

# Impact of Culture on Men's Reluctance to Report Domestic Violence: A Case of Hwange Urban Area

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the cultural factors influencing men's reluctance to report domestic violence in Hwange Urban Area, Zimbabwe. Guided by interpretivist and critical theory paradigms, the research employed a qualitative design, using in-depth interviews with 30 purposively selected men aged 20–60 to capture their lived experiences. Findings reveal that entrenched cultural norms, perceptions of masculinity as strength and dominance, fear of ridicule, and social stigma significantly discourage men from disclosing abuse. Participants also reported limited institutional support and the absence of gender-inclusive policies as barriers to seeking help. The study recommends community-based awareness programs to challenge harmful cultural narratives, capacity-building for service providers and law enforcement to respond sensitively to male victims, and the establishment of confidential reporting mechanisms. These measures are critical for reducing stigma, fostering disclosure, and promoting gender-inclusive justice.

**Keywords:** Cultural norms, Masculinity, Domestic violence, Men's reluctance, Victimhood stigma, Reporting barriers.

## INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is as one of the most pervasive human rights and public health issues worldwide. Globally, the discourse has primarily been regarded as a women's issue, given the higher prevalence rates among women and the severe forms of abuse they often experience. However, of late, evidence is demonstrating that men, too, are victims of domestic violence, yet their experiences remain largely invisible in both academic literature and social policy (Tsui, Cheung, & Leung, 2010). The reluctance of men to report abuse is not merely a matter of personal choice; but it is deeply rooted in cultural, social, and institutional frameworks that define masculinity and victimhood. This raises important questions about the inclusivity of current domestic violence interventions.

Hines & Douglas, (2010) highlight that global studies suggest that between 10–40% of men have experienced some form of intimate partner violence. This is also supported by Breiding et al (2014) who posit that in the United States, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey found that nearly one in seven men had been a victim of severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Similar findings have been reported in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. Compared to women, male victims are far less likely to report their experiences, seek medical treatment, or access social services. This silence perpetuates a cycle of hidden victimization and reinforces cultural norms that stigmatize male vulnerability.

Central to men's reluctance to report abuse are issues to do with cultural constructions of masculinity. Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity highlights how societies valorise male dominance, strength, and stoicism, thereby discouraging men from admitting vulnerability. Reporting abuse is often interpreted as a betrayal of these masculine ideals, leading to ridicule, stigma, and social isolation. Culture plays a dual role, that is, it not only normalizes male dominance but also silences men when they become victims.

In Zimbabwe, patriarchal traditions remain deeply embedded, despite progressive legal frameworks such as the Domestic Violence Act of 2007. In practice, most interventions are directed at women, while men's experiences remain underexplored and often dismissed. In Hwange Urban Area, a multicultural town shaped by mining

economies and traditional beliefs, domestic violence against men remains largely hidden. Cultural scripts dictate that men should “control” their households, which makes it difficult for abused men to seek help without fear of stigma or ridicule. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the impact of culture on men’s reluctance to report domestic violence in Hwange Urban Area. By situating the problem within global, regional, and local contexts, it contributes to the broader discourse on gender, masculinity, and domestic violence, while advocating for more inclusive interventions that recognize men as legitimate victims.

## **Background of the Study**

Globally, domestic violence is recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) as a pervasive problem affecting individuals across gender, race, and class. While research and interventions have focused largely on women, studies indicate that between 10–40% of men globally experience some form of intimate partner violence (Hines & Douglas, 2010). According to Chan (2014), in countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, men have reported experiences of physical violence, emotional abuse, and coercive control, yet they are less likely than women to report or seek services. In African societies, cultural constructions of masculinity strongly discourage men from acknowledging victimization. Reporting abuse is often equated with loss of respect and community standing. Adebayo (2014) postulates that research in South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya suggests that men’s silence is perpetuated by cultural stereotypes, limited legal recognition, and fear of institutional neglect. Zimbabwe has progressive legislation such as the Domestic Violence Act (2007), but implementation remains gender-skewed, with focus on female victims. Studies by Machisa & Chingono, (2017) reveal that men rarely come forward, largely because cultural and institutional biases discourage their participation in reporting mechanisms.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the cultural factors influencing men’s reluctance to report domestic violence in Hwange Urban Area.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The study is underpinned by the following four objectives which are

1. To examine the cultural norms and beliefs that influence men’s reluctance to report domestic violence.
2. To explore the perceptions of masculinity that hinder male victims from seeking support.
3. To analyze institutional and community responses to men who experience domestic violence.
4. To recommend culturally sensitive strategies that encourage male victims to report abuse.

