

Single mothers and gender-based violence: A Cultural perceptive in Tofarasei village, Bikita District, Zimbabwe.

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ABSTRACT

Single mothers in rural Zimbabwe face persistent social discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV), yet their experiences remain largely understudied. This paper explored the lived experiences of single mothers in Tofarasei village, Bikita District. The paper examined how cultural norms, patriarchal practices, social stigma, religious beliefs and intergenerational gender expectations exacerbate affect single mothers. A qualitative case study design was employed to conduct in-depth interviews with seven single mothers, aimed at exploring their experiences of social discrimination and gender-based violence, using purposive sampling techniques. The findings revealed that rooted cultural practices and patriarchal structures normalise violence, marginalise women and limit their decision-making power. To some extent, religious teachings and social learning were found reinforcing discriminatory attitudes across generations. The study underscored the intersection of culture, social norms and structural inequality in shaping single mothers' experiences, highlighting the urgent need for culturally sensitive interventions, legal reforms and community-based support to empower and protect women in marginalised rural communities. These insights contribute to understanding the complex cultural drivers of social discrimination and offer guidance for targeted policies and programs aimed at promoting gender equality and social inclusion.

KEYWORDS: Cultural norms, Gender-based violence, Patriarchy, Social discrimination.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Bikita District, like many rural districts in Zimbabwe, faces significant economic challenges that give a rise to social problems. These conditions increase the vulnerability of women, exposing them to various forms of abuse, violence and sexual exploitation (Muto, 2020). Although numerous interventions have been advocated for by the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other stakeholders, many of these initiatives have largely failed. Consequently, the livelihoods of many single mothers in rural areas remain severely distressed (Saidi, 2020). Cases of social discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV) are prevalent in Zimbabwe. Saidi (2020) reports that single women often face social discrimination rooted in patriarchal norms, where marriage is highly valued and womanhood is socially validated through male partnership. As a result, women who parent outside marriage are frequently labelled as morally deviant, irresponsible, or culturally inappropriate (Barnett et al., 2016), exposing them to social exclusion and reduced access to economic and social support systems (Kidd, 2017).

This situation is further aggravated by the persistent of GBV, particularly in rural communities where cultural norms and traditional practices remain influential (Mutombo, 2023). Many studies highlight that Zimbabwean single women are disproportionately affected by various forms of abuse, namely, emotional, psychological, social, physical and economic violence, which are often normalised within cultural frameworks (Saidi, 2020; Walter et al., 2020; Chadambuka, 2022). According to Mutombo (2023), single mothers in rural districts experience intersecting challenges of economic hardship, social discrimination and violence. The author further advocates that there is urgent need for a research that examines the cultural dimensions of single women social discrimination and GBV. In response, education and GBV awareness programs have been implemented to address these challenges. For example, the prominent comedian Sabhuku Vharazipi (VZ) has played a role in raising awareness within Zimbabwean communities through educative comedy, illustrating the causes, effects and consequences of single mothers social discrimination and GBV. Despite such efforts, single women social

discrimination and GBV remains a worrying phenomenon in rural areas. This paper therefore sought to examine the role of cultural practices that fuels single women social discrimination and GBV, with particular attention to show how culture shapes attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate violence against single women.

Problem Statement

Despite increased government and non-governmental interventions aimed at addressing GBV in Zimbabwe, single mothers living in remote communities continue to experience persistent stigma, social marginalisation and abuse (Muto, 2020). The deepening economic hardships intersect with cultural norms to heighten the vulnerability of women heading households and this exposes them to various forms of violence and exploitation. While awareness campaigns and advocacy initiatives have sought to challenge GBV (Saidi, 2020), these efforts have largely failed to address the cultural practices and beliefs that may sustain discriminatory attitudes toward single women. The pertinent question addressed by this study was to examine whether social discrimination and GBV of single women in rural areas, in particular Tofarasei village in Bikita district, is embedded within the shona cultural norms. The study also aimed to explore the cultural dynamics that shape the lived experiences of single mothers in rural settings. Therefore, this knowledge gap undermines the effectiveness of the existing interventions and calls for context-specific and in particular culturally informed approaches to protecting and empowering single women in marginalised communities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study borrowed the patriarchal and social learning theories to explore how culture perpetuates social discrimination and gender-based violence against single women.

Patriarchal Theory

The patriarchal theory maintains that societies are structured in ways that privilege men and subordinate women through cultural norms, values and institutions (Simon & Hasan, 2025). Sikweyiya et al. (2020) observe that in many African societies, cultural practices assign authority, decision-making power and control of resources to men, while women are expected to be submissive and dependent. Even religions that preach love, equality and justice have historically positioned women in subordinate roles (Barr, 2021). Aziz et al. (2020) confirm that many religions often reinforce male authority and female submission, restricting women's participation in leadership and decision-making processes. Furthermore, the authors concede that some religions emphasize women's silence and obedience and as a result, such teachings indirectly legitimise social discrimination and create conditions in which GBV is tolerated or overlooked (1 Corinthians 14:34–35; Ephesians 5:22–24; 1 Timothy 2:11–12; Genesis 3:16; Qur'anic verses Surah An-Nisa 4:11, 4:34, and 4:3, Surah Al-Baqarah 2:282, and Surah Al-Ahzab 33:33). This unequal power relationship normalises discrimination against women and creates an environment where GBV is tolerated or justified as a form of discipline or control. Single women, in particular, are viewed as deviating from cultural expectations of marriage and male authority, making them more vulnerable to stigma, abuse and social exclusion.

