

Gender-Based Violence: Structural Roots, Global Dynamics and Policy Interventions

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Abstract

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) represents a pervasive violation of human rights, deeply rooted in structural inequalities and perpetuated by social, cultural, and economic systems. While it affects individuals across all genders, women and gender minorities disproportionately bear the burden due to patriarchal norms and systemic marginalisation. This paper critically explores the multifaceted dimensions of GBV, analyses global patterns and causes, evaluates existing legal and policy responses, and highlights the need for transformative approaches that centre on survivor agency, intersectionality, and community-based interventions.

Keywords: Gender-based Violence, Roots, Global Dynamics, Policy Interventions.

Introduction

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) refers to harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender identity or gender expression. It encompasses a range of physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuses and is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality. Despite international legal frameworks aimed at combating GBV, it remains a global public health and human rights crisis. Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the most pervasive human rights violations worldwide, affecting individuals across social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. It encompasses physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse directed primarily at women and marginalised gender groups. Understanding GBV requires an examination of its structural roots, which include patriarchal norms, gender inequality, socio-economic disparities, and systemic discrimination embedded within institutions. Beyond local contexts, GBV is shaped by global dynamics such as migration, conflict, economic instability, and cultural globalisation, which can exacerbate vulnerabilities and complicate responses. Policymakers and international organisations have increasingly recognised the need for comprehensive interventions, including legal frameworks, social support systems, awareness campaigns, and education programs. This study explores the structural causes of GBV, its manifestations in diverse global contexts, and the policy measures aimed at prevention, protection, and empowerment, highlighting the critical interplay between societal structures and effective interventions.

Background of the Study

Gender-based violence (GBV) has deep historical and structural roots that span cultures, societies, and legal systems. Traditionally, patriarchal norms and gendered power hierarchies have

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reinforced male dominance and female subordination, creating a social environment where violence against women and marginalised gender groups is normalised or overlooked. Globally, GBV manifests in various forms, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, human trafficking, female genital mutilation, child marriage, and intimate partner violence. Structural inequalities—such as disparities in education, economic dependence, lack of legal protection, and limited access to healthcare—exacerbate the vulnerability of women and gender minorities to violence.

Recent decades have seen growing recognition of GBV as a critical human rights and public health issue. International frameworks, including the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have highlighted the urgent need for policy interventions. Despite this, cultural norms, weak institutional enforcement, and socio-economic challenges continue to hinder the effective implementation of prevention and response measures. Understanding GBV thus requires an analysis of both its structural causes and the global dynamics that influence its prevalence and impact.

Existing Evidence

Studies such as WHO (2021) indicate that one in three women worldwide has experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. This evidence supports the view that GBV is a global public health concern requiring systemic intervention.

Defining Gender-Based Violence

According to the United Nations, GBV covers acts that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm to an individual, primarily women and girls. While women disproportionately experience GBV. It affects individuals across genders but disproportionately impacts women and girls.

Forms and Manifestations of Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Gender-based violence (GBV) manifests in multiple forms, affecting individuals physically, psychologically, and socially. Understanding these forms is crucial for effective prevention and intervention.

1. *Physical Violence*: This includes acts such as hitting, slapping, punching, kicking, or any other form of physical assault. It is often perpetrated within households, intimate partnerships, or by community members, and can result in serious injury or death.
2. *Sexual Violence*: Sexual abuse, harassment, exploitation, rape, and coercion fall under this category. Sexual violence can occur in both private and public spaces and remains one of the most underreported forms of GBV due to stigma and fear of retaliation.
3. *Psychological and Emotional Violence*: GBV also includes verbal abuse, intimidation, humiliation, isolation, and controlling behaviours that erode a person's self-esteem and mental health. Emotional violence often accompanies physical and sexual abuse.
4. *Economic Violence*: Limiting access to financial resources, controlling income, denying employment opportunities, or restricting educational access constitutes economic abuse. This form of GBV creates dependence and restricts autonomy.
5. *Cultural and Structural Violence*: Harm may also be embedded in societal norms and practices, such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, honour-based violence, or discriminatory laws and policies that perpetuate gender inequality.

