Gender-based Violence during Covid 19

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Abstract

**Introduction:** Women and gender non-conforming persons (GNC) are at risk of gender-based violence. Anecdotal evidence during the global Covid-19 lockdowns suggests that reports of domestic violence against women increased.

**Methods:** A desktop study was undertaken to derive information about the magnitude of gender-based violence reports in South Africa during the March to May 2020 lockdown period. We interpret this data for what it means for understanding of gender-based violence and for designing prevention interventions.

**Findings:** there are conflicting reports about the pattern and extend of reported cases of domestic violence during the lockdowns. In terms of helping services, community-based domestic violence services were limited as some shifted their services to online and over the phone interventions. Even when they were operating, persons at risk of violence struggled with public transportation to visit the police, social workers and local NGOs. Informal sources of help were limited due to the lockdown regulations and social disconnection for people with limited data and airtime to connect with friends and families.

**Lessons learnt:** Increase in reported cases of domestic violence during the lockdown is an unreliable source of information for whether gender-based domestic violence against women increased as this data may reflect a shift in services used rather than an increase in incidents. Public life is a coping mechanism and an escape for some women and girls at risk of domestic violence; the lockdown eliminated this thus may have resulted in more calls.

**Conclusions and recommendations:** Post Covid-19 will be a time to rebuild and reconstruct. Crises and shocks interventions to reduce violence against women should emphasise changes in social norms around gender and address normalised use of violence by men. Countries with heightened gender-based violence need to invest in communication infrastructure to enable access to data at no cost. Organisations that provide face-to-face counselling and one-stop services for clients need to invest in training their personnel to offer alternative cell phone and online based interventions.

*Key words: alcohol, domestic violence, gender-based violence, violence against women*
Introduction

The South African society has a long history of violence against women in both public and private spaces (Durbach, 1999; Gender Links & Medical Research Council, 2011; Plaatje, 2007). This paper focuses on gender-based domestic violence against women (GBVAW), not negating that gender-based violence is complex, victims can be males (including gay and transgender men) and it is not always perpetrated by men. Gender based violence is understood to refer to any harm that is perpetrated against a person’s will because of their gender, and has a negative impact on their physical or psychological health, development and identity (Mazars, Mofolo, Jewkes, & Shamu, 2013; Mpani, 2015). Gender-based violence is a term that encompasses a vast range of violation including rape, domestic assault, abduction, trafficking, forced prostitution, incest, sexual harassment, beating, femicide and others (Grootboom, 2016; Kigwuwa et al., 2015; Mkhize, Bennett, Reddy, & Moletsane, 2010). Gender-based violence cuts across age, gender, class, race and ethnic identities. Gender-based violence is a crime that is perpetrated in defense of patriarchal traditional values that uphold men’s control over sexualities and in particular feminine and gender-nonconforming sexualities; be it a woman who does not listen (Brümmer, 2012), a gay men or a child (Gqola, 2015; Struthers & Meyer, 2012). Men learn gendered sex-role expectations through direct instruction as part of traditions (Brear & Bessarab, 2012; Brümmer, 2012). Transgression of these gendered sex-role expectations causes tensions in relationship and can result in arguments that turn violent (Gibbs et al., 2020).

Alcohol abuse, which refers to regular or occasional excessive consumption of alcohol causing harm to self and others, is reported to be associated with increased domestic violence (Mpani, 2015). Observation and experimental studies of violence explain the effect of alcohol and intoxication on aggression through diminished behaviour inhibition (Gibbs et al., 2020; Lange, 2002). Intoxication may make the aggressor to see the actions of the other (the target) as arbitrary and threatening; and thus, act to defend themselves against the perceived threat. There are between and within country dynamics in alcohol use and abuse. For instance, South Africa is named as having the highest level of adult per capita alcohol consumption in Africa (Mpani, 2015). In South Africa, men, across racial lines report harmful alcohol use whilst for women it is Colored women who report harmful alcohol use (Statistics South Africa, 2016). High levels of alcohol use are linked to increased levels of gender-based violence against women including coercive sex or rape (Mpani, 2015; Mpani & Nsibande, 2015; Palmer, McMahon, Rounsaville, & Ball, 2009; Zinzow et al., 2010). A study of perceptions of intimate partner violence (IPV) from southern Africa suggest that Swazi men identify intentionality on the side of the perpetrator (Brear & Bessarab, 2012). If this is true, intoxication can only exacerbate intentionality on the side of the perpetrator. Following the alcohol-aggression theories (Lange, 2002) in gender-based violence incidents, the behaviour of the partner (the victim) may be perceived as ambiguous and because alcohol impairs cognitive systems; in a state of intoxication the aggressor may not
pay attention to alternative cues and act to resolve the ambiguous situation by resorting to violence.

