

# PATTERNS OF NARRATIVES ON HOW TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: CONTEXT OF THE ONTOGENIC AND MICRO-LEVELS OF THE ECOLOGICAL MODEL OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

JOSAPHINE HAPAZARI<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** *Violence against women (VAW) is a widespread human rights abuse, and it is persevering despite the efforts of various government ministries, non-governmental organizations, civic societies, communities, and individuals to combat it. In this article, I explore the patterns of narratives of people who perpetrate VAW, survivors of VAW, and people who solve VAW cases, that is, police officers and village chiefs. I problematize the social construction of gender that occurs in most patriarchal families since it favours men over women, inculcating male supremacy. I argue that most men in patriarchal societies exhibit dominance over females, which heightens women's susceptibility to VAW. Therefore, I asked participants their views on what individuals and families can do to prevent VAW within their communities. Heise's (1998) ecological model of violence against women underpinned this study. The study focuses on the ontogenic level and the micro-level only, unearthing patterns of narratives that focus on individual people and families in the Maseru district of Lesotho. Results are envisaged to assist policymakers in proffering relevant social policies grounded on empirical research.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Lesotho, ontogenic level, micro-level, violence against women, prevention practices*

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<sup>1</sup> Josaphine Hapazari is a Lecturer at the National University of Lesotho, Department of Sociology and Social Work, in Roma, Lesotho; email address: jbhiri.hapazari@gmail.com. This paper was supported by University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, South Africa.

## INTRODUCTION

Violence against women (VAW) is a tenacious issue negatively impacting women's rights worldwide. Literature has demonstrated increased levels of VAW globally (Kanougiya et al. 2022; Oche et al. 2020; Ellsberg et al. 2015). Therefore, it is imperative for individuals, families, communities, and governments to implement various VAW prevention practices to protect women. Definitions of the term VAW abound. The United Nations (UN 1993: 1) defines VAW as any act of gender-based violence (GBV) that causes or is likely to cause "physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life". This definition is comprehensive; covering almost all forms of VAW and even includes threats of VAW. Taking a cue from this definition, the current study employs a broad definition of VAW, inclusive of intimate and non-intimate partner violence.

VAW prevention practices are habits, methods and means of deterring VAW in any given society. These VAW prevention practices can be implemented at the individual, family, community and national levels. Research on VAW prevention practices is crucial because it informs implementation efforts to improve the provision of services to VAW survivors, perpetrators, and society at large. Some of the VAW prevention practices pointed out by various scholars target governments and NGOs (Ndlovu 2021; Jewkes et al. 2019; Graaff 2017). The current study argues that VAW prevention practices ought to target survivors, perpetrators, women, men, girls, boys and families because the family is a primary agent of socialisation. A study conducted by Ndlovu (2021) in South Africa emphasises the use of VAW prevention practices that involve men and boys. Similarly, there has been growth in the number and magnitude of VAW prevention practices in various contexts such as the criminal justice system, health sector, civic organisations' activism and child welfare issues.

A lot of VAW prevention practices have been put in place worldwide. Ellsberg et al. (2015) shed light on the fact that initial VAW prevention practices focus on survivors through the provision of services they need and the reduction of perpetrators' jail sentences. These two prevention practices seem to clash, especially as they champion survivors' rights on the one hand while fighting for perpetrators on the other. Generally, most people recommend long jail sentences for VAW perpetrators to deter other members of society (Oche et al. 2020). Developing countries focus on VAW prevention practices that instil non-violent traits in people (Ellsberg et al. 2015). These programmes are geared towards instilling non-violent behaviour in individuals as well as empowering girls and women so that they are not so susceptible to VAW. In a study conducted in South

Africa, women survivors who were interviewed by Ndlovu (2021) suggested VAW prevention practices that enhance equal opportunities in education, justice, and political and economic arenas for both males and females.

Boonzaier (2001) interviewed 15 women survivors in Mitchell's Plain, in Cape Town, South Africa, who cited various VAW prevention practices, including leaving the abuser and avoiding an escalation of verbal abuse by remaining silent or leaving the scene and submission. The same study established other VAW prevention strategies, such as avoiding antagonising reactions to verbal abuse, especially in relation to the reactions of women who rely on their husbands financially, screaming, running away and calling or threatening to call the police. Fighting back was also highlighted as another way of dealing with violence, and some participants also utilised various social and legal resources (ibid. 2001). Behaviour change is considered a cornerstone to combating VAW in some parts of South Africa. For instance, Ndlovu (2021) established that traditional gatherings (known as *imbizo*) should specifically target boys and men as part of prevention practice that focuses on addressing and altering boys' mindsets towards women in ways that are deemed to discourage intimate partner violence (IPV). With regard to VAW prevention practices that focus on perpetrators, there is a need for the use of role models since they tend to impact perpetrators positively (Graaff 2017). This is a sound prevention practice that is applicable at the individual level, and the use of male role models is ideal, given that most VAW perpetrators are males. The current study submits that role models need to be charismatic so that participants can be inspired by them and possibly driven to change their ways.