Saidi (2020) observes that women in Zimbabwe are often constrained by cultural frameworks, including the oppressive patriarchal system. Similarly, Chadambuka and Warria (2020) argue that high rates of GBV in Zimbabwe and Africa are largely influenced by patriarchal norms that condone the subordination of women. Consequently, single women in rural areas face significant challenges in accessing support and those who do seek assistance often report being ignored or dismissed.

The patriarchal theory seems to support the notion that culture perpetuates the social discrimination of single mothers and GBV. It also highlights how societal norms and traditions systematically privilege men while marginalising women. In Zimbabwe, these cultural expectations worsen the vulnerability of single women, limiting their access to support and resources. Thus this theory provided useful lens for understanding the experiences of single mothers in Tofarasei Village, Bikita District.

Social learning Theory

The social learning theory argues that behavior is learned through observation, imitation and socialisation (Firmansyah & Saepuloh, 2022). The theory also postulates that individuals acquire norms and practices from their surrounding environment. In the context of gender-based violence, cultural beliefs and practices that condone the subordination of women are transmitted across generations through family structures, community norms and traditional teachings (Muto, 2020). Childress et al. (2024) advocate that children who grew up witnessing violence against women being tolerated, justified, or ignored are likely to internalise these behaviors as normal, thereby perpetuating in the cycles of abuse. On the same hand, Widom and Osborn (2021) argue that experiences of abuse and neglect in childhood can have long-term effects, contributing to cycles of violence

where victimised girls may be at higher risk of involvement in criminal or aggressive behavior as adults. This culture normalises GBV within society and reinforces discriminatory attitudes towards women, making such violence culturally acceptable (Mutambo, 2023). Single women are disproportionately affected because prevailing cultural narratives often label them as morally weak, socially inferior, or deviant, further legitimising their marginalisation. The social learning theory exposes how cultural norms systematically reproduce GBV and social discrimination against single mothers in Zimbabwe.

Cultural norms and patriarchal practices

Cultural norms and patriarchal practices play a significant role in shaping the social realities of single women in rural Zimbabwe (Mkude & Shimba, 2025). Moyo (2025) mentions that many Zimbabwean rural communities' cultural expectations privilege male authority and define women's roles primarily in relation to men, such as daughters, wives, or mothers are put under male supervision. According to Mkude and Shimba (2025), single women who do not fit these prescribed roles, are often viewed as deviating from societal norms, which exposes them to social marginalisation, discrimination and increased vulnerability to societal discrimination and GBV. Patriarchal structures embedded in local traditions reinforce these inequalities by limiting women's decision-making power, access to resources and participation in community affairs (Simon & Hasan, 2025). This study analysed the experiences of single mothers in Tofarasei Village using cultural norms and patriarchy as a framework to show how deeply rooted practices perpetuate social discrimination and GBV, shaping women's daily lives and coping strategies in rural settings.

Experiences of gender-based violence (GBV)

Experiences of GBV are a central concern for single women in rural areas. Single women face multiple forms of abuse, including physical, emotional, sexual and economic violence (Sinacore et al., 2021). The authors also affirm that GBV is often normalised or tolerated due to cultural and patriarchal norms that reinforce male dominance and the subordination of women. Single women are particularly vulnerable because their social status is often stigmatised, making it harder for them to seek help or report incidents of violence (Mkude & Shimba, 2025). The absence of accessible and responsive protective systems, including legal and social services, deepens women's marginalisation and compels them to rely on isolated coping strategies (Stulz et al., 2024). In this study, probing the lived experiences of GBV among single mothers provided insights into how cultural practices and structural inequalities intersect to perpetuate violence and undermine women's safety, well-being, and social inclusion.

Social stigma and discrimination

According to Malatzky (2023), social stigma and discrimination significantly shape the lives of single women in rural communities. Bhandari (2023) explains that cultural and societal norms often portray single women as morally weak, socially deviant, or incapable of fulfilling traditional female roles, which leads to marginalisation within families, neighbourhoods and community institutions. Khan et al. (2022) contend that stigma functions as a structural barrier that marginalises women socially while constraining their access to education, economic opportunities and supportive networks; such conditions contributing to many single women being reluctant to report abuse or seek assistance due to fear of judgment (Schroeder et al., 2021). This study sought to document the social stigma faced by single mothers highlighting how the negative cultural perceptions intersect with GBV, shaping their lived experiences and survival strategies in rural Zimbabwe.