6. *Digital and Online Violence*: With the rise of technology, GBV has extended to cyberspace, including cyberstalking, online harassment, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, and gender-targeted trolling.

Collectively, these forms of GBV undermine personal security, health, and well-being while perpetuating systemic gender inequalities. Addressing them requires a multi-dimensional approach that combines legal enforcement, social awareness, and structural reform.

Violence against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) Individuals

Violence against LGBTQ+ individuals is a severe form of gender-based violence rooted in societal stigma, discrimination, and heteronormative norms. LGBTQ+ people often face multiple forms of abuse, including physical assault, sexual violence, emotional abuse, and systemic marginalisation, simply because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Physical and Sexual Violence: LGBTQ+ individuals frequently experience targeted attacks, hate crimes, and sexual assault. These acts are often underreported due to fear of further discrimination, social ostracism, or lack of legal protection.

Psychological and Emotional Abuse: Verbal harassment, bullying, social exclusion, and threats are everyday experiences for LGBTQ+ individuals. Persistent exposure to such abuse can lead to anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges.

Structural and Institutional Violence: Many LGBTQ+ people face discrimination in education, healthcare, employment, and legal systems. Laws criminalising same-sex relationships, a lack of anti-discrimination protections, and inadequate support services perpetuate systemic violence and limit access to justice.

Intersectional Vulnerabilities: LGBTQ+ individuals who also belong to marginalised ethnic, religious, or socio-economic groups experience compounded risks, facing heightened levels of violence and reduced support.

Addressing violence against LGBTQ+ individuals requires inclusive legal frameworks, social awareness campaigns, and culturally sensitive support services to ensure their safety, rights, and dignity.

Literature Review

Structural Roots of Gender-Based Violence

A substantial body of literature frames gender-based violence (GBV) as stemming from structural inequalities. Galtung's concept of *structural violence*—where societal institutions systematically harm marginalised groups—has been widely used to explain how gendered power imbalances become embedded in social systems.

Sinha et al. (2017) argue that patriarchy, unequal access to resources, and entrenched cultural norms perpetuate a form of violence that transcends physical abuse, limiting women's autonomy and reinforcing their economic and social subordination.

Similarly, Rose et al. (2023) critique common GBV interventions for failing to engage with the systemic nature of violence, calling for structural transformations rather than superficial institutional reforms.

In social movement theory, structural GBV is understood not just as a condition but as a *master frame* through which feminist activism mobilises. Frontiers in *Social Movement Studies* articulate how framing GBV structurally helps link feminist protest to broader social justice agendas (e.g., capitalism, racism, heteronormativity).

Empirical and Contextual Evidence

Empirical research across multiple settings demonstrates how structural factors contribute to GBV. For example, a qualitative study in Nepal shows that gender inequality, power hierarchies, and culturally sanctioned norms are deeply interlocked; "power play" between men and women enables and legitimises violence.

In Mekelle, Ethiopia, Mishra & Aman (2022) document how institutional breakdown, traditional beliefs, economic inequality, and social norms contribute to domestic violence.

Moreover, geospatial analysis has been used to highlight the spatial dynamics of violence. A study in Nairobi modelled patterns of GBV across different neighbourhoods, showing that factors such as time of day, physical environment, and perceived safety strongly influence risk.

There is also a growing literature on *digital gender-based violence*. For instance, a survey in Malawi found that cyber harassment, cyberstalking, and non-consensual sharing of intimate images are significant, yet often underreported, forms of GBV.

Global Dynamics & Socio-Ecological Perspectives

GBV does not operate in a vacuum; global dynamics such as economic inequality, migration, and institutional policy shape its prevalence. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), systematic reviews show that interventions at multiple levels—from structural to individual—are essential.

A landmark review by BMC Public Health synthesises evidence on *structural interventions* (e.g., economic programs, legal reform) aimed at reducing intimate partner violence in LMICs. They find that such interventions can reduce controlling behaviours and shift gender norms, though evaluations vary in rigour and scale.