Various studies have documented varied ways of preventing VAW (Ndlovu 2021; Graaff 2017; Ellsberg et al. 2015). However, there is a paucity of research on forms of prevention of VAW that focus on Heise's (1998) model and the narratives of VAW survivors, perpetrators and those who address this social problem, such as village chiefs and police officers. Thus, in line with the introduction, this paper describes the narratives of VAW survivors, perpetrators, police officers and village chiefs about VAW. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: What are participants' narratives about practices that can be applied to prevent VAW at the ontogenic level?
- RQ2: What are participants' narratives on practices that can be applied to prevent VAW at the micro-level?
- RQ3: What are the patterns of narratives of VAW survivors, perpetrators, village chiefs, and police officers about VAW prevention?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study described here was underpinned by the ecological violence against women model, propounded by Heise (1998). ‘Ontogenic factors’ refer to those features of an individual regarding the “developmental experience of personality that determine his or her response to microsystem and exosystem stressors” (ibid. 266). This explains why I asked perpetrators questions about their upbringing. Carlson (1984) clarifies the ecological model of VAW regarding the analysis of the causes and maintenance of VAW, citing that the individual level focuses on the perpetrator’s family background, personality and issues with alcohol. At this level, males as individuals may exhibit sexist, patriarchal and sexually aggressive attitudes (Fergus 2012). Some of these aggressive attitudes are linked to hegemonic masculinity. The micro-level is the second level of the ecological model of VAW. This level is also called the family level, which consists of family dynamics, interactions, the quality of spousal relationships, and kinship connectedness (Carlson 1984). The micro-level refers to “all those relations in which an individual engages with others, as well as to the particular meanings assigned to those interactions” (Heise 1998: 269).

The exolevel is the third level of the ecological model of VAW. Belski (as cited in Heise 1998) defines the exolevel as the formal or informal social structure that encroaches on the direct settings in which a person is found that determine what transpires in the wider milieu. Carlson (1984) defines this as the social structure level, consisting of the economic realities of the community, neighbourhood norms, work, and law enforcement practices. The fourth level of the ecological model is known as the macro level. Carlson (1984) adds that it consists of cultural norms, values, and beliefs such as rigid sex role stereotyping, sexism, condoning of violence, and norms about family life. Heise (1998) states that the macro level refers to a wide-ranging set of cultural values that infuse and inform the other layers of the social ecology, such as male entitlement, ownership of women, male supremacy and rigid socially constructed gender roles. The ecological model of VAW was found to be appropriate for this study because it provided a foundation for the formulation of research questions. Other scholars have also highlighted the importance of this model and have utilised it in their studies on GBV and VAW (Maphosa 2018; Sakala 2015). Taking cues from these authors, I also structured my discussion of VAW prevention practices around the ecological model of VAW but went further and sampled four groups of participants. This, therefore, indicates the originality of my study.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted in Lesotho, with Maseru district as the research site. An interpretive approach and case study research design were used. Thus, qualitative data were gathered from a sample of 40 participants: 10 VAW survivors, 10 VAW perpetrators, 10 village chiefs and 10 police officers. In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants. These interviews were conducted face-to-face in June and July 2019, well before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. I directly interacted with the research participants (Ataro 2019) and was able to gather rich data from them. The main purpose of the interviews was to establish the narratives and patterns of responses of VAW survivors, perpetrators, village chiefs, and police officers regarding what individuals and families can do to prevent VAW. The main themes addressed during the interviews were participants' social attributes and practices that individuals and families can apply to prevent VAW.

Regarding the research participants, VAW survivors were women who had experienced any form of VAW perpetrated by men, inclusive of sexual abuse. VAW perpetrators were men who were incarcerated at Maseru Central Correctional Institution. Chiefs were village chiefs, or chiefs who were traditional leaders of the ten villages where I collected data. In Lesotho, village chiefs are found in both rural and urban areas. Police officers are government officials who are responsible for law enforcement, crime prevention and ensuring safety within any given country. The VAW survivors were housed in a shelter in Maseru town. Taking the suggestions made by Creswell–Creswell (2018), I sought research permission from four government ministries that are the gatekeepers of the four sets of participants. I was also granted access to social workers who provide counselling to survivors and perpetrators. This was appropriate due to the delicate nature of the research topic. With regard to ethical considerations, I ensured the research conformed to all the relevant research-related ethical practices. For instance, informed consent was ensured by first explaining to the participants what the research entailed and the nature of their participation. I ensured the anonymity of participants by assigning numbers to each of them instead of using their names. Since this was a study I conducted for my PhD degree in sociology, research ethical approval was granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee<sup>2</sup>.