## **Research questions**

1. What cultural norms and beliefs contribute to men’s reluctance to report domestic violence in Hwange Urban Area?
2. How do perceptions of masculinity affect male victims’ willingness to seek support for domestic violence?
3. How do institutions and communities respond to male victims of domestic violence, and how do these responses influence reporting?
4. What culturally sensitive strategies can be implemented to encourage male victims of domestic violence to report abuse?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to literature on gender and domestic violence by highlighting male victimization, an area often overlooked. It provides evidence to policymakers, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs, and

community leaders on the cultural barriers affecting men, thereby informing the design of gender-inclusive interventions. It also seeks to normalize the discourse around male victimization in Zimbabwe, reducing stigma and promoting equality

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study is guided by four interrelated objectives that interrogate the cultural, social, and institutional factors shaping men's reluctance to report domestic violence in Hwange Urban. Each objective is grounded in global literature, contextualized in regional scholarship, and situated within the Zimbabwean socio-cultural setting.

Connell & Messerschmidt, (2005) highlight that globally, cultural norms are powerful determinants of help-seeking behaviors. Hegemonic masculinity, which valorizes dominance, stoicism, and self-reliance, often delegitimizes men's experiences of victimization. Men who disclose abuse risk being perceived as weak, incompetent, or even re-cast as perpetrators (Taylor et al., 2021). As a result, silence and denial are common strategies for maintaining social legitimacy.

In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), patriarchal systems reinforce male authority while trivializing their victimization. Abrahams et al., (2014) state that studies in South Africa reveal that men who disclose abuse risk ridicule and social isolation, as cultural scripts frame violence against men as an impossibility. WHO (2009) further notes that strong cultural imperatives for family privacy suppress reporting of intimate partner conflicts.

In Zimbabwe, cultural idioms such as "indoda ayikhali" ("a man does not cry") reinforce the notion that men must endure suffering silently. In Hwange Urban, where patriarchal norms remain influential, reporting domestic violence is often perceived as dishonoring one's masculinity and undermining community respect. Thus, understanding these cultural beliefs is essential for contextualizing male silence.

The perceptions of masculinity that hinder male victims from seeking support is yet another hindrance to reporting domestic violence by men. Masculinity is a central lens through which men's reluctance to report domestic violence must be examined. Globally, perceptions of masculinity equate strength with invulnerability, discouraging admissions of vulnerability. Research has shown that the anxiety men feel when they believe they fall short of expected masculine roles is strongly associated with reduced help-seeking behaviors and increased psychological distress (Reidy et al., 2014). According to Tsui et al. (2010), in North America, male victims often internalize abuse as personal failure, thereby invalidating their own eligibility for support.

In African societies, masculinity is linked to breadwinning, authority, and emotional control. Disclosure of abuse is perceived as incompatible with these ideals. In Uganda, Jewkes et al. (2015) observed that men avoided reporting violence because acknowledgment undermined their authority. Similarly, in Nigeria, Oluremi (2019) documented how men feared being ostracized for admitting to abuse, as it was seen as a sign of weakness. Male victims fear ridicule from colleagues, family, and community leaders, thus, reinforcing silence. Thus, understanding how constructions of masculinity shape male help-seeking behaviors is vital for designing gender-sensitive interventions.

Institutional and community responses to men who experience domestic violence is yet another factor that prevents men from reporting domestic violence. Globally, institutional frameworks for responding to domestic violence are predominantly designed for women, inadvertently marginalizing men. Scott-Storey et al (2022) note that research from the UK and US shows that male victims often encounter disbelief from service providers, and in some cases, they are misidentified as perpetrators. Huntley et al. (2019) argue that the lack of male-specific shelters, hotlines, and support services contributes significantly to underreporting.

In Low to middle income countries resource limitations and patriarchal biases further restrict institutional responses. Abrahams et al. (2014) observed that in South Africa the police officers and healthcare workers frequently minimized male cases of domestic violence. Community responses often echo cultural beliefs, urging men to resolve issues privately or through informal reconciliation processes.

In Zimbabwe, while the Domestic Violence Act (2007) is gender-neutral, its practical application tends to prioritize women's cases. In some instances, police officers often encourage male victims to withdraw complaints to preserve "manhood" and avoid public embarrassment. Traditional courts (dare) typically advise reconciliation, further silencing male voices. Such institutional and community responses perpetuate stigma and deter men from accessing available protections.