Influence of religion and spiritual beliefs

Religion was viewed as a double edged sword in this study. On one hand, religion preaches love, forgiveness, justice and equality; on the other hand, it can reinforce patriarchal norms, justify gender-based discrimination and limit women's autonomy. Khan (2022) announces that in some contexts, religious teachings are interpreted in ways that reinforce male authority, female submission and traditional gender roles, which can justify or normalise the subordination of single women. Similarly, Schroeder et al. (2021) express that certain cultural and religious beliefs may also discourage women from speaking out against abuse or seeking external support, framing their suffering as a test of faith or a moral obligation to endure hardship. Additionally, religious institutions may prioritise preserving family and community reputation over addressing the needs of women who experience violence, further marginalising them (Khan, 2022). In this study, examining the influence of religion and spiritual beliefs helps to understand how these factors interact with cultural norms to perpetuate social discrimination and gender-based violence against single mothers in rural Zimbabwe.

Intergenerational transmission of gender norms

Intergenerational transmission of gender norms refers to the process through which cultural beliefs, values and behaviors regarding gender roles are passed down from one generation to the next (Mutambo, 2023). In rural

communities, boys and girls learn expectations about male authority and female subordination through family practices, community interactions and traditional teachings (Wiesner-Hanks, 2021). Childress et al. (2024) believe that when children observe the normalisation of gender-based violence, discrimination and restrictive gender roles, they internalise these behaviors and perpetuate them in their own lives, reinforcing cycles of inequality. Single women, in particular, are affected because these entrenched norms often portray them as socially inferior or deviant, further legitimising discrimination and violence against them (Belknap, 2020; Andersen, 2024). Examining this intergenerational process, the study highlights how deeply rooted cultural patterns continue to shape the experiences of single mothers, sustaining social marginalization and vulnerability to gender-based violence in rural Zimbabwe.

Coping strategies and access to support

According to Mphatheni (2024), coping strategies and access to support are critical in understanding how single women navigate social discrimination and GBV. Single mothers often develop both formal and informal coping mechanisms, including seeking assistance from family members, neighbours, religious institutions, or community leaders, as well as relying on personal resilience and social networks (Schroeder et al., 2021). However, access to support is frequently limited by cultural norms, stigma and structural barriers, such as inadequate government services, lack of awareness about available programs, or economic constraints (Mphatheni, 2024). For example, some women may avoid reporting abuse or seeking help due to fear of social judgment, further entrenching their vulnerability. Exploring these coping strategies in this study provided insights into the resilience of single women and the effectiveness of existing support mechanisms, highlighting areas where culturally sensitive interventions are needed to reduce vulnerability and enhance protection against gender-based violence in rural Zimbabwe.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research approach to explore the lived experiences of single women in Tofarasei Village, Bikita District. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of social discrimination, cultural norms, and gender-based violence (GBV) from participants' perspectives (Dahal, 2022). Purposive sampling was employed and seven women were interviewed. According to Tisdell and Merriam (2025), qualitative studies are important for understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds and the meanings they attribute to their experiences. A case study design was employed to explore these phenomena within their real-life context, focusing on the experiences of single mothers. This approach enabled the collection of rich, narrative data on sensitive issues, allowing participants to share their perceptions, emotions and coping strategies (Muatambo, 2023). It also helped to uncover how cultural and structural factors perpetuate discrimination and GBV.

Findings

Cultural norms and patriarchal practices

The item being addressed was, "Kindly explain how cultural norms and patriarchal practices on the social experiences, decision-making power, and vulnerability of single mothers in rural communities."

Interview 1

"People in the village constantly talk about me behind my back because I am not married. Even when I try to participate in community decisions, my opinions are ignored, and I feel powerless."

Interview 2

"Whenever there is distribution of aid or resources, I am overlooked. Sometimes I am told to wait until a man approves and on some occasions, those in charge try to take advantage of me when I insist on my rights."

Interview 3

"Being a single mother here is very hard. I am judged for not having a husband and at times I am threatened or harassed by those who control access to food and support, making life even more difficult."

Interview 4

Interview

"As a single mother, I was taught from a young age that a woman's role is to be married, look after children, and cook for her husband. These cultural norms make women vulnerable, and without men we are made to feel like we cannot do anything."

Interview 5

"As a single mother, I belittle myself and feel shy to express my views, especially at family gatherings. Most of the time I remain quiet because our culture teaches that women, especially single women, are cursed. When my marriage broke down and I returned to live with my mother, I was considered nothing within the family."

Interview 6

"I am a widow and a single mother, and I am accused of having killed my husband. This has affected me psychologically and emotionally. Our society looks down upon single women, and any success a single woman achieves is often attributed to a man who is believed to be behind the scenes."

Interview 7

"As a single mother, I am constantly judged by the community. People assume that I am irresponsible or morally weak, and this makes it difficult for me to be respected or included in community matters. Even when I work hard to provide for my children, my efforts are overlooked because I do not have a husband."