Data was analysed utilising thematic analysis. After I came up with themes, I employed the triangulation method by requesting that other sociologists who possess experience in qualitative data analysis and gender issues crosscheck my

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2 The ethical clearance number is HSS/0131/019D.

themes. Thus, to ensure the trustworthiness of the themes, I sought validation from fellow sociology PhD students and lecturers. By so doing, I ensured rigour through the triangulation of researchers and peer debriefing, as suggested by Belotto (2018). I gave the data to these sociologists so they could verify my themes. This process helped me to verify and alter my themes before presenting and discussing the findings.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are based on participants' narratives on VAW prevention. These narratives are discussed, aligning with the first two levels of Heise's (1998) ecological model of VAW. Last, the discussion will present policy recommendations on VAW prevention.

### *Narratives on VAW prevention practices at the ontogenic level*

This sub-section addresses the first research question on narratives on VAW prevention practices at the individual level that are applicable to Maseru's rural and urban areas. These VAW prevention practices were highlighted by VAW survivors, VAW perpetrators, chiefs and police officers. The ontogenic level represents the individual history that shapes each person's behaviour and relationships (Maphosa 2018; Heise 1998). Given that at the ontogenic level, individual males display patriarchal and sexually aggressive attitudes (Fergus 2012), this study argues that individuals ought to employ VAW prevention practices that target patriarchal attitudes, gender socialisation issues and behavioural changes.

### *Chiefs and police officers' narratives on ontogenic level VAW prevention practices*

Chiefs and police officers narrated that in order for them to solve VAW cases, survivors must report them. They explained that some survivors do not report such crimes due to fear and economic dependence on male perpetrators. However, they emphasised that individuals ought to report VAW cases. In South Africa, Boonzaier (2001) also observed that women's dependence on men is one of the contributors to women's failure to report VAW cases. Chief Six pointed out the following:

*Some victims keep quiet after being abused. This is very bad. Abuse must be reported by the victims as soon as possible because when they don't report, perpetrators will continue abusing women.*

Police Officer Three also affirmed this: *Sexually abused women must report the crimes so that we can arrest the perpetrators.* This finding indicates that failure to report cases is an impediment to the fight against VAW, and it concomitantly promotes a culture of violence, as cited in Galtung's (2002) theory of violence. Failing to report VAW usually leads to a vicious circle of abuse.

Furthermore, failure to report VAW cases disempowers survivors since it demonstrates acceptance of the situation. Hence, it heightens the chances of being sexually abused repeatedly. This corroborates the recommendation that women's organisations ought to assist VAW survivors in opening up about incidents of abuse (Oche et al. 2020). Assistance in reporting VAW crimes is crucial, given that some survivors fail to report crimes due to fear. For instance, Survivor Seven was raped by her father, and it took her a long time to report the case due to fear. Chief Six added, *When survivors report the cases to either the chiefs or the police officers, it usually results in the perpetrator being incarcerated.* The incarceration of VAW perpetrators is vital, given that incarceration deters the majority of perpetrators from committing similar crimes. Furthermore, during incarceration, perpetrators go through rehabilitation under the guidance of prison officials, counsellors and social workers, as corroborated by previous studies (Afdal et al. 2017). Participants highlighted that perpetrators ought to cooperate with law enforcement agents upon commission of VAW crimes, as well as counsellors and social workers.

Chiefs and police officers cited not withdrawing charges related to reported VAW cases as one of the VAW prevention practices that individuals can implement. They highlighted that, in many instances, VAW survivors withdraw charges associated with already reported VAW cases for various reasons, including fear of retribution. They asserted that sustaining the reported cases to finality would go a long way in fighting VAW, while withdrawing charges may expose survivors to repeated attacks and eliminate the chances of rehabilitation of the perpetrators. Prior studies affirm that some of the survivors have a tendency to withdraw from reported cases or not report cases at all (Ndlovu 2021; Samuels et al. 2015).