In school settings, realist reviews show that interventions work best when they create "safe spaces," empower students, engage both boys and girls, and change normative behaviours rather than just delivering information.

Policy Interventions and Institutional Responses

Several studies suggest that anti-GBV policies must be multi-layered. Structural interventions (legal reform, economic empowerment, community engagement) are more sustainable than individually focused programs.

In academic institutions, a recent European study (2025) points to the gap between formal policy (e.g., the EU's framework) and day-to-day implementation. Cultural norms, limited funding, and insufficient coordination undermine efforts to prevent GBV in universities.

There is also critical scholarship on the use of technology and algorithms in GBV response. For instance, Valdivia et al. (2022) examine how risk assessment tools used in courts (e.g., in the Basque Country) can perpetuate bias, lack transparency, and hinder justice.

Addressing Structural Violence: Community-Based & Intersectional Approaches

Intervention literature emphasises the importance of community-led and intersectional strategies. A recent qualitative study from Kenya shows that *safe spaces* run by community organisations help young women challenge institutional, cultural, and economic barriers to health services and reduce structural violence.

Intersectionality is also central: feminist scholars argue that structural violence intersects with race, class, sexuality, and other axes of inequality. Without acknowledging these intersections, policies risk being exclusionary or ineffective.

Comparative research from Zimbabwe and Europe highlights how socio-cultural and economic barriers differ by region but share core roots in patriarchal norms and power hierarchies.

Gaps and Critiques in the Literature

Despite growing scholarship, several key gaps persist:

- *Evaluation of Structural Interventions:* Many studies lack rigorous long-term evaluation. For example, structural interventions to prevent IPV are understudied in terms of sustained normative change.
- *Algorithmic Bias & Institutional Tools:* As risk assessment tools proliferate, research into their fairness, transparency, and real-world consequences remains nascent.
- *Digital GBV:* Although cyber violence is recognised, there is limited policy implementation and prevention work, especially in LMICs.
- *Intersectionality in Policy Design:* Policies often treat GBV in a gender binary and fail to address the specific vulnerabilities of LGBTQ+ people, racial minorities, or economically marginalised groups.
- *Implementation Gap:* There is often a disconnect between policy frameworks (primarily global or regional) and their practical implementation on the ground.

Research Methodology

The research methodology involves reviewing theoretical frameworks, existing studies, and policy analyses related to GBV. Secondary data from global organisations such as the UN, WHO, and Amnesty International are examined to understand trends, causes, and responses. A qualitative approach, emphasising literature review and conceptual synthesis, has been employed.

Theoretical Frameworks and Conceptual Foundations

Understanding GBV necessitates a multidisciplinary lens. Feminist theory, particularly intersectional feminism (Crenshaw, 1989), provides a robust framework for analysing how overlapping systems of oppression, such as patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and heteronormativity, shape individuals' experiences of violence. Structural violence theory further situates GBV within broader social systems that produce and normalise inequality (Galtung, 1969). These approaches challenge the individualistic framing of GBV and emphasise the need for systemic change.

Structural Drivers of GBV

Patriarchy and Cultural Norms

Patriarchal ideologies, reinforced through religion, media, and education, legitimise male control over women's bodies and lives. GBV thus functions as a tool to enforce gender hierarchies and maintain social control.

Economic Inequality and Dependency

Economic dependency limits victims' ability to escape abusive situations. Moreover, neoliberal policies that reduce social protections disproportionately impact women, exacerbating their vulnerability to violence (Fraser, 2013).

Conflict and Displacement

Armed conflict and displacement heighten the risk of GBV, particularly for women and girls. Rape is often used as a weapon of war, and refugee camps frequently lack adequate protection mechanisms (Amnesty International, 2019).

Results and Discussion

The study of gender-based violence (GBV) reveals a multifaceted and pervasive problem affecting women and LGBTQ+ individuals across different social, economic, and cultural contexts. The results highlight both the prevalence and the structural drivers of GBV, while the discussion examines the implications for policy and society.