Based on the thematic analysis of the interview excerpts, the key themes that emerged regarding the influence of cultural norms and patriarchal practices on the social experiences, decision-making power, and vulnerability of single mothers in rural communities were as follows:

Social Stigma and Marginalisation of Single Mothers

- Widespread gossip and judgment from community members.
- Negative labelling of single mothers as morally weak, cursed, irresponsible, or socially inferior.
- Exclusion from family gatherings and community spaces.
- Blame for marital breakdowns or widowhood.
- Denial of respect, undermining social identity and sense of belonging.

Patriarchal Control and Exclusion from Decision-Making and Resources

- Male authority dominates community decision-making processes.
- Single mothers are often ignored or sidelined in community discussions.
- Requirement to seek male approval to access aid or resources.
- Vulnerability to exploitation or harassment by those controlling resources.
- Reinforcement of dependence on men and denial of women's autonomy.

Internalised Oppression and Psychological Vulnerability

- Feelings of powerlessness, self-blame, and shame among single mothers.
- Cultural teachings link a woman's worth to marriage, causing silence and self-belittlement.
- Acceptance of marginal treatment as a norm.
- Accusations, exclusion, and persistent judgment exacerbate emotional and psychological harm.
- Deepened vulnerability due to social and cultural pressures.

In summary, the thematic analysis revealed that single mothers face stigma, patriarchal control and psychological vulnerability, limiting their autonomy and access to resources.

The above experiences align with patriarchal theory, which posits that societal structures privilege men and subordinate women through cultural norms and traditions. The women's narratives also reflect social learning theory, as they described how attitudes toward single women and gender roles were modelled and reinforced across generations within families and the community. Similar findings have been reported by Saidi (2020) and Chadambuka and Warria (2020), who note that patriarchal systems in Zimbabwe and broader African contexts normalise the subordination of women, contributing to social discrimination and vulnerability to gender-based violence. These results indicate that deeply embedded cultural expectations continue to shape both the status and experiences of single mothers in rural communities, reinforcing cycles of marginalisation and limiting opportunities for empowerment.

Experiences of gender-based violence (GBV)

The item being addressed was: "May you please share your experiences of gender-based violence (GBV)?"

Interview responses:

Interview 1

"When I went to claim my name on the list for government aid, some men in charge tried to touch me inappropriately. I felt scared and helpless."

Interview 2

"I have been verbally abused by neighbors and family members because I am a single mother. Sometimes they threaten me when I try to stand up for myself. Even some married women and girls do not respect me, taking my situation as a misfortune."

Interview 3

"It is common here; women like me are beaten or harassed when we insist on participating in decisions or accessing resources that we are entitled to."

Interview 4

"As a single mother, I cannot report abuse to the authorities because it is time-consuming, expensive, and officials often favour men over women."

Interview 5

"Some cases of harassment are taken to local courts, but they are biased towards men, and even if I present evidence, I am often dismissed or told I won't win."

Interview 6

"I have experienced emotional abuse from my own family, who constantly remind me that being single makes me inferior and unable to protect my children."

Interview 7

"Sometimes I am physically threatened by men in the community when I try to claim my rights or access resources, and there is no one to protect me."

Based on the thematic analysis of the interview excerpts, the key themes that emerged regarding experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) among single mothers were:

Physical and Sexual Harassment:

- Participants reported being threatened or harassed by men in positions of power, leaving them feeling scared, helpless, and vulnerable.

Verbal and Emotional Abuse:

- Single mothers experienced insults, threats, and emotional mistreatment from neighbors, family members, and community members, reinforcing social marginalization.

Barriers to Reporting and Accessing Justice:

- Participants highlighted difficulties in reporting abuse due to time, cost, and bias within legal and local systems, which often favor men over women.

Family and Social Pressure:

- Cultural expectations and negative judgment from families and communities increased the emotional and social burden on single mothers.

In brief, the thematic analysis highlights that single mothers experience physical and sexual harassment, verbal and emotional abuse, barriers to reporting and accessing justice and intense family and social pressure that together perpetuate their vulnerability to gender-based violence.

The study revealed that single women in Tofarasei Village experience multiple forms of gender-based violence, including physical abuse, sexual harassment, emotional abuse, and economic exploitation. Participants reported that GBV often occurs in contexts where they are dependent on male authorities or community leaders for access to resources and social support. These findings align with Patriarchal Theory, which posits that unequal power relations between men and women create conditions where violence against women is normalized and tolerated. Social Learning Theory also helps explain how these behaviours are perpetuated, as participants described witnessing or hearing about GBV being accepted or ignored across generations. These experiences demonstrate how GBV is not only a product of individual behaviour but is embedded in the cultural and structural systems of the community, reinforcing the vulnerability and marginalization of single mothers in rural Zimbabwe. Similar patterns have been observed in other studies, where patriarchal norms and socialized gender expectations contribute to widespread GBV (Chadambuka & Warria, 2020; Saidi, 2020).