Chief Ten highlighted this:

*Even though some perpetrators want revenge by causing harm to survivors, I advise survivors not to withdraw [charges associated with] reported cases. In most cases, survivors will be abused again by the same perpetrators.*

The withdrawal of charges denies police officers the opportunity to arrest perpetrators. Police Officer Three summed this up, saying, *Withdrawal means the case is closed, and the perpetrator goes both unpunished and is not rehabilitated*. The withdrawal of charges by survivors means the police cannot take the matter any further. Without facing any consequences, some perpetrators are likely to feel emboldened and empowered to continue with their VAW. Furthermore, Police Officer Three explained why survivors must not withdraw cases: *Well [...] survivors must never ever withdraw reported cases because perpetrators will harm and harass them further*. Samuels et al. (2015) also discourage survivors from withdrawing charges.

The above quotes confirm the issue of the recurrence of VAW-related crimes due to a failure to report such crimes. While withdrawing from cases may benefit perpetrators, previous studies have revealed that it is actually costly to survivors. For instance, Ching-Yu and Fay (2019) warn that some perpetrators sometimes exhibit violent masculinities towards the survivors for having exposed them to the police and the public. Thus, reported perpetrators tend to seek revenge. Knowledge such as this ought to be utilised in VAW awareness campaigns so that survivors avoid meeting perpetrators alone and avoid harm. Prior studies affirm that some men enact violent masculine behaviour to assert their power over women (Ndlovu 2021; Graaff 2017). In such cases, VAW prevention practices ought to target issues associated with masculinities so that men desist from such conduct.

Some of the participants narrated that women ought to resist sexual violence by not submitting to men's demands. Chief Nine suggested this: *Females should fight back against male abusers because if they do not do that, men will continue to sexually abuse them*. This finding suggests that women's submission to sexual abuse empowers men, contributing to the perpetual sexual abuse of women by men, and traumatic bonding theory also confirms this finding (Austin–Boyd 2010). However, Police Officer Eight cautioned against the retaliation approach by highlighting the following: *Some of the survivors get stabbed with knives by perpetrators when they fight them during rape incidents*. Apart from the highlighted danger, the approach actually propagates violence instead of combating it; thus, it cannot be a sustainable prevention practice. Some of the chiefs and police officers also urged that the perpetrators exercise self-control, refrain from engaging in VAW, and learn from their past mistakes. Chief Eight highlighted this: *Men must not commit these crimes again once they are arrested. They must learn to control their feelings and temper*. This suggestion is based on the assumption that some of the VAW crimes that are committed by men are a result of a lack of self-control, which some scholars link with gender-based violence (Carlson 1984). Thus, another VAW prevention practice



that requires action from perpetrators is building their self-control. This study argues that VAW prevention practices that target men are paramount as they directly address the source of the problem. Correspondingly, in the USA, programmes for perpetrators target violent men, utilising cognitive behavioural therapy methods (Ellsberg et al. 2015).

### ***Perpetrators' narratives about ontogenic level VAW prevention practices***

The findings reveal that perpetrators' narratives are distinctly self-exonerating and shift blame to the victims. Moreso, they largely suggest methods of protection from VAW that not only put the burden on the women but also curtail their freedom of movement, association and choice. Effectively, the perpetrators' narratives basically assign no obligations to the perpetrators themselves. Perpetrator Ten warned women thus: *Women must not walk at night; it is not good for them*. Perpetrator Nine also gave this warning: *Umm ... I think that any woman must avoid being in one room with a man, whether it is a father, uncle, pastor or teacher*. The above VAW 'prevention practice' is derived from the assumption that when women walk alone at night, their chances of being abused are greater. However, the current study submits that when women are restricted from walking at night or must avoid certain spaces, this constrains them; thus, restricting women's freedom of movement and association is being prescribed as a form of VAW prevention practice. Sriver et al. (2015) affirm that restriction on its own is a form of violence. Apart from this, this finding is based on gender stereotypes and gender bias, whereby women are perceived as the weaker and inferior gender that ought to avoid being with men in order to be safe. The current study asserts that the solution must lie with men, who ought to change their mindsets so that women are able to live in a free society with no infringements on their mobility. VAW prevention practices that constrain women perpetuate male supremacy, which is improper and should be avoided.

Some perpetrators strongly feel that women should desist from wearing clothes that reveal their bodies and that women ought to use formal language when talking to men. The perpetrators suggest that women should neither have freedom of choice nor expression – they must dress and speak in a certain way so that they will not fall victim to VAW. The following excerpt is from Perpetrator Nine: *Women must stop wearing revealing clothes because they will be raped by men. Women must be polite and formal when talking to men*. These VAW prevention practices were suggested by a man (perpetrator), and the suggestions are embedded in gender stereotypes according to which some

men expect women to dress and talk according to men's dictates and to be submissive, adhering to men's tastes and orders. The notion of submission is linked to patriarchy (Ndlovu 2021; Graaff 2017). Perpetrator One was equally emphatic, declaring that

*Women's language must be formal when talking with men because when they talk in informal ways, it will lead men to think about having sexual activities with them.*