Globally, business as usual ceased for many as the novel corona virus forced many societies into lockdown of various sorts (Abel & McQueen, 2020). An emergence of domestic violence during the Covid-19 lockdown, when alcohol restrictions were in place puzzled some (Tisane, 2020; UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). Yet, this was expected and predicted at the start of the global lockdowns. Abel and McQueen reported that gun and ammunition sales soared in the USA, while in Switzerland justice departments prepared for increases in domestic violence during the lockdown (2020).

This paper focuses on intimate partner violence (IPV) domestic violence (DV) during Covid-19 lockdown and seeks to explain the perceptions that domestic violence incidence increased during this time. IPV refers a type of violence that is reported within an intimate relationship and may include acts of aggression such as slapping, hitting, kicking and beating (Jewkes, Dunkle, Nduna, & Jama Shai, 2010; Mpani, 2015). Whilst IPV is considered to be ‘domestic’, the term domestic violence encompasses others in the domestic sphere such as siblings, parents and others (Mpani, 2015). Research on alcohol as a predictor of domestic violence suggests that removing excessive alcohol drinking could significantly reduce domestic violence (Mpani, 2015). This has resulted in suggestions for interventions to reduce alcohol drinking in order to increase safety for women (Dworkin & Peacock, 2013; Mazars et al., 2013; Mpani & Nsibande, 2015). The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in country-wide lockdowns across the globe with the exception of a few (e.g. Sweden). During the lockdowns, alcohol sales and public drinking were suspended (COGTA, 2020). This created a ‘natural experiment’ to examine the hypothesis that removal of excessive alcohol use would remove men’s use of violence against their partners and thus reduce domestic violence.

STUDY AIM

This paper reflects on domestic violence incidence during the Covid-19 lockdowns, in a context of lowered alcohol abuse and makes links to theorising about gender-based violence and evidence-bases for GBV+F interventions during and post curfews.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

• To examine the probable impact of ‘reduced’ alcohol drinking on rates of reported domestic violence.

• To offer an analysis for domestic violence patterns that were reported during the Covid-19 lockdowns.
• To make recommendations for gender-based violence against women interventions post Covid-19 lockdowns.

**Methods**

This study followed the rapid assessment methodology. This is a research method that is commonly used where data is needed quickly and where local constraints rule out conventional research approaches (Mpani, 2015). Rapid assessments are useful for producing information that is required to develop, monitor and evaluate intervention programs (Mpani, 2015). In this case the rapid assessment was used to gather context specific data in response to the Covid-19 lockdown. This was an appropriate method given the physical movement restrictions that were in place in South Africa at the time.

**The context**

South African women, and Black women in particular, have been victims of various forms of political violence including sexual violence for decades (Durbach, 1999; Plaatje, 2007). In the wake of democracy and end of apartheid, South Africa held a process to address human rights abuses that were suffered in the context of political violence. During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), only 140 women, of the 21,000 victims testified about rape amongst 37,672 testimonies of human rights violations; with not a single man admitting to participating in rape as a political tool during the struggle period (Borer, 2009). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and other tools of justice with a patriarchal posture leave the State, civic society and individuals with a sense that violations that were directed at women are less important.

This legacy continues to inform responses to various types of contemporary violence against women which is mainly perpetrated by men (Gender Links & Medical Research Council, 2011). South Africa has one of the highest rates of violence against women in the world. Studies by various organisations report that 1 in 4 women in the general population have experienced gender-based violence (see, Mpani & Nsibande, 2015). Police records show that nearly 3000 women were killed in South Africa in 2017/2018, an increase of 11% from the previous year. Sexual assault also increased by 8.2% from 6271 to 6786 and police statistics are known to be a gross underestimation.