Cultural sensitive strategies that encourage male victims to report abuse need to be put in place so as to prevent men from committing suicide due to the shame they go through. Globally, scholars advocate for strategies that normalize men's help-seeking by reframing it as a strength rather than a weakness (Douglas & Hines, 2011). Huntley et al. (2019) highlight the need for gender-sensitive interventions, including confidential reporting systems, online counseling, and male-inclusive shelters. These approaches reduce stigma by ensuring men feel validated in their victimhood. From an African context, culturally sensitive interventions must involve community gatekeepers. WHO (2009) emphasizes engaging traditional and religious leaders to shift harmful gender norms. South African initiatives such as Men as Partners have demonstrated that engaging men in discussions issues around gender and violence can reshape masculine ideals and improve reporting.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study applies Connell's Theory of Hegemonic Masculinity and Goffman's Stigma Theory to illuminate how cultural norms and societal perceptions sustain men's reluctance to report domestic violence in Hwange Urban. Together, these theories provide a dual perspective where one focuses on gendered power relations and the other on social labeling and identity management respectively Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity explains how certain forms of masculinity are culturally exalted over others, reinforcing gender hierarchies. Hegemonic masculinity emphasizes dominance, toughness, control, and emotional restraint. Connell & Messerschmidt, (2005) postulate that it delegitimizes men who express vulnerability, effectively silencing those who experience abuse. On the other hand, Goffman's (1963) Stigma Theory provides a complementary lens, emphasizing how societal labeling shapes individual behaviors. Stigma is the process by which individuals are socially discredited or devalued because they deviate from normative expectations. For male victims of domestic violence, stigma arises from the perception that victimhood contradicts normative masculinity. Stigma is compounded by cultural norms that equate family problems with private matters, discouraging external disclosure (Jewkes et al., 2015).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Philosophical Framework**

This study is anchored in interpretivism and critical theory, two paradigms that foreground human experience and the influence of social structures. Schwandt (2015) states that interpretivism posits that reality is socially constructed and best understood through individuals lived experiences and subjective meanings. It is particularly relevant to domestic violence research, where cultural norms, identity, and personal narratives shape disclosure patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Critical theory complements interpretivism by challenging power relations and questioning oppressive structures. Rooted in the Frankfurt School tradition (Horkheimer, 1982), it emphasizes emancipation from domination, making it suitable for examining how patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity silence male victims of abuse. Globally, critical theory has been used to deconstruct gendered violence and highlight the voices of marginalized groups (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011).

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design was employed to explore men's lived experiences of domestic violence in Hwange Urban Area. Qualitative research focuses on understanding social phenomena from the perspectives of participants, capturing the depth, complexity, and context of human experiences (Creswell, 2014). This approach is particularly appropriate for sensitive topics such as domestic violence, as it enables participants to narrate

personal experiences in their own words, providing rich insights that cannot be obtained through quantitative methods (Patton, 2015).

### **Justification of the Qualitative Approach**

The qualitative approach is particularly relevant to this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the social, cultural, and psychological factors shaping male victims' experiences. Greene (2007) emphasizes that qualitative research in gender-based violence reveals not only what happens, but how and why participants interpret and navigate their situations. In African contexts, qualitative methods are effective for capturing local narratives and culturally grounded realities, which are essential for designing contextually appropriate interventions (Maree, 2019).

By employing a qualitative design, this study provides rich, nuanced insights into male victims' lived experiences, supporting the development of culturally sensitive strategies to encourage reporting and access to support services

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study utilized in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. This approach allowed participants to discuss sensitive and personal experiences in a confidential and flexible setting, enabling the researcher to probe for deeper understanding. Interviews explored participants' perceptions of masculinity, cultural expectations, barriers to reporting, and interactions with institutional support systems.

### **Sampling**

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select participants who could provide relevant insights into the cultural influences on men's reluctance to report domestic violence (Maree, 2019). The study included a total of 30 participants to ensure a more comprehensive and diverse representation. This sample comprised male victims of domestic violence, representing diverse ages, socio-economic backgrounds, and marital statuses, as well as key stakeholders such as police officers, counsellors, and local leadership figures including kraal heads and headmen.

Including stakeholders allowed the study to capture a wider range of perspectives on the social, institutional, and cultural factors that influence men's reporting behaviors. This multi-perspective approach enhances understanding of both the personal eA purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select participants who could provide relevant insights into the cultural influences on men's reluctance to report domestic violence (Maree, 2019). The study included a total of 30 participants to ensure a more comprehensive and diverse representation. This sample comprised male victims of domestic violence, representing diverse ages, socio-economic backgrounds, and marital statuses, as well as key stakeholders such as police officers, counsellors, and local leadership figures including kraal heads and headmen.