In both cases, these VAW prevention practices cited by men (perpetrators) are directed at women; thus, in their view, the solution to VAW lies with the women conforming to certain behaviours dictated by men. Hadi (2017) also established that society blames women for sexual violence. Issues related to the style of dress are very debatable, given that some women who wear long clothes still get sexually abused. Very young babies are still sexually abused by men (Gettleman–Kumar 2018). Hence, the issue of the wearing of revealing clothes cannot be used to justify the commission of VAW. This mindset exhibits gender bias, which is inappropriate. The perpetrators' attitudes, as revealed by their narratives, indicate that even after being found guilty by the courts and subsequently incarcerated, some of them remain unrepentant and continue to blame their victims. This suggests the need for the intensification of rehabilitation efforts within Correctional Service Centres.

### ***Survivors' narratives on ontogenic level VAW prevention practices***

Some survivors agreed with one of the chiefs, as they proposed fighting back as one way of curtailing VAW. This argument is premised on the perception that if perpetrators anticipate strong resistance from their potential victims, they will think twice before engaging in acts of VAW.

Survivor Eight asserted the following: *I think that we, as women, must fight these men, but, hey, I tried one day and failed because men are too strong. However, fighting is better than giving up.* Thus, some people view putting up resistance against sexual abuse as a viable VAW prevention practice, which, simultaneously, is a way for females to resist male dominance, thereby reclaiming their freedom. However, the challenge with encouraging the fight-back approach is that it encourages society to fight violence with violence. This can only worsen the scourge of violence within societies rather than combating it. Moreover, the perpetrators may engage in greater violence, including the

use of excessive force and dangerous weapons, in their quest to fend off the anticipated resistance.

The words “men are too strong” illustrate that sexual abuse is mostly about physical power. It suggests that male perpetrators can overpower some female victims. This explains why Jewkes et al. (2019) warn that, sometimes, more violent abusers intensify their violent behaviour. Therefore, the risk is that fighting back sometimes infuriates male perpetrators, who may react more aggressively and harm the female victims. Police Officer Eight confirms this by highlighting the following: *Some of the survivors get stabbed with knives by perpetrators when they fight them during rape incidents*. This clarification buttresses the above warning given by Jewkes et al. (2019) that resisting abuse may lead to harm. All this knowledge regarding possible reactions from rapists ought to be shared with community members during VAW awareness campaigns so that women can make informed decisions.

Some survivors advocate for women who experience VAW to be more open and avoid silence since this emboldens their abusers. While the issues associated with reporting VAW cases to authorities (chiefs and police) were earlier highlighted, this particular view includes informing any other relevant members of the family or society, not just the authorities (chiefs and police). A survivor stated the following: *Victims must tell other people about any violence against women and sexual offences cases*. Various participants noted the importance of reporting VAW cases to enable law enforcement agents to investigate them and bring perpetrators to book.

### ***Narratives about VAW prevention practices at the micro-level***

This sub-section addresses the second research question concerning narratives about VAW prevention practices at the micro-level of the VAW ecological model. Thus, it presents and discusses VAW prevention practices that can be employed by families in both rural and urban areas of the Maseru district. The family has a crucial role in preventing VAW, and this claim aligns with the findings of earlier studies (Heise 1998). Research has demonstrated that gender socialisation, experiencing and witnessing violence and sexual violence in childhood have an impact that carries through to adulthood – such children are more liable to exhibit violent masculinities in their adulthood (Oche et al. 2020; Kalaca–Dundar 2010). Therefore, in this sub-section, the study argues that families have the potential to impart constructive masculinities through practising androgynous socialisation. Androgynous socialisation refers to the kind of socialisation that combines masculine and feminine characteristics

related to gender identity, gender roles and sexual identity (Barlose 2015). The current study further argues that the proper socialisation of children by family members can yield positive outcomes whereby males shun violence.

### ***Chiefs and police officers' narratives about micro-level VAW prevention practices***

Some participants in this category cited androgynous socialisation of children as a critical practice that families can apply to prevent VAW. Androgynous socialisation involves teaching children to shun violence and embrace gender equality.

Chief One highlighted this practice thus: *Boys should be taught that it is good to listen to women's views. Parents must teach their children that boys and girls are equal.* This VAW prevention practice resonates with findings from prior studies that have demonstrated that one's background and experiences with violence at a young age contribute to the commission of VAW in adulthood (Oche et al. 2020; Kalaca–Dundar 2010; Barchi et al. 2018; Owusu Adjah – Agbemaflle 2016). Chief Six affirmed the latter thus: *Within families, fathers and uncles must guide boys on what to do and mothers and aunts also must guide girls regarding good manners and gender equality.* Therefore, in the fight against VAW, nuclear families, being primary agents of socialisation, have a huge role to play, imparting gender equality principles to children at a younger age. Such principles are envisaged to produce children who embrace gender equality, shunning male supremacy. Parents need to stress to boys that they ought to treat girls as counterparts and not as subservient.