Post-Apartheid, millions of women are raped each year and yet very few men are brought to books and admit the crime (Gqola, 2015). Failure to act and hold perpetrators of violence against women accountable renders, in particular, Black women’s voices inaudible and perpetrators victorious. Sometimes women are discouraged and threatened for disclosing violations that happen to them and or to other women (Gqola, 2015). Even in the most civilised of institutions where the discourse of human rights, gender equality and women’s rights punctuates every utterance, many of these violations are not reported; where
reported they are not taken seriously by authorities and women tire and cease to pursue cases. The aim is to shrink women to participate in what Gqola refers to as the ‘cult of femininity’ and force them to make themselves ‘small, quiet and invisible’ as much as possible so that they remain safer. Sometimes women are discouraged and threatened for disclosing violations that happen to them and or to other women (Gqola, 2015). Even in the most civilised of institutions where the discourse of human rights, gender equality and women’s rights punctuates every utterance, many of these violations are not reported; where reported they are not taken seriously by authorities and women tire and cease to pursue cases. The aim of creating and maintaining ineffective responses is to shrink women to participate in what Gqola refers to as the ‘cult of femininity’ and force them to make themselves ‘small, quiet and invisible’ as much as possible so that they remain safer. It therefore should not puzzle the society why women continue to be victims of rape in South Africa (Gqola, 2015). In her book ‘RAPE: A South African nightmare’, Pumla reminds the society that most survivors of rape know their perpetrators. It is the silence around who rapists are that needs to be broken (Gqola, 2015), because indeed women long broke their silence and continue to do so. A 2013 study conducted by Gender Links in four provinces of South Africa reported that a large proportion of men (Gauteng 78%; Limpopo 48%; Western Cape 35%; and Kwa-Zulu Natal 41%) admitted to committing some form of violence against women in their lifetime (see, Mpani & Nsibande, 2015).

Women in the Southern Africa face structural violence such as unemployment, underemployment, precarious and vulnerable employment, lower incomes, working poverty and workplace victimization, harassment and other forms of deprivation in all sectors (Bhatasara & Chirimambowa, 2018; Izwi, 2020; Nduna, accepted). In business, ‘opportunity’ entrepreneurship makes a far more significant economic contribution than ‘necessity’ entrepreneurship, and yet women are underrepresented in opportunity entrepreneurship (Policy Co-ordination and Advisory Services (PCAS), n/d). This is so because there is a place that men, through direct instruction as part of traditions, have come to accept for women (Brümmer, 2012), therefore in public spaces, women have to demonstrate some propriety to gain access to professional spaces that they qualify for. Women in the public sphere include sex workers. The majority of sex workers are cisgender women, similarly, women in sex work are victims of violence perpetuated by “…police, clients, intimate partners, health care workers; thugs and/or criminals, managers and/or controllers, and the community” (African Sex Worker Alliance, 2019). sex workers are faced with shocking levels of violence and their ability to report crimes against them is diminished and they are often extorted for money and free sex instead (African Sex Worker Alliance, 2019; Sonke Gender Justice and SWEAT (Sex Worker Education & Advocacy Taskforce), 2018).

Whilst women in the Southern Africa region may face similar challenges (Bhatasara & Chirimambowa, 2018), women victims of gender-based violence whose status is ‘undocumented or illegal’ under report violations (see, Mpani & Nsibande, 2015). Even with crises and shocks such as Covid-19, the major expected loser will be women (Bhatasara &
Chirimambowa, 2018; Izwi, 2020). This is true even for professional sectors and the digi
economy (Kitchener, 2020; Minello, 2020). Notably, Black, African, poorer women and
migrants bear the brunt of all of the various permutations of violence (Bhatasara &
Chirimambowa, 2018; Izwi, 2020), and are thus exposed to the likelihood of poly
victimization.