Social stigma and discrimination

The item being addressed was, "Could you please describe the social stigma and discrimination you have experienced as a single mother?"

Interview 1

"As a single mother, people in the village treat me like I am a problem. My voice is never taken seriously in community meetings."

Interview 2

"I am often left out of family gatherings because they say a woman without a husband brings shame."

Interview 3

"Neighbors whisper about me and my children. Sometimes I feel invisible, like I don't belong here."

Interview 4

"Even when I try to participate in church or community events, I am reminded that single women should know their place."

Interview 5

"When there is food or aid distribution, I am usually ignored or told to wait until a man approves. It feels like I have no rights."

Interview 6

"People assume I am morally weak because I am not married. Their judgment follows me everywhere I go."

Interview 7

"I try to make decisions for my family, but relatives and leaders often override me, saying I am too young or inexperienced to know better."

Based on the thematic analysis of the interview excerpts, the key themes that emerged regarding social stigma and discrimination were:

Negative community judgment and labeling:

- Participants reported being talked about negatively, treated as problems, or assumed to be morally weak because of their status as single mothers, reflecting pervasive community judgment and stigma.

Social and Family Exclusion:

- Single mothers described being left out of family gatherings and community events, leading to feelings of invisibility, rejection, and loss of belonging.

Restrictions on Participation and Voice:

- Women noted that their opinions are ignored in community discussions and that cultural expectations limit their participation, reinforcing marginalization.

Gendered Access to Resources:

- Stigma was linked to discrimination in accessing aid and community support, often requiring male approval or resulting in denial of rights, reinforcing structural inequalities

This analysis reveals a concerning pattern of social exclusion, judgement, and institutional barriers that single mothers face, showing how stigma and discrimination in rural communities restrict women's social participation, access to support and overall well-being

The study revealed that single women in Tofarasei Village experience pervasive social stigma and discrimination, which affects their social inclusion, decision-making, and access to resources. Participants shared varied experiences of marginalisation. For example:

These experiences align with patriarchal theory, which explains how societal structures favor men and subjugate women, embedding discrimination into cultural norms. They also reflect social learning theory, as stigma is transmitted across generations through observation and reinforcement of negative attitudes toward single women. Saidi (2020) and Chadambuka & Warria (2020) support the view that patriarchal norms in Zimbabwe normalize the marginalization of single women. However, some scholars, such as Dube (2018), argue that stigma is context-dependent, noting that in certain communities, single women receive respect and support, suggesting that discrimination is influenced not only by culture but also by social, economic, and individual factors.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that social stigma and discrimination remain significant barriers to the empowerment and well-being of single women in rural Zimbabwe, reinforcing their vulnerability to gender-based violence and limiting opportunities for social and economic participation.

Influence of religion and spiritual beliefs

The item being addressed was, "Kindly explain how religion and spiritual beliefs influence your experience and perceptions regarding roles, social description, social description and gender-based violence."

Interview 1

"In church, I am always told that as a single woman, I must obey men and not question their decisions."

Interview 2

"Some pastors say that my suffering is a test of faith because I am single, and I should accept it quietly."

Interview 3

"I have been advised by church elders not to speak out against harassment, otherwise I will be seen as disrespectful."

Interview 4

"During religious meetings, men are given priority to speak and make decisions, while women like me are ignored."

Interview 5

"Some community members say that being unmarried is a punishment from God, and this makes people treat me poorly."

Interview 6

"I avoid asking for help from religious institutions because I fear being judged for my status."

Interview 7

"Even women in the church sometimes reinforce these teachings, telling me to endure mistreatment because that is God's will."

Based on the thematic analysis of the interview excerpts, the key themes that emerged regarding influence of religion and spiritual beliefs were:

Religious justification of gender inequality

- Church teachings emphasise male authority and female obedience, particularly for single women.
- Men are prioritised in leadership, decision-making and speaking roles, while women are marginalised.
- Religious spaces reinforce patriarchal norms that silence women's voices.

Spiritualisation and normalisation of suffering

- Suffering is framed as a "test of faith" or God's will that women must endure quietly
- Singlehood is portrayed as something to be tolerated rather than addressed or supported.
- Religious narratives discourage resistance by presenting hardship as spiritually meaningful.
- This framing invalidates women's emotional pain and lived experiences.

Silencing and discouragement from speaking out

- Women are explicitly advised not to speak out against harassment or mistreatment
- Fear of being labelled disrespectful or disobedient reinforces silence.
- Religious authority figures play a role in discouraging reporting or resistance.
- Silence is upheld as a moral or religious obligation.

Stigma, Judgment, and Social Exclusion of Single Women

- Singlehood is interpreted as punishment from God, leading to poor treatment by the community.
- Fear of judgment causes women to withdraw from religious institutions.
- Negative attitudes toward unmarried women are reinforced by both men and women within the church.
- This stigma contributes to isolation, shame, and reduced access to support systems.