Including stakeholders allowed the study to capture a wider range of perspectives on the social, institutional, and cultural factors that influence men's reporting behaviors. This multi-perspective approach enhances understanding of both the personal experiences of male victims and the broader systemic and cultural contexts affecting disclosure.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method systematically organizes participants' narratives, highlighting recurring experiences and culturally specific factors that influence men's reluctance to report domestic violence. Themes were generated both inductively from the data and guided by the study's objectives, ensuring alignment with the research focus.

## Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of domestic violence research, strong ethical protocols were observed. Ethical clearance was obtained from relevant institutional review boards, ensuring compliance with global standards for human subjects' research (WHO, 2001). Informed consent was secured from all participants, emphasizing voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without consequence (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). This is also supported by Ellsberg & Heise, (2005) when they posit that research on violence emphasizes the importance of safety, confidentiality, and trauma-informed approaches.

## Data Analysis

This study followed a dual pathway reflecting the mixed-methods design. Quantitative data from structured questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. According to Creswell (2014), quantitative analysis helps identify prevalence, patterns, and relationships within social research. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework of thematic analysis: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. This method enables researchers to identify patterns of meaning within narratives, offering insights into cultural norms, perceptions of masculinity, as stigma shaping male silence. Thematic analysis is widely used in domestic violence research because it balances flexibility with methodological rigor (Nowell et al., 2017).

## Findings

The study revealed that cultural beliefs, societal expectations, and institutional practices significantly influence men's reluctance to report domestic violence in Hwange Urban Area. Across the diverse participant groups—male victims, police officers, counsellors, and local leaders—common themes emerged, highlighting the powerful role of cultural norms in shaping men's behavior and decisions regarding disclosure.

### Cultural norms and beliefs that influence men's reluctance to report domestic violence

#### Male Victims' Perspectives

Male participants consistently emphasized that social and cultural expectations of masculinity create significant barriers to reporting abuse. One participant reflected:

*"In our culture, men are expected to be strong and never show weakness. From a young age, I was taught that crying or complaining makes you less of a man. Even now, when my wife hits me, I feel trapped between pain and pride. I know people in my community will laugh at me, gossip about me, and call me weak if they find out. This fear of humiliation is stronger than the fear of the abuse itself, so I have learned to endure it quietly, hoping it will pass."*

Another participant stated:

*"My father always told me that men must handle their problems at home quietly. He said that seeking help outside the family is a sign of shame and failure. Growing up with that mindset, I feel torn between protecting my own dignity and acknowledging my suffering. Whenever I consider reporting domestic violence, I remember his words, and it fills me with guilt and anxiety."*

Participants also described community attitudes as reinforcing their silence:

*"Neighbours often say that real men don't cry and they make jokes whenever they see a man expressing pain. So even when I am physically hurt or emotionally scarred, I force myself to hide it. I avoid seeking help because I don't want people to label me as weak or less of a man."*

The fear of gossip, ridicule, and loss of social standing was repeatedly cited as a reason for enduring abuse silently. Additionally, religious and traditional teachings were reported as emphasizing reconciliation over reporting:

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*“The church and traditional leaders often advise reconciliation rather than reporting incidents of domestic violence. They emphasize preserving family unity and warn that exposing private family matters brings shame to the man and his household. Their guidance, while intended to maintain peace, left me feeling unsupported, misunderstood, and reluctant to ever disclose my situation to anyone outside my home.”*

### **Police Officers’ Perspectives**

Police officers corroborated the challenges identified by male victims, noting that cultural expectations discourage men from reporting abuse. One officer observed:

*“Many men don’t report domestic violence because they are afraid of being laughed at or ridiculed by the community. Even when they come to the station, they hesitate to give details because they don’t want to appear weak in front of other men or officers. Sometimes they say, ‘I can handle it myself,’ and leave without filing a report.”*

Another officer added:

*“Even when men approach us, some are concerned that their wives or families will find out. They fear gossip and community judgment more than the physical harm itself, which makes it very challenging to provide support.”*

The officers highlighted that male victims often delay reporting until situations become severe, demonstrating the strong influence of social conditioning on their help-seeking behavior.

### **Counsellors’ Perspectives**

Counsellors emphasized the psychological and emotional barriers stemming from cultural norms. One counsellor explained:

*“Men often express guilt or embarrassment during sessions. Many say, ‘I shouldn’t feel pain’ or ‘I should be able to manage this.’ This internalized belief from cultural and family expectations keeps them from disclosing abuse until it becomes severe.”*

Another counsellor noted:

*“We notice a pattern where men wait for months or even years before seeking help. They often come with physical or psychological consequences of enduring abuse silently, showing that cultural norms are deeply ingrained and difficult to counter without community-wide awareness and support.”*

### **Local Leadership Perspectives**

Local leaders, including kraal heads and headmen, highlighted how community norms reinforce silence among male victims. One kraal head stated:

*“In our community, men are told from a young age to be strong and not to complain about family issues. When a man reports domestic violence, people say he has lost control or that he is not a real man. As leaders, we often advise reconciliation first to protect the family’s image, but this can unintentionally discourage reporting.”*

Another headman observed when he stressed that,

*“Even when men approach us for help, they hesitate because they worry about gossip and losing respect. Cultural beliefs are strong, and while we try to counsel them, the fear of humiliation still stops many from taking further action.”*

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## The perceptions of masculinity hinder male victims from seeking support

### Male Victims

One participant said, *“Masculinity is about being the provider and protector. If I admit that I am being abused at home, I feel like I am failing in my responsibilities. Even when the pain is unbearable, I convince myself to stay silent because asking for help would make me look weak in front of my children and neighbours.”*

Another participant noted when he said,

*“Whenever I think of telling someone about the abuse, I remember what my friends say—‘Real men don’t get beaten by women.’ That thought alone stops me from seeking counselling or reporting, because it feels like admitting defeat.”*

A third participant shared:

*“Sometimes I wish I could tell the truth to the police, but I imagine them laughing or saying, ‘Men don’t get abused.’ That fear of ridicule keeps me trapped, and I suffer in silence rather than risk embarrassment.”*

Participant 22 added:

*“Even at work, I avoid talking about what happens at home. I don’t want colleagues to know, because they would think I cannot control my own household. Maintaining that image of strength is exhausting, but I feel like I have no choice.”*

Participant 24 remarked:

*“When I approached a relative for advice, he said, ‘A man should never allow a woman to hit him; what’s wrong with you?’ I felt humiliated, and it reinforced my belief that reporting the abuse is not an option.”*

### Police Officers’ Perspectives:

One officer noted:

*“Many men come to the station only to leave without filing a report. They tell us, ‘I am not weak; I just want it to stop quietly.’ The fear of losing respect among peers and family outweighs their desire for legal protection.”*

Another officer explained:

*“Sometimes male victims express that even if we help them, their community will laugh at them or question their manhood. This cultural pressure is very strong and prevents them from taking action.”*

### Counsellors’ Perspectives:

One counsellor said,

*“Male clients often describe a conflict between their suffering and cultural ideals of masculinity. They say, ‘If I show that I am hurt, I am less of a man.’ This internalized belief creates a barrier that counselling alone cannot easily overcome without addressing societal norms.”* Another counsellor added *“I have had clients who endured years of abuse simply because they believed seeking help would be seen as failure. They feel shame not just from the abuse, but from violating the expected image of masculinity.”*

### Local Leadership Perspectives:

A kraal head shared that,

*“In our culture, men are expected to be strong and in control. When a man admits to being abused, even we as leaders sometimes struggle to take it seriously because it goes against traditional notions of manhood. This inadvertently discourages men from reporting.”*

Another headman noted:

*“Men fear losing respect in the community. They tell me, ‘If I report my wife, everyone will say I am not a real man.’ Even though we try to advise them on support options, the pressure to conform to masculine ideals often keeps them silent.”*

### **Institutional and community responses to men who experience domestic violence**

Most institutions and the community respond negatively to men who report that they are being beaten in the homes. Most men get ridiculed and laughed at when they report being battered in the home. One participant said: *“When I went to the police to report the abuse, they looked confused and said, ‘We handle cases like this only when women report; men don’t usually come with these problems.’ I felt invisible, unprotected, and discouraged from ever trying again.”* The other men weighed in when he said, *“I approached community leaders for advice, and they only told me to forgive my wife and avoid causing trouble. They did not offer any practical support or guidance, making me feel abandoned by the very institutions that are supposed to help.”* Another man highlighted the response he received from the health worker when he said, *“When I mentioned my situation to health workers, they seemed unsure of how to respond. One asked, ‘Are you sure this is happening? Men don’t usually get abused.’ I left the clinic feeling invalidated and unsure of where to turn for help.”*

Participant 19 also highlights the embarrassing incident he encountered when he said, *“Social services referred me to women’s programs, saying there are no resources for male victims. It made me feel excluded, like my suffering didn’t matter, and left me unsure of how to access appropriate support.”* The community itself is hostile to men who report being abused by women as evidenced by this utterance from participant number 11 who said, *“Even in my neighbourhood, people told me to stay quiet, saying that men reporting abuse is shameful and makes the community look weak. That attitude made me fear social isolation and reinforced my silence.”* Participant 17 had this to say: *“Some NGOs focus exclusively on women’s empowerment and violence prevention. While this is important, it made me feel invisible as a male victim. It’s like the system assumes men cannot be harmed in domestic spaces, which discourages me from seeking support.”*