**Gender-based domestic violence during Covid-19 lockdown**

Countries adopted measures to regulate the spread of the novel corona virus, by putting
in place restrictions to movement and for many women, this meant being stuck in a
house with an abusive partner (Tisane, 2020). The impact of COVID-19 has been drastic
to women and girls who cannot escape the harsh reality of violence, albeit other
socioeconomic issues are at play (Tisane, 2020). The disproportionate impact of COVID-
19 with the threat of domestic violence on women emerged as a concern early on in the
epidemic (Tisane, 2020; UNFPA, 2020).

The number of women calling domestic violence support services was reported to have
risen significantly in various countries were a national lockdown was implemented
(Tisane, 2020; UNFPA, 2020). This resultant “**horrifying global surge in domestic violence**”
(Tisane, 2020) was not entirely unanticipated (Abel & McQueen, 2020). The UN warned
that ‘as people spend more time in close proximity in household isolation...women and
children are at risk of experiencing higher levels of violence’ (UN Joint Global Programme,
2020). The UN cited reports from parts of Asia, North and Latin America and Europe which
showed a significant rise in the number women calling helplines and reporting abuse during
the Covid-19 pandemic (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). Numbers in hotlines, crises
centres and justice officials surpassed the pre-Covid records around the same time
(UNFPA, 2020). In Australia, the Police force reported a 5% increase in domestic violence
reports (Tisane, 2020). France was the first to report a 30% spike in domestic violence
cases, a week after the national lockdown was implemented (Tisane, 2020). India
clocked a 45% increase in domestic violence complaints within a 25 day period from the
first week of March (Tisane, 2020). In Tunisia, calls to a helpline in the first days of
confinement increased fivefold (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). In Italy, calls to
helplines dropped sharply; however, SMS and emails to support services increased (UN
Joint Global Programme, 2020).

South Africa, saw the surge of Gender-Based Violence since the implementation of the
national lockdown, with 87 000 gender-based violence complaints (Tisane, 2020). An
examination of routinely collected data from the command centre call centre in South
Africa suggests that the absence of intoxication did not remove aggression towards women
in the domestic sphere. By the end of the first phase of the national lockdown South Africa
released the official statistics as below:
The data presented here categorised calls related to child custody/visitation, maintenance, counselling, depression, marriage and relationships as non-GBV when in fact these could have been related to domestic disputes that are fraught with violence. It is also not possible from these statistics to look at the impact of alcohol alone as it is grouped with other substances. Despite these data challenges the increased GBVAW was confirmed by people who work on violence against women on the ground. South African news reported that Police statistics for the first week of lockdown showed that more than 2300 complaints of gender-based violence were recorded. Google also shared that there had been a 64% spike in online searches for the words “domestic violence shelters.”

**Increased rates of reported domestic violence amid reduced alcohol use**

Against the background that links alcohol to violence, an expectation would have been that reduction in excessive alcohol use would result in reduced reports of GBVAW. The Covid-19 curfews and lockdowns provided a ‘natural experiment’ to test this hypothesis and the opposite seemed to be true. So, should we reject this hypothesis? With lack of data on alcohol use during the lockdown, it is difficult to delink this unexpected hike in domestic violence from alcohol use. Alcohol consumption may have continued in a number of places that could not be policed at the beginning of the lockdown. The UN raised a concern that since unhealthy consumption of alcohol is already linked to an increased likelihood of intimate partner violence, the risk for alcohol misuse may have become ‘more acute during the COVID-19 crisis’ (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020).

There is no data on alcohol consumption that was made possible by robberies of liquor stores in South African townships. It is not possible to estimate a reduction in excessive and binge alcohol drinking for those who had access to bootleg and illicit purchases of alcohol; these are typically low income and the lower end of the middle-class. Alcohol consumption
in private homes was not barred and therefore it is not possible to assume a reduction in alcohol drinking for those who keep alcohol in their private homes. These are typically middle to high income earners. Excessive and binge drinking in the early days of the lockdown may have accompanied the psychological panic in a way that mimics the ‘panic buying’ that was reported a few days before the lockdown came into effect. It is also possible that being home, with the physical and psychological lockdown, may have increased risk for binge and excessive drinking.