In line with gender socialisation, some participants highlighted that family members ought to intervene in the lives of relatives and their marriages, too, in order to impart socially accepted gender roles. Chief Two emphasised this:

*Families must be concerned with the relationships of those close to them, just as they all gather to welcome the bride. [emphatic voice] They must not be afraid to interfere because it will be too late to interfere.*

The participants also highlighted that abused wives need to seek assistance from their husbands' relatives regarding marital problems. However, Hadi (2017) established that in-laws sometimes perpetuate VAW.

Some participants highlighted the need for families to fully support VAW survivors and avoid doubting or dismissing survivors' stories, as also suggested by Retief and Green (2015). The quotes below demonstrate that family members

are expected to provide survivors with full support and exhibit faith in VAW survivors' stories rather than doubt them. The following quote by Chief Six illustrates this finding:

*Families and communities need to support survivors by accompanying them and giving them money to travel to the police and to go to the doctor for examinations. Lack of support contributes to failure to report sexual violence crimes.*

Lack of family support and the exhibition of doubt by family members can prevent survivors from reporting VAW crimes. This corroborates findings by Retief and Green (2015), who established that some people think that victims initiate abuse.

Participants highlighted that relatives of illegal gun owners ought to report the presence of such guns to the police. Chief Three had this to say: *This issue about guns bothers me a lot in my village. Family members must tell the police about those who own guns illegally and those who threaten women with guns.* This VAW prevention practice is informed by the proliferation of gun ownership and abuse of those guns in the Maseru urban area, as it was highlighted by participants that guns are used by men to threaten female intimate partners into submission. Chief Five also added, *Young boys must be told by their fathers while still young that they must not use guns or they will get used to using guns when they are older.* Therefore, participants highlighted that family members could intervene by reporting illegal gun owners straight away and any legitimate gun owner who abuses his gun to the police so that such people are made accountable.

Consequently, participants suggested that there is a need for family members, particularly elders, to counsel relatives who abuse drugs and alcohol. This finding was succinctly highlighted by Chief Three as follows:

*Oooh, alcohol and sleeping around are too common in my village. I solve many cases of people who drink a lot of beer and get into trouble. Even women, too; yes, women drink too much, too. Their relatives must educate them about using drugs, drinking alcohol, and too much talk about HIV. You know what, alcohol goes hand in hand with promiscuity and the abuse of women. Therefore, family members must really help such men and women.*

The above sentiments illustrate that, in urban areas of the Maseru district, sexual abuse is linked to the use of drugs and alcohol and promiscuity.

Oche et al. (2020) present similar findings from Ghana. Consequently, participants suggested that one of the VAW prevention practices is the intervention of family members who offer guidance on these specific matters – drug and alcohol abuse and promiscuity. The current study argues that, while family members may be effective at guiding those who are not into such behaviour, their efforts alone may be insufficient for mentoring those who are already involved in it. Therefore, family members ought to involve relevant professionals when dealing with drug and alcohol abusers. Some scholars highlight the importance of rehabilitation programmes for drug and alcohol abusers (Murray et al. 2020). The current study appreciates the role of the family in the rehabilitation of drug and alcohol abusers and holds that family members need to represent a strong support system to augment any professional assistance for this particular VAW prevention practice to be effective.

### ***Perpetrators' narratives about micro-level VAW prevention practices***

Some participants in this category cited instilling boy children with a positive behavioural culture as a critical VAW prevention practice that families can apply. Perpetrator Two added, *Parents can help by teaching young boys how to behave [and] not [...] fight in front of children*. Thus, families socialising children to be peaceful clearly suggests the understanding that exposure to violence at a young age reinforces violent masculinities in adulthood (Monnat–Chandler 2015). Some of the participants highlighted that issues relating to drug and alcohol abuse and promiscuity need to be addressed by educating men about the dangers and contribution of drug and alcohol abuse towards VAW and the spread of HIV. Perpetrator Nine made this suggestion:

*I really think that mature family members can sit down with young men who are abusing drugs and alcohol. Elders must give young men direction, telling them that alcohol abuse triggers sexual violence and many problems for women.*

This family practice is in line with findings from prior studies that established a link between drug and alcohol abuse and VAW (Murray et al. 2020; Fulu–Miedema 2015; Newman 2015). The participants also suggested that family involvement is a critical practice that could also fight VAW. In this regard, Perpetrator Five had this to say:

*Eeeh [pondering] ... Wives must approach their husbands' relatives each time there is a problem inside their marriages and not pack their belongings and go back home or have boyfriends. If they are not satisfied with the marriage, they must open up.*

In this case, gender socialisation is seen as a lifelong process whereby family members continue to impart gender roles and social norms. This finding suggests that the extended family plays a vital part in the provision of counselling to married couples facing marital challenges. Kisa et al. (2019) recommend that social workers offer counselling. The family is, therefore, perceived as a safety net and a gender socialisation agent in the fight against VAW.