### **Police Officers’ Perspectives**

One officer said:

*“When men come to report domestic violence, some officers still think men cannot be victims. They are sometimes laughed at or told to ‘tough it out.’ This discourages men from reporting again or seeking help from the police in the future.”*

Another officer shared:

*“We try to take all cases seriously, but there is a cultural bias. Many colleagues struggle to understand that men can experience abuse. Male victims often sense this and leave without filing official complaints because they feel unsupported.”*

A third officer remarked:

*“Even when a report is made, the community often questions the man’s credibility. Neighbors say things like, ‘How can a woman dominate him?’ This external pressure, combined with internalized shame, means men often avoid institutional support altogether.”*

### **Counsellors’ Perspectives**

One counsellor stated:

*“Many men come to counselling reluctantly and are hesitant to share details. They worry about confidentiality and fear judgment from the counsellor, thinking, ‘Even you might laugh or think less of me if I admit this.’ This perception makes it hard to provide timely support.”*

Another counsellor explained:

*“We notice that men often only come after long periods of abuse. They report that friends, family, and community members advised them to ignore the abuse or reconcile, which delays seeking professional help.”*

A third counsellor added:

*“Men frequently mention that institutional support feels indirect or unsympathetic. They say, ‘I felt like the system was designed for women, not men,’ which reinforces their reluctance to continue seeking help.”*

### **Local Leadership (Kraal Heads / Headmen) Perspectives**

A kraal head explained:

*“When men approach us, we try to counsel them, but we also consider family unity and cultural expectations. Often, we advise reconciliation rather than formal reporting, because exposing family matters can bring shame. Men leave feeling conflicted between following advice and protecting themselves.”*

Another headman said:

*“Community reactions are harsh. Men who report abuse are sometimes mocked or seen as failing in their duties. Even when we support them, societal attitudes make it difficult for them to feel safe or validated in seeking help.”*

A third local leader noted:

*“Men rarely report to leaders because they fear losing respect in the community. We encourage dialogue and guidance, but cultural norms pressure men to endure abuse quietly, leaving many feeling isolated and unsupported despite our efforts.”*

In summary, the study found that institutional and community support for male victims is limited and often inadequate. Police officers, social services, and health workers frequently lack training to recognize or respond to male victims, sometimes dismissing complaints or referring men to women-focused programs. Community leaders and neighbors often advise reconciliation or silence, perpetuating stigma. NGOs predominantly focus on women’s empowerment, leaving male victims feeling excluded and unsupported within existing service frameworks.

### **Culturally sensitive strategies that encourage male victims to report abuse**

The participants also highlighted some culturally sensitive strategies that can be used to assist men who are experiencing domestic violence. Participant 8 said:

*It would help if community leaders, elders, and influential men spoke openly about male victims, showing that seeking help is acceptable and not shameful. Hearing role models acknowledge this could encourage more men to come forward.*

Participant 16 also said,

*Counselling centres should have male counsellors who understand men’s challenges and can provide guidance without judgment. I would feel safer sharing my experiences with someone who can relate to my situation.*

Another participant had this proposal when he said:

*Awareness campaigns on radio, TV, and social media should include men’s voices and experiences. Most messages only show women as victims, which makes male victims feel invisible and unsupported.*

The other one also said:

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*Workshops with local chiefs, church leaders, and community groups could teach that reporting abuse is not shameful for men. They could help shift cultural attitudes that currently pressure men into silence.*

Another one had this suggestion:

*Support groups specifically for men experiencing domestic violence would make it easier to share experiences without fear of ridicule. Knowing that other men are going through similar struggles would reduce feelings of isolation.*

One more man puts across the following suggestion:

*Training police officers, health workers, and social services staff to respond equally to male and female victims would encourage men to report abuse. If I knew I would be taken seriously, I would feel safer seeking help.*

### **Police Officers' Perspectives**

One officer said:

*"We need to create a safe space at the station where men feel they won't be judged or ridiculed. Sometimes just being listened to respectfully makes a difference. I always tell them, 'Your situation matters, and we are here to help, not shame you.'"*

Another officer explained:

*"Community outreach programs targeting men can help break the stigma. We could hold awareness meetings in local neighborhoods, explaining that men can be victims too, and that reporting abuse is a sign of strength, not weakness."*

A third officer noted:

*"Confidential reporting options, like a hotline or private appointments, are important. Men need assurance that their cases will be handled sensitively and discreetly, without exposing them to gossip or ridicule."*

### **Counsellors' Perspectives**

One counsellor said:

*"We encourage group sessions or support networks specifically for men, where they can share experiences with others who understand them. Hearing that they are not alone can reduce shame and fear."*