**Gender-based domestic violence against women increased during the lockdown**

Domestic violence is an example of gender-based violence against women, and there are other forms. The domestic violence rates reported here could have included others such as siblings and children (Mpani, 2015), whilst the gender-based motivation cannot be ruled out in such cases, it is not always assumed. Help seeking for abused women was severely impacted during the lockdown period (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). Services that are offered by community-based organisations to abused woman were closed and some shifted their services to online and telephone assistance. Further to this, in less individualised societies and social and cultural contexts people are used to turning to each other when times get rough (Abel & McQueen, 2020). Women, in particular, may avoid formal sources of help due to shame, fear of reprisals, or lack of knowledge on how to access available help (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). The spatial and social distancing created by the lockdowns may have created problems of access to informal sources of support for domestic disputes (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). It is therefore possible that this period increased awareness of the availability of the national command centre and redirected help-seeking behaviours of abused women away from community services and to the toll-free hot-lines; thus the national toll-free lines were confronted, for the first time by the extent of the scale of the problem of domestic violence that they had never dealt with before the lockdown because these were locally handled by community-based organisations. To complicate this, the close proximity and visibility of police and security officers in communities may have falsely increased confidence that reports of domestic violence would be taken seriously. Thus the up to 40% of women who normally would not seek help (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020), may have reported with the hope that police help will be dispatched sooner.

**Are reported rates of domestic violence an indication that violence against women increased during lockdowns**

Violence against women is a continuum of behaviours from disrespect and disregard, to emotional, economical, physical, sexual violence and murder. It is crucial to not lose sight of all forms of gender-based violations that women experience in their lives; these violations are spread across institutions such as schools, churches, workplaces, recreational activities, and others. What happened with the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns is that schools, churches, workplaces, recreational activities and other public spaces were closed. Based on
the profiles of perpetrators of violence (Mpani, 2015), older brothers, friends, neighbours, schoolmates, uncles, fathers, grandfathers and others were in close proximity: at home. Women and girls as their children, nieces, grandchildren, partners, and wives bore the brunt. Multiple sexual partnering is common among cisgender heterosexual men in Southern Africa and the lockdown period may have affected men’s philandering and locked them in with one partner (Soul City, 2008). If this was a main partner who would have been overlooked in favour of ‘side chicks’; and in a society where the function of women’s bodies is regarded as to sexually please men (Gqola, 2015), his expectation for conjugal rights and sexual entitlement may exacerbate tensions, disagreements, and violence arising from refusal to have sex. Some men, as providers in their homes, expect sexual favours as a duty of their partner to demonstrate their reciprocity towards their material contribution to the home (Brear & Bessarab, 2012).

We therefore argue that perpetrators of violence shifted their target to the women in their domestic sphere. This should awaken the conscience of the society to realise the poly-violence that women and girls are generally exposed; to which the risk remains regardless of where women are (Nduna, accepted). During the lockdown, people who were in processes of separation or divorce may have had their plans halted and remained stuck with their abusers. This is so, as some courts reduced their capacity and others closed (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). With children at home, it is possible that this created a gap for experimental and binge drinking of young people increasing the problem of under-age drinking (Sabi & Rieker, 2017) and its associated violence (Mpani, 2015).

