives, and orchestrating a unified response to incidents involving alcohol-related DV. The findings suggest that PS holds valuable information that can allow for a better understanding of DV within different contexts.

The third pivotal finding is the need for tailored training because of the complex nature of DV. For example, victims of GBV are more likely to seek informal support networks (i.e., family and neighbors) since they are least likely to be blamed for their victimization, and in most cases require emotional support compared to legal processes (Roomaney et al., 2023; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014). The findings from the study suggest that PS offers victims the immediate support they require. Social reactions, including emotional support, giving advice, and/or allowing the victim to talk about the abuse, and providing practical support are helpful (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014). While PS may not directly provide emotional support to victims, they act as a medium to appropriate support structures such as counsellors as found in the study. Informal support has a strong influence on altering the knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of friends, family, and neighbors, thus improving awareness and response to DV which facilitates healing and recovery (Bird et al., 2022). This is not to say that PS should be trained counsellors, but rather that training on the dynamic needs of DV victims could prove to be beneficial. Understanding the complex nature and multiple victims, as well as how to respond to DV, can potentially reduce victim-blaming and enhance help-seeking.

Comprehensive training is required because PS is involved in mediation between the parties as seen in the study. PS can acquire crisis intervention techniques to effectively diffuse tense situations and guide individuals towards relevant resources such as helplines or counseling services. Training on conflict resolution could potentially have long-term positive benefits in changing social behavior and promoting equality. Although recognized in the study that PS personnel offer an unbiased response to victims of DV, it cannot be a generalized finding. It is well known that the SAPS fosters patriarchal attitudes, victim-blaming, and secondary victimization, all of which contribute to non-reporting and additional stress and trauma for victims (Molebeleli, 2018). To avoid adopting existing police stereotypes of GBV (Shaw et al., 2017) and foster an unbiased response to DV, compressive training is necessary. Unbiased responses from PS could significantly impact the psychological well-being of victims, making their recovery easier and less traumatic. Harkin (2021) notes the dangers posed when PS respond to DV calls, including not having credentials to deal with DV which could potentially agitate the situation rather than defuse it. However, PS does not have (sufficient) training on how to deal with GBV calls and/or incidences which proves to be essential, especially since most PS personnel are males and may not be sensitive to DV cases.

In line with the theory of community psychology, the study found PS to work well in the communities they protect because they can foster alliances (Fox et al., 2009). This suggests that training PS personnel on how to respond to DV calls will be beneficial. It is worth noting that

partnership research finds support for defined roles and responsibilities of partners in achieving set goals (Alzbeidi et al., 2021). Participants in the study support the notion that guidelines on how PS can intervene in cases of GBV can be beneficial underlying our fourth significant finding: the need for clear policy guidelines on DV intervention. Participants emphasized the need for policy guidelines. Guidelines about reporting, responding, and defusing DV appear to be the main areas requiring guidance. Policy guidelines on training PS on dealing with DV are also necessary. Such a policy could potentially reduce the case burden on the SAPS, and assist in cases proceeding in the criminal justice system.

While our study sheds light on the potential role of PS in preventing and responding to DV, it is crucial to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in the qualitative research design. Firstly, the study's findings are context-specific and may not be universally applicable, as the sample size is relatively small and confined to a specific geographical area in Pretoria East, Gauteng, South Africa. This may limit the generalizability of the results to broader populations or diverse settings. Additionally, the exclusive inclusion of male participants in the study may introduce a gender bias, overlooking the perspectives and experiences of female PS personnel. While the gender homogeneity among participants may limit the diversity of perspectives, it reflects the current composition of the PS sector and highlights the need for future research to explore gender representation more comprehensively. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the research may not provide a comprehensive understanding of the quantitative aspects of DV incidents handled by PS, and a quantitative study could complement these findings. Finally, the study primarily focuses on the perspectives of PS personnel, and incorporating the viewpoints of DV victims and other stakeholders could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics involved.

7. Conclusion and recommendation

Given their presence and engagements with the community, SAPS, and civil society, PS appears to be well-positioned to assist in addressing DV. More specifically, PS plays a critical mediation role in DV incidences. Partnering with the SAPS, the PS sector can enhance response capabilities, contribute to prevention strategies, and provide support to victims of DV. The PS sector's resources, technology, and personnel can supplement the efforts of the SAPS in addressing DV incidents, especially in areas where the police may face resource constraints or challenges in reaching communities. PS resources coupled with detailed training in DV intervention, PS can potentially disrupt GBV.

Additionally, for PS to become active in crimes related to DV and to ensure the responsible and ethical involvement of the PS sector in GBV issues, the development and implementation of comprehensive guidelines are necessary. These guidelines should outline the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of PS when dealing with DV incidents. The guidelines should also address training requirements for PS personnel to enhance their understanding of GBV dynamics, victim sensitivity, and appropriate response protocols. Collaboration and information-sharing mechanisms between the PS sector and the SAPS should be established, fostering a coordinated and effective approach to addressing GBV. More research on effective collaboration between PS and the SAPS is required.

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