Another counsellor explained:

*"Training counsellors in cultural sensitivity is key. Men often say, 'If you understand our culture and don't judge me, I can talk.' Respecting cultural values while emphasizing their right to safety helps them open up."*

A third counsellor added:

*"Educational campaigns in communities that challenge harmful stereotypes about masculinity could help. Men need to hear, 'It's okay to seek help, it doesn't make you less of a man.' This messaging can come from respected local figures or through media they trust."*

### **Local Leadership (Kraal Heads / Headmen) Perspectives**

A kraal head stated:

*"We can create community forums where men can report abuse confidentially, without losing respect. I often tell men, 'Protecting your well-being is as important as protecting your family.' This shifts the focus from shame to safety."*

Another headman said:

*“Leaders can use cultural teachings to encourage reporting. For example, emphasizing that endurance does not mean silence and that seeking help is consistent with being a responsible and respected man.”*

A third local leader noted:

*“Collaboration with churches, elders, and community groups can help. When respected figures normalize reporting and support men, the community gradually stops mocking victims and instead values courage and responsibility.”*

Culturally sensitive strategies need to be put in place to encourage male to report domestic violence. Participants suggested that culturally sensitive strategies are crucial for encouraging male victims to report abuse. Recommendations included public awareness campaigns highlighting male victimhood, male-focused support groups, and the inclusion of male counselors in social and health services. Training police and healthcare providers to respond equally to men and women, alongside community engagement with elders and religious leaders to challenge stigma, was also emphasized. Participants expressed that seeing respected community figures openly acknowledge male victimhood could significantly reduce fear and shame, fostering a safer environment for reporting.

In summary, the findings of this study align closely with global literature on male victimization in domestic violence contexts. Connell’s (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity helps explain why men in Hwange, like elsewhere, avoid reporting abuse. Findings confirm patriarchal norms as barriers, consistent with Connell (2005). Unlike Western contexts (Douglas & Hines, 2011), Zimbabwean men face compounded ridicule tied to African masculinity, requiring localized interventions. In essence, the findings show that cultural norms, gendered expectations of masculinity, inadequate institutional support, and societal stigma collectively suppress male reporting of domestic violence. Addressing these barriers requires community-informed, culturally sensitive interventions and systemic changes in institutional responses.

## **Discussion of Findings in Relation to Literature**

The findings of this study align closely with global, regional, and Zimbabwean literature on men’s reluctance to report domestic violence, highlighting the interplay of cultural norms, perceptions of masculinity, and institutional barriers.

### **Cultural norms and beliefs**

The study revealed that deeply entrenched cultural norms in Hwange Urban—such as “indoda ayikhali” (“a man does not cry”)—compel men to endure abuse silently, consistent with the work of Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) on hegemonic masculinity. Participants’ accounts of fearing ridicule, gossip, and social humiliation mirror findings from South Africa and other LMICs, where disclosure is often equated with weakness (Abrahams et al., 2014; WHO, 2009). This confirms that in patriarchal societies, cultural imperatives for family privacy and male stoicism serve as powerful deterrents to reporting, reproducing patterns observed globally (Taylor et al., 2021). The study thus situates male silence within both local idioms and broader masculine norms, reinforcing the importance of understanding socio-cultural context when addressing underreporting.

### **Perceptions of masculinity**

Participants consistently highlighted that societal expectations of masculinity—emphasizing strength, authority, and emotional control—discourage men from seeking help. These findings resonate with Reidy et al. (2014) and Tsui et al. (2010), who observed that men internalize abuse as personal failure, leading to shame and psychological distress. In the African context, similar patterns were documented by Jewkes et al. (2015) and Oluremi (2019), where male victims feared ostracization and ridicule. The study extends this literature by showing how these perceptions are reinforced at multiple levels in Hwange Urban, including peers, relatives, and community leaders, highlighting a compounded effect of cultural and gendered expectations.

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## **Institutional and community responses**

The findings indicated that male victims in Hwange Urban often face disbelief, dismissal, or redirection from formal institutions and community structures. This is consistent with Scott-Storey et al. (2022) and Huntley et al. (2019), who note that institutional frameworks are predominantly designed for women, marginalizing male victims. Locally, the study confirms that despite the gender-neutral Domestic Violence Act (2007), practical application favours women, with police and traditional courts prioritizing reconciliation over protection for men. These findings align with Abrahams et al. (2014), who observed similar institutional biases in South Africa, reinforcing that underreporting is not only a function of personal or cultural factors but also structural inadequacies in support systems.