### ***Survivors' narratives about micro-level VAW prevention practices***

Some participants in this category cited the family unit as critical in VAW prevention by helping address wayward behaviour by family members. Survivor One had the following to say:

*I once told my mother-in-law that my husband always threatened me with a gun, but she did not help me. Family members must intervene when guns are being used by other members of the family. Parents must stop buying guns (toy guns) for boys because they are teaching boys to use guns.*

Survivor Seven suggested this:

*Families must ... [clearing her throat] be united and fight any form of abuse. My mother and grandmother did not doubt what I told them when I was raped. They gave me all the support. It made everything easier. If they had doubted my story, I was not going to report the case to the police.*

The notion of assuming that victims initiate abuse is grounded in gender stereotypes, where females are perceived as the socially immoral gender and males are perceived as the morally upright gender. The above quotes illuminate the downside of doubting the experiences of the survivors and the lack of some critical forms of support from family – sometimes, survivors are discouraged from reporting abuse cases or incapacitated, and this leads to the perpetuation

of VAW. This study warns that doubting survivors' experiences reflects sexism, whereby women are viewed as the weaker sex that is expected to protect the reputation of the superior sex (men).

Some participants argue that parents must desist from the improper socialisation of boy children, which includes not buying them weaponry toys (such as guns). Survivor One highlighted this: *Parents must stop buying guns (toy guns) for boys because they are teaching boys to use guns*. Participants implicitly appealed to parents to reconsider the issue of buying toy guns for their children. Gender socialisation is an ongoing process (Stewart–Zaaiman 2014). Thus, participants are concerned that by buying toy guns for children, parents will impart gun culture to their children. Gun culture has the potential to breed the normalisation of violence.

### ***Patterns of narratives about VAW prevention***

This sub-section presents and discusses the patterns of participants' responses to VAW prevention practices. These patterns will be discussed in conjunction with the social attributes of participants, such as gender, age, employment status and marital status. With regard to VAW prevention practices that target individuals, participants such as VAW survivors, village chiefs and police officers were in unison about the importance of crime reporting by survivors. Survivors were aged between 18 and 50, with the majority not having a tertiary qualification. Kishor and Johnson (as cited in Kalaca–Dundar 2010) observed that, for women, low educational attainment, being under 25 years of age, living in an urban area, and low socioeconomic status were consistently associated with an increased risk of abuse.

Participants also pointed out that survivors must not withdraw claims about reported cases, and perpetrators must control their feelings. For instance, Chief Six, who is a male aged between 41 and 45 and employed, highlighted the danger associated with the failure to report VAW cases, citing that perpetrators may continue to commit such crimes with impunity. Police Officer Three, who is a female, employed, married, and aged between 31 and 35, concurred by highlighting that the reporting of VAW crimes by survivors enables police officers to investigate cases and arrest the perpetrators. Chiefs and survivors were in agreement that survivors ought to resist perpetrators' abuse. This pattern of responses displayed by survivors, chiefs, and police officers is geared towards preventing perpetrators from committing VAW crimes, and there is a sense of acknowledgement of the fact that individuals are fighting a common enemy (perpetrators).



On the other hand, perpetrators suggested the following VAW prevention practices that individuals can implement: women should avoid walking at night, avoid being in common spaces with men, desist from wearing revealing clothes, and use formal language when talking to men. This pattern of responses exhibits victim blaming and gender bias. All of the perpetrators were males; none had a tertiary qualification, and two had never attended school; six were not formally employed upon their incarceration, and they were aged between 26 and 60. Perpetrators' social attributes linked to VAW include a lack of education, mental health problems, alcohol or drug abuse and an inferiority complex (Kalaca–Dundar 2010; Kanougiya et al. 2022). What is evident about the pattern of perpetrators' responses is that the responses are characterised by mainly apportioning all the blame on the survivors as well as engendering VAW. There is a clear pattern of perpetrators not taking the blame, wanting instead to be viewed as victims of women's bad habits. This pattern of responses reflects that perpetrators of VAW crimes do not take responsibility for their bad conduct. Thus, failure by perpetrators to take ownership of crimes they commit is associated with recidivism and, ultimately, the perpetuation of the VAW social problem in Lesotho. Acknowledging the commission of crime is, therefore, one of the issues that ought to be addressed by social workers as they rehabilitate VAW perpetrators.