The study revealed that religious and spiritual beliefs play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward single women in Tofarasei Village, sometimes reinforcing social discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV). Participants reported that certain interpretations of religious teachings emphasized female submission, justified male authority, and discouraged women from challenging abusive or unfair treatment.

These findings align with patriarchal theory, demonstrating how religious institutions can reinforce male dominance and female subordination. They also reflect social learning theory, as participants described observing and internalizing religious practices and teachings that perpetuate unequal gender roles. Scholars such as Saidi (2020) note that religion in rural Zimbabwe can both empower and marginalize women, while Dube

(2018) argues that alternative interpretations of scripture and more progressive religious leaders can mitigate these discriminatory practices.

Largely, the study showed that religious and spiritual beliefs in Tofarasei Village significantly influence social attitudes, contributing to the marginalization, stigma, and vulnerability of single women, and intersect with cultural norms to reinforce gender-based violence.

Intergenerational transmission of gender norms

The item being addressed was, "May you please explain your understanding of the intergenerational transmission of gender norms?"

Interview 1

"I grew up seeing my mother being told what to do by my father, and now I face the same kind of control from male relatives."

Interview 2

"As a girl, I was taught that women must always obey men, and that lesson never really left the village community."

Interview 3

"Even now, elders tell me that as a single woman I cannot make important decisions; it's what I saw happening to other women in my family."

Interview 4

"Children in the community see how women are treated, and they copy it. Boys grow up thinking women must always follow men."

Interview 5

"I often hear older women advising younger girls to accept abuse quietly because that is how life is for women."

Interview 6

"In our culture, what my grandmother taught my mother continues to influence how men and women behave today."

Interview 7

"Even the young men in the village laugh at women who try to speak up, just like they saw their fathers do."

Below is a concise response based on the thematic analysis of the interview excerpts revealing several key insights about the intergenerational transmission of gender norms were:

Reinforcement of Traditional Gender Roles:

- Religious teachings and interpretations often emphasise male authority and female submission, which can justify unequal roles and perpetuate discrimination against women.

Legitimation of Gender Inequality:

- Some participants' experiences reflect how spiritual beliefs are invoked to validate women's subordination, aligning with research showing that certain religious frameworks can normalise hierarchical gender relations that disadvantage women.

Discouragement from Seeking Support:

- Religious pressures sometimes lead women to endure suffering quietly, with faith being interpreted as encouraging patience and endurance rather than assertiveness, a pattern noted in studies on faith and coping with GBV.

Potential for Positive Support:

- Although religion can reinforce inequality, it also holds potential for empowering and supportive interpretations for example, by promoting compassion, dignity, and support for survivors when religious teachings are oriented toward equality and care

Socialisation of Gendered Expectations:

- Children learn expectations about male and female roles from family members and community interactions through everyday socialisation.
- These learned behaviours and attitudes reflect broader cultural gender norms that are reinforced over time.
- Parents' gender-role attitudes and behaviours significantly influence how children understand and adopt gender roles.

Reproduction of Traditional Gender Roles:

- Longstanding beliefs about women's roles—such as obedience, household duties, and dependence on men—are learned early in life and carried into adulthood, reinforcing cycles of gender inequality.
- Such patterns of intergenerational transmission of gender ideology are documented in research showing that parents' and families' gender-role attitudes shape children's gender expectations and behaviours, contributing to persistent traditional beliefs across generations.

Cultural Norms as Structural Reinforcement:

- Cultural norms that privilege male dominance and define women's roles as subordinate are deeply embedded in social systems and continue to perpetuate inequality across generations by shaping expectations in the home and community.
- These gendered cultural norms hinder women's development and widen inequality because they consistently place men in superior roles and women in subordinate positions across social, economic, and institutional contexts.
- Cultural transmission models show that parents and societal structures often socialise sons and daughters differently, reinforcing traditional gender roles over time and making inequalities persistent.

Learned Gender Roles:

- Cultural expectations that women should be obedient and subordinate are passed from parents and community members to children.

Reinforcement of Patriarchy:

- Traditional norms that privilege male dominance shape behaviours and attitudes that disadvantage women.

Embedded Discrimination:

- Internalised beliefs about gender roles contribute to ongoing unequal power dynamics and limit women's autonomy.

Socialisation across generations:

- Family and community practices consistently transmit gender norms that sustain cycles of inequality over time.

In brief this analysis reveals a concerning pattern of entrenched gender norms and cultural transmission that systematically disadvantage women, where traditional expectations about male authority and female subordination are embedded in community socialisation and reinforce unequal power relations over time.

These findings support social learning theory, which argues that behaviors, attitudes, and social norms are learned through observation and imitation within families and communities. They also connect with patriarchal theory, showing how structural male dominance is maintained across generations. Scholars such as Saidi (2020) and Chadambuka & Warria (2020) note that intergenerational transmission of gender norms reinforces the marginalisation of women in Zimbabwe, while Dube (2018) suggests that exposure to alternative role models can sometimes mitigate these effects, indicating that such norms are not entirely fixed.