## **Culturally sensitive strategies**

Participants emphasized the need for interventions that validate male victimhood, involve community gatekeepers, and provide safe spaces for reporting. These findings echo recommendations from Douglas and Hines (2011) and Huntley et al. (2019), who advocate for male-inclusive services, confidential reporting mechanisms, and online counselling to reduce stigma. Moreover, the study reinforces WHO's (2009) suggestion that engaging traditional and religious leaders is critical for reshaping harmful gender norms. Successful African interventions, such as South Africa's Men as Partners program, underscore that involving men in dialogue about gender and violence can improve reporting rates. This study contributes locally grounded evidence that culturally sensitive approaches are essential in the Zimbabwean context, where stigma and masculine ideals are deeply embedded.

## **Overall**

The findings substantiate and extend existing literature by demonstrating that male reluctance to report domestic violence in Hwange Urban is shaped by the intersection of cultural norms, masculinity perceptions, and institutional inadequacies. While the global and regional literature highlights similar patterns, this study provides specific insights into the Zimbabwean context, illustrating how local idioms, community attitudes, and traditional authority structures compound male silence. It also emphasizes actionable strategies for intervention, highlighting the potential for culturally tailored programs to challenge stigma and improve reporting among male victims.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the above findings the study drew up the following recommendations.

Firstly, the establishment of safe and confidential reporting channels is crucial as male victims often fear ridicule and loss of respect, which prevents them from reporting abuse. Police departments and community support services should implement confidential reporting mechanisms, such as private appointments, dedicated hotlines, or online reporting platforms. These channels should guarantee privacy, ensure respect for victims, and minimize exposure to gossip, thereby reducing barriers created by social stigma.

Secondly there is the need to develop community-based awareness campaigns that are designed to challenge harmful stereotypes of masculinity and normalize men seeking help. Messages can highlight that seeking support demonstrates strength and responsibility rather than weakness. Collaboration with respected local figures such as kraal heads, headmen, and religious leaders can lend authority to these campaigns and foster community acceptance of male victims' rights to protection.

Thirdly, the provision of support groups and peer networks for men is crucial. Male victims benefit from spaces where they can share experiences with peers facing similar challenges. Counsellors and community leaders can facilitate support groups or peer networks that reinforce the message that men are not alone and that seeking help is socially acceptable. Such networks can also reduce feelings of isolation and shame, encouraging men to report abuse and access assistance.

Fourthly, the training of institutional actors in cultural sensitivity plays a critical role. Police officers, counsellors, and other professionals who engage with male victims should receive training to understand the cultural and social pressures men face. Training should emphasize respectful communication, non-judgmental listening, and awareness of biases that may unintentionally discourage disclosure. Institutions that reflect cultural sensitivity foster trust and make male victims more likely to seek help.

Fifthly, leveraging cultural and religious norms to support reporting is very necessary. Cultural teachings and religious guidance can be reframed to support male victims without violating traditional norms. For example, local leaders can emphasize that enduring abuse does not equal honor and that protecting one's well-being is a responsible and courageous action. Integrating culturally resonant messages into education and counselling can help reduce shame and community stigma.

Sixthly, the encouragement of a multi-stakeholder collaboration to men's issues is very important. Effective support requires coordination between police, counsellors, healthcare providers, and community leadership. Joint initiatives such as workshops, outreach programs, and mediation services can provide holistic support, ensuring that male victims receive practical assistance while cultural norms are respected.

Lastly, the creation of monitoring and evaluating strategy effectiveness plays a central role in assisting males who are in abusive relationships. Programs aimed at encouraging male victims to report abuse should include monitoring and evaluation components. Feedback from participants, including male victims and stakeholders, can inform continuous improvement, ensuring strategies remain culturally sensitive and practically effective.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights that culture is a central factor in silencing men who experience domestic violence in Hwange Urban Area. Patriarchal norms, rigid perceptions of masculinity, and community expectations collectively pressure men to endure abuse silently, discouraging help-seeking and perpetuating psychological and emotional harm. Institutional gaps including law enforcement, social services, and traditional justice mechanisms further exacerbate male underreporting by failing to provide adequate support or recognition.

To effectively address male victimization, interventions must go beyond policy rhetoric and actively challenge harmful gender stereotypes while promoting inclusive domestic violence responses. This includes culturally sensitive education, gender-neutral service provision, and accessible support systems that validate men's experiences. Recognizing male victimization as a legitimate social concern is essential not only for protecting individual men but also for fostering broader community awareness, gender equity, and healthier family dynamics.

Ultimately, addressing male domestic violence requires a coordinated approach that combines societal sensitization, institutional reform, policy enhancement, and community-based support. Only then can the pervasive silence surrounding male victimhood be broken, enabling men to report abuse safely and access the care they need.

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