Prevalence of GBV

Research indicates that GBV remains widespread, with high rates of physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse reported among women. In many regions, domestic violence is the most common form, often perpetuated by intimate partners or family members. Among LGBTQ+ individuals, harassment, hate crimes, and discrimination are prevalent, with transgender persons being particularly vulnerable due to societal stigma and legal invisibility. Online violence has emerged as a significant threat, with cyberbullying, harassment, and non-consensual sharing of intimate material increasing globally.

Structural and Societal Roots

GBV is deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, gender inequality, and systemic discrimination. Cultural practices, traditional norms, and legal frameworks that fail to protect vulnerable groups reinforce power imbalances. For LGBTQ+ individuals, heteronormativity, criminalisation of same-sex relationships, and institutional exclusion exacerbate vulnerability. Socio-economic factors, such as poverty, lack of education, and unemployment, further limit victims' ability to seek protection or redress.

Impact on Individuals and Society

The consequences of GBV are profound, extending beyond immediate physical harm. Victims experience psychological trauma, decreased productivity, and reduced participation in social and economic activities. In LGBTQ+ populations, the fear of violence often leads to social isolation, mental health issues, and underreporting of abuse. On a societal level, GBV undermines social cohesion, perpetuates inequality, and imposes economic costs through lost productivity, healthcare expenses, and legal interventions.

Policy and Intervention Insights

Existing interventions, including legal frameworks, awareness campaigns, and support services, show mixed effectiveness. While countries with stronger anti-GBV legislation demonstrate lower levels of violence, gaps in enforcement, social acceptance, and access to justice remain critical barriers. For LGBTQ+ individuals, inclusive policies are often limited or poorly implemented, leaving them at continued risk. Evidence suggests that integrated approaches combining legal protection, education, economic empowerment, and community engagement are more successful in reducing GBV.

Discussion

The findings underscore the need to address GBV as both a structural and societal issue. Patriarchal norms, discriminatory laws, and economic inequalities reinforce cycles of violence. Addressing these root causes requires a multi-dimensional strategy, including policy reforms, education programs promoting gender equality, and targeted interventions for marginalised groups. Furthermore, the study highlights the intersectionality of vulnerabilities, showing that women and

LGBTQ+ individuals with overlapping social disadvantages face heightened risks. Promoting inclusivity, awareness, and social change is essential to reducing GBV and creating safer, equitable societies.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence remains a pervasive global issue with deep structural, cultural, and economic roots. Women and LGBTQ+ individuals are disproportionately affected, facing physical, sexual, psychological, and financial harm. The study highlights that addressing GBV requires more than legal measures; it necessitates structural reforms, societal norm changes, and comprehensive support systems. Policies that combine prevention, protection, and empowerment—while being inclusive and sensitive to intersectional vulnerabilities—are essential for meaningful change. Reducing GBV not only protects individual rights but also fosters social cohesion, economic growth, and sustainable development. Ultimately, coordinated efforts by governments, communities, and international organisations are critical to eliminating GBV and creating safer, more equitable societies.

Recommendations

1. *Strengthen Legal Frameworks:* Governments should implement and enforce comprehensive laws against all forms of GBV, including protections for women and LGBTQ+ individuals, and ensure swift legal recourse for survivors.
2. *Promote Education and Awareness:* Community-based programs and school curricula should address gender equality, consent, and respectful relationships to shift harmful societal norms.
3. *Enhance Support Services:* Expand accessible shelters, counselling, healthcare, and legal aid for survivors, ensuring these services are sensitive to the needs of both women and LGBTQ+ individuals.
4. *Economic Empowerment:* Provide vocational training, microfinance, and employment opportunities to reduce economic dependence, a key factor increasing vulnerability to GBV.
5. *Data Collection and Research:* Develop inclusive, disaggregated data systems to track GBV incidents, particularly among marginalised groups like LGBTQ+ populations, to inform evidence-based policies.
6. *Multi-Sectoral Collaboration:* Encourage cooperation among governments, NGOs, healthcare providers, and law enforcement to develop holistic interventions that address prevention, protection, and rehabilitation.

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