Generally, the findings demonstrated that deeply embedded intergenerational norms contribute to the continued social discrimination and vulnerability of single women in rural Zimbabwe, perpetuating cycles of GBV and limiting their autonomy.

Coping strategies and access to support

The item being addressed was, 'Kindly describe the coping strategies you use and the sources of support you rely on when facing stigma, discrimination, or violence.'

Interview 1

"I mostly rely on my sister and a few trusted neighbors when I face challenges, because the community often judges me."

Interview 2

"When I experience harassment while trying to access government aid, I just keep quiet to avoid conflict."

Interview 3

"I pray and seek guidance from my church, but I am careful not to reveal too much because some leaders do not take single women seriously."

Interview 4

"Sometimes I join informal women's groups to share experiences and learn how to cope with discrimination and abuse."

Interview 5

"I try to hide my struggles to protect my children from embarrassment and judgment by others."

Interview 6

"I have learned to negotiate quietly with local leaders to get my name on aid lists, even if it means enduring insults."

Interview 7

"I use my own savings whenever possible, because relying on community or government support is too risky and humiliating."

The thematic content analysis of the provided interview excerpts reveals the following key themes regarding coping strategies and access to support:

Informal Social Support Networks

- Many women rely on close family members and trusted neighbours for emotional and practical support when facing discrimination or violence, reflecting how informal social connections help them endure challenging circumstances.

Avoidance and Silence as Coping

- Participants often choose to remain quiet or avoid conflict when faced with harassment or discrimination, a common coping response when formal support is inaccessible or biased, and one that mirrors patterns identified in studies of rural women's responses to GBV.

Spiritual and Community-Based Coping

- Some women draw strength from religious faith and selective participation in community or women's groups, aligning with broader research showing that faith and peer support can offer solace and resilience in the face of adversity.

Self-Reliance and Personal Strategies

- Participants described individual coping mechanisms such as protecting their children's dignity, negotiating quietly with leaders, and using personal savings to avoid reliance on potentially humiliating or unsafe support systems, consistent with findings that adaptive coping can include problem-focused and resource-based strategies.

In summary, the key themes highlight how single mothers employ a range of coping strategies drawing on informal support networks, avoiding conflict, engaging in spiritual or community-based coping, and relying on self-reliance while facing structural barriers that limit access to formal support and reinforce vulnerability to discrimination and violence.

The study revealed that single women in Tofarasei Village employ a variety of coping strategies to navigate social discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV), but access to support is often limited by cultural norms, stigma, and structural barriers. Participants described relying on informal networks, personal resilience, and selective engagement with community and religious institutions to survive. For example:

These experiences illustrate social learning theory, as women adopt coping strategies modelled by others in their families and communities, and adapt behaviors based on observed consequences. They also connect to patriarchal theory, highlighting how structural inequalities and male-dominated decision-making limit women's access to formal support systems. Saidi (2020) notes that rural women often rely on informal networks due to limited access to institutional support, while Dube (2018) suggests that strengthening women's collective agency and community-based support systems can improve resilience and reduce vulnerability.

Largely, the findings indicate that while single women in Tofarasei Village demonstrate resourcefulness and resilience, their coping strategies are constrained by systemic barriers, stigma, and entrenched cultural norms, emphasising the need for culturally sensitive interventions that expand access to support and protection.

Strengthen legal and policy support

The item being addressed was, "Kindly explain how strengthening legal and policy support can improve access to justice and protection for survivors of gender-based violence in your community."

Interview 1

"As a single woman, I cannot report issues of discrimination because it requires money to go and see the police."

Interview 2

"Certain cases are now being referred to kangaroo courts, which are biased towards men. Even if I take a case, I will not win because corruption and money have power."

Interview 3

"I cannot report abuse because it is time-consuming; one is required to attend court nearly every day. Why waste my time?"

Interview 4

"Even when I try to seek legal help, officials often dismiss my case or favor the male party, leaving me helpless."

Interview 5

"When I consider going to the police, I often give up because they treat GBV like a private matter and tell me to 'work it out at home,' which makes me feel unsafe and unsupported." (Victims are often told to resolve matters privately rather than legally, deterring reporting and justice.)

Interview 6

"I know women who tried to follow up on court cases, but they were told the case file was lost or that evidence wasn't enough, so the perpetrator walked free"

Interview 7

"Even when I want to take my case forward, I am told the legal process is complex and I lack the knowledge and resources to follow it through, so I just abandon the idea of seeking justice."

The thematic content analysis of the provided interview excerpts reveals the following key themes regarding strengthening legal and policy support:

Barriers to reporting and access to justice

- Participants highlighted financial, procedural, and systemic barriers that deter them from reporting abuse to police or pursuing legal action, reflecting wider issues where survivors are discouraged from seeking help.

Bias and systemic inequities in legal processes

- Interviews indicate that courts and legal institutions are perceived as biased toward men and influenced by corruption or power dynamics, mirroring documented challenges where survivors often face ineffective legal responses and secondary victimisation.