With VAW prevention practices at the micro-level, most chiefs saw androgynous socialisation by both nuclear and extended families as one means of preventing VAW within communities. Chiefs also suggested that, in terms of intervention, family members ought to offer guidance to other family members, urge other family members to shun gun use and for family members to report gun ownership to the police. Chiefs also believe that fathers ought to give boys a good direction for the future. Similarly, Ndlovu (2021) and Michau et al. (2015) emphasise the use of VAW prevention practices that involve men and boys. This clear pattern of responses about VAW prevention practices from chiefs reflects the role of chiefs or traditional leaders in any given society, which is to provide guidance to members of society. Village chiefs are custodians of culture, social norms, and values. Therefore, this pattern of response is expected and applauded. Another pattern of responses is that of a few perpetrators who pointed out that fathers and family members ought to guide boys on how to conduct themselves. This is against the backdrop that such perpetrators were male, and they had witnessed abuse at an early age and grown up with absent fathers, which they saw as a contributory factor to their crime commission. Witnessing family violence as a child is linked with VAW (Oche et al. 2020; Kalaca–Dundar 2010). Overall, the patterns of narratives showed how differently participants think about VAW prevention practices at both the ontogenic and micro levels.

## ***Policy recommendations for VAW prevention***

Taking cues from the literature, I make the following recommendations. There is a need for governments to develop and run VAW public awareness campaigns within communities based on existing helplines and interventions (Oche et al. 2020). Gender policies ought to include VAW mitigation strategies that address gender bias and gender stereotyping among men in order to avoid victim-blaming. Since most VAW survivors are unemployed, access to credit and assets ought to be increased to decrease women's risk of VAW perpetrated by men (Barlose 2015). The rationale behind increasing access to resources is that it can potentially give financial autonomy to vulnerable women, ultimately enabling them to leave violent intimate relationships (Ndlovu 2021). Agents that deal with VAW, such as the police force and community leadership, ought to respond to VAW cases in an integrated, coordinated, and sensitive manner by ensuring a comprehensive package of services for VAW survivors (Barlose 2015). These sectors should identify and mitigate the barriers to reporting VAW cases. Thus, the government ought to come up with training programs that are directed at increasing the capacity of organisations, agencies, and individuals to respond to reported and suspected cases of VAW. Training programs ought to focus on dealing with perpetrators' rigid views and gender biases regarding the causes of VAW and reforming ingrained social norms (Afdala et al. 2017). What is also key is the development of legislation and policies that address wider socioeconomic gender inequalities in a bid to advance the status of women in society, as well as mainstreaming gender equality in interventions during the crafting of social policies. Governments ought to prevent VAW through implementing VAW mitigation strategies at the individual and family levels.

## **CONCLUSION**

VAW prevention practices are multifaceted and influenced by factors such as the nature of abuse, cultural beliefs, prevailing attitudes among the community, political will, gender policies and the availability of resources. Narratives about VAW prevention practices at the ontogenic level highlighted what survivors ought to do to protect themselves from VAW. It is not only the duty of survivors since perpetrators can also play a critical role by practising restraint and respecting women and the prevailing laws and legislation that prohibit them from committing VAW crimes. As for narratives on VAW prevention practices at the micro-level, androgynous socialisation focuses on the substitution of the

fallacious notion of male supremacy, replacing it with more socially acceptable practices that have the potential to effectively address rigid gender roles, rigid gender norms, gender biases, patriarchy and gender stereotypes. The study argues that family members have the potential to instil gender equality principles through positive gender socialisation.

Furthermore, family members ought to involve the relevant professionals when dealing with perpetrators who abuse drugs and alcohol to help the latter access counselling and therapy. The current study finds this practice useful but warns that in order for such initiatives to be more effective, there is a need to ensure continuity so that the participants' perceptions are gradually shaped over time. Generally, the patterns of participants' narratives revealed a divergence of views on VAW prevention practices at both the ontogenic and micro-levels. Some of the patterns of responses, particularly those of perpetrators, violate women's rights. Addressing violations of women's rights through VAW perpetrated by men is a priority in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since such violations curtail the attainment of SDG 5, which focuses on gender equality. For policymakers, some of these patterns also threaten the UN's SDGs concerning eliminating poverty (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), good health and well-being (SDG 3) and reducing inequalities (SDG 10). Last, the abundance of VAW cases warrants holistic and effective VAW prevention practices to combat this scourge.

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