The lockdown demonstrated once more that alcohol is not the root cause of domestic violence against women. Feminist scholars of gender-based violence agree that patriarchy is the root cause of violence against women (Gqola, 2015; Motsei, 2017). Victim blaming and fault-finding is one aspect of a masculine-favouring, patriarchal culture which may facilitate domestic abuse (Brear & Bessarab, 2012). Abusive men, across societies, typically conceive of IPV as being the fault of women (Brear & Bessarab, 2012). Gender-based violence against women is a tool that is used to chastise, discipline, sanction, teach a lesson to create a dutiful woman (Motsei, 2017). Alcohol may be one of the significant contributing factors to both perpetration and victimisation; promotion of responsible values may positively impact on the reduction of violence against women. If alcohol use was a cause of violence against women; girls would be safe from violence in school, and yet they are not (Centre for Applied Legal Studies & Cornell Law School’s Avon Global Center for Women and Justice and International Human Rights Clinic, 2014; Mncube & Madikizela-Madiya, 2014), girls and women would be safe from violence in churches, and yet they are not (WHITSON, 1997), young women would be safe from violence in colleges and universities, and yet they are not (Bennett, 2009; Kiguwa et al., 2015), women would be safe from violence in their workplaces, and yet they are not (Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002). In these public institutions, girls and women experience violence from sober men who disrespect, disregard, manipulate, harass and assault them (Nduna, accepted). Women in
professional spaces experience microaggressions from their male counterparts, women in politics struggle with men who do not accept being outsmarted by them, women in business are side-lined by ‘boys’ clubs’ (ref). Violence in these spaces is normalised as it is not usually physical, and women do not always have the language to describe their experiences. The perpetrators of these forms of violence, spent time with their families during the Covid-19 lockdown and their domestic partners were on the receiving side; hence an increase in reports of domestic violence when the society least expected it.

**Interventions for gender-based domestic violence against women during Covid-19**

Reports of increased domestic violence concerned governments and the civil society alike during this period. The safety of women around the world, whether inside or outside their homes remained the overarching socioeconomic issue during the Covid-19 perilous times (Tisane, 2020). To curb the threat of domestic violence, governments in various parts of the world took corrective measures, as 90% of cases were thought to be triggered by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic (Tisane, 2020). Measures ranged from apps launched by Italy which allow individuals to seek help without making a call. Spain initiated use of “code-words” to alert help-services and authorities of a case of domestic violence, which will then amount to the relevant authorities offering help (Tisane, 2020). In Italy, Austria, and Germany, the domestic violence perpetrators were evicted from the house instead of the victim and court fees related to protection orders were waived (Tisane, 2020). Tisane warned that “some women have a greater chance of surviving COVID-19 than they do of surviving domestic violence” (Tisane, 2020). Yet, in many countries, the underfunded and ailing civil society had to bear the burden of providing safety and security to domestic violence victims. In South Africa, organisations such as People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA), provided counselling and legal assistance to victims of domestic violence (Tisane, 2020). On the other hand, celebrities such as Charlize Theron stepped in and committed $1 million to domestic violence support (Tisane, 2020).

**Conclusions**

Illicit and bootleg alcohol sales, private access to alcohol in a state of emergency and panic drinking fall outside the scope of this paper. This analysis considered restrictions of legal sales of alcohol. This study presents a hypothesis to be tested; which is that it is possible that men who are at risk of harmful drinking practices are the same who are at risk of violence. And therefore, one does not cause the other, but an external factor causes both.

This paper presents important lessons for the national governments to appreciate the role of the civil society and to match resources to fight gender-based domestic violence against women to scale. As the prognosis of the Covid-19 pandemic is unknown; interventions to reduce VAW could be integrated into digital applications where possible. Considerations could be made with regards to moderating different messages to appeal and speak to
adults and young people, as well as customizing them for various audiences: gender, race, class, nationality, etc.

**Recommendations**

This paper provides insights in terms of alcohol-aggression and yet is limited in its ability to produce depth because of lack of reliable and good data from the services. Reports on domestic violence against women need to be specific in order to be useful. This study utilised readily available desktop data which was not collected using tailored data collection tools. With lack of in-depth, tailored, disaggregated and detailed data obtained from various sources, it was difficult to ascertain that it is gender-based domestic violence against women or reporting that increased during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Men need to stop using violence against women in order to prevent violence against women from happening. Based on the observations from the ‘natural experiment’ as presented here; programmatic recommendations are possible. There needs to be an investment in interventions, with men, to reduce perception of the other’s behaviours in drinking settings as threatening. Interventions with men should encourage alternative conflict resolutions as a norm; without resorting to violence as a readily available strategy. Interventions with men need to encourage behaviour-change for men to adopt better communication with others.

There is a need to strengthen support systems for women who plan to escape from an abusive situation during curfew periods. During periods of emergency there needs to be support for women who were in the process of separation and divorce so that they or their partners find alternative homes. Lessons from this study will inform future program development, including the potential for continued work post Covid-19 lockdowns.

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**References**


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