Lack of survivor-centred services

- The need for specialised, accessible legal aid and support services is evident, aligning with calls from legal advocates for decentralised GBV courts, trained personnel, and trauma-sensitive approaches to make justice more accessible.

Structural weaknesses in policy implementation

- Participants' reluctance to engage with legal systems reflects broader implementation gaps, where laws and policies may exist but enforcement and accountability mechanisms are weak, requiring strengthened coordination and resource allocation.

The study revealed that single women in Tofarasei Village face significant barriers in accessing legal protection, which exacerbates their vulnerability to social discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV). Participants reported that reporting cases to authorities is often costly, time-consuming, and biased in favor of men. For example

These findings align with patriarchal theory, which highlights how male-dominated power structures and social hierarchies limit women's access to justice. They also reflect social learning theory, as women learn from observing community patterns that legal institutions are biased and inaccessible, reinforcing their reluctance to report abuse. Scholars such as Saidi (2020) and Chadambuka & Warria (2020) note that rural women in Zimbabwe often face systemic barriers when attempting to access legal protection, including corruption, cost, and societal bias, which normalize impunity for perpetrators of GBV.

All in all, the findings underscore the urgent need to strengthen legal and policy support by making justice accessible, affordable, and unbiased, ensuring that single women can report cases without fear, cost, or discrimination.

Limitations

While this research provided valuable insights into the experiences of single mothers, it had the following limitations. Firstly, the study focused on only seven participants from one village, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other rural areas in Zimbabwe. Secondly, data was collected through self-reported interviews, which may be influenced by participants' willingness to share sensitive information, potentially leading to underreporting of certain experiences. Thirdly, the study explored cultural, social and

religious factors and did not extensively explore economic, political, or legal dimensions, which may also influence the vulnerability of single women. Additionally, the study employed both patriarchal theory and social learning theory, acknowledging their limitations. However, these theories were used in this research because they provide frameworks for understanding the societal dynamics and learned behaviours that contribute to the experiences of single mothers. Despite these limitations, the findings offer a rich understanding of lived experiences and highlight critical areas for intervention.

Recommendations

Culturally Sensitive Awareness Campaigns

Community education programs should be implemented to challenge harmful cultural norms and patriarchal practices that marginalise single women. These campaigns can include workshops, community dialogues, and drama-based interventions involving men, women, and community leaders. Promoting understanding of gender equality and women's rights will help reduce stigma, social exclusion, and the normalisation of gender-based violence (GBV).

Promote Women's Economic Empowerment:

Vocational training, microfinance programs, and income-generating initiatives can help single women achieve financial independence. Economic empowerment enables women to make autonomous decisions, provide for their families, and reduce vulnerability to social discrimination and GB

Support Networks and Peer Groups

Women-led community groups can provide emotional support, guidance and collective advocacy for single mothers. Peer networks help women share experiences, learn coping strategies and collectively address social and economic challenges, enhancing resilience and social cohesion

Intergenerational Education

Educational programs targeting children and youth can disrupt the perpetuation of harmful gender norms. Schools and community centres should teach gender equality, respect, and non-violence, helping younger generations challenge discriminatory attitudes and reduce the cycle of GBV and social marginalization over time

Engage Religious and Community Leaders

Religious and traditional leaders should be engaged in programs that encourage reinterpretation of cultural and religious teachings to support gender equality. Their influence can help challenge discriminatory practices, reduce stigma, and promote safer environments for single women.

Enhance Access to Social Services

Efforts should be made to ensure that single women have equitable access to government aid and NGO support. Transparent registration processes, monitoring systems, and complaint mechanisms can prevent exclusion and abuse. Accessible services will empower women to claim their rights and reduce dependency on potentially exploitative intermediaries.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that social discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV) faced by rural single mothers are often sidelined, yet their situations are among the most challenging in rural communities. Numerous studies indicate that single women are frequently exposed to social marginalisation, economic vulnerability and various forms of abuse, often perpetuated by male-dominated patriarchal structures. In the context of this study, it was noted that single mothers are victims of stigma, exclusion from decision-making, and harassment when accessing social support. Based on these findings, it appears that single women in rural areas face compounded disadvantages due to the intersection of gender, marital status, and location.

Furthermore, the rural setting exposes single mothers to limited access to resources, heightened vulnerability to GBV and restricted social mobility. Guided by patriarchal and social learning theories, the study found that cultural norms play a central role in perpetuating discrimination and violence against single women. Despite economic and social challenges, these cultural practices remain entrenched, further marginalizing vulnerable women.

The study underscored the need for further research on single women in urban areas to compare experiences across different contexts. Additionally, intervention programs should be initiated by the government, churches and NGOs to provide legal, economic and social support, empower single women and challenge harmful cultural and patriarchal norms. Such measures are crucial to improving the well-being safety, and inclusion of single mothers in Zimbabwean society.

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