



Social workers' responses to gender-based violence during climate-related disasters in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study examined how the occurrence of climate change-induced disasters affects women and girls by exacerbating existing vulnerabilities to gender-based violence and identifying effective social work interventions for preventing, responding to, and supporting victims of gender-based violence. A qualitative research method using a case study design was employed in the study. Data was collected from 26 social work practitioners through focus group discussions and analysed using thematic analysis. The study revealed that the occurrence of climate change-induced disasters increases the prevalence of gender-based violence incidents, particularly for women and girls, due to their vulnerability. The risks are amplified by internal displacement, loss of livelihood, scarcity of resources, and weakened social protection in the wake of disasters. Social workers implement a range of interventions, including creating child-friendly spaces, awareness campaigns, linking survivors with resource systems, psycho-social support, and providing immediate relief. These interventions contribute immensely to survivor protection and support. The study highlights the need for disaster-oriented social work practice, effective collaboration among organisations, and intensifying community-based awareness campaigns to challenge harmful cultural practices that create a cycle of violence against girls and women. This study contributes to the growing field of disaster-oriented social work practice by highlighting how disasters heighten the risks of gender-based violence among women and girls. It also offers actionable insights for social work practitioners and policymakers.

Keywords: Climate Change-Induced Disasters; Gender-Based Violence; Social Work Practice; Women; Girls; Zimbabwe; Manicaland Province

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Cite this article as: Shayamano, M. (2025), "Social workers' responses to gender-based violence during climate-related disasters in Zimbabwe", *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, Vol. 14 No. 9, pp. 771-788.

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1. Introduction

Climate change is currently a pressing global issue. It has reshaped disaster risks, with climate change triggering the occurrence and frequency of disasters such as droughts, storms, heat waves, floods, and cyclones. Thurston et al. (2021) posit that the frequency, severity, and intensity of climate change-induced disasters are increasing drastically globally. Between 2000 and 2019, there were 6,681 recorded climate-change-related disasters, representing an increase of 82.7% compared to the 3,656 climate-change-related disaster events recorded between 1980 and 1999 (Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters and United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2020).

Africa is becoming more susceptible to these climate-change-induced disasters, as evidenced by recurring disasters from 2019 to the present. Most African countries are vulnerable to cyclones and storms, leading to severe flooding for the affected communities (Lad and Hollowell, 2024). In 2019, Cyclone Idai caused severe flooding in Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, affecting more than 2 million people (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], 2020). More than 1,000 people lost their lives during this disaster event, and over 500,000 people were displaced in these three countries (IMDC, 2020). This places women and girls at significant risk for GBV. Rapinyana and Baratedi (2023) posit that violence against girls and women is one of the leading human rights challenges in most African countries.

In South Africa, flooding has become more common in most parts of the country, with the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces being the most affected. In Zimbabwe, climate change has increased the frequency and intensity of its associated disasters, and the most occurring disasters in the country are floods, droughts and cyclones (Shayamano et al., 2025). The most recent disasters in Zimbabwe are Cyclone Idai in 2019, Tropical Storm Chalane in 2020, Cyclone Eloise in 2021, Cyclone Freddy in 2023, and Cyclone Filipo in 2024, which caused significant loss of life, displacement and infrastructure damage. For instance, Cyclone Idai of 2019 affected about 270,000 people in the country, resulting in the death of 340 individuals, and many others remain unaccounted for (Chatiza, 2019). In Zimbabwe, Manicaland province is more prone to these climate-change-related disasters. Hence, this study focuses on Manicaland province to explore the intersection of climate-change-related disasters and GBV.

Furthermore, many studies have linked disasters with loss of life, damage to infrastructure and economic losses (Brazier, 2017; Chatiza, 2019; Panwar and Sen, 2019). The reality is that these disasters not only result in economic losses and infrastructure damage but also worsen social vulnerabilities, including GBV. As the world continues to experience increased vulnerability to climate-change-related disasters, GBV against women and girls will be increasingly prevalent. Climate-change-related disasters often result in displacement and food insecurity and disrupt economic stability, which are the major drivers for GBV, placing women and girls at high risk (Irish Consortium on Gender-Based Violence, 2022). Thurston et al. (2021) concur that disaster occurrences increase stressors that trigger GBV, create an enabling environment for GBV to thrive and exacerbate the existing drivers of GBV.

In addition, several studies have identified internal displacement, loss of livelihood, scarcity of resources, weakened protection systems, breakdown of family structures, food insecurity and collapse of law enforcement services as the key drivers for violence against women and girls during and after disaster events (Desai and Mandal, 2021; IFRC, 2015; Thurston et al., 2021). This calls for disaster-oriented social work practice that focuses on active involvement in disaster management's prevention, preparedness, response and

recovery phases. Social work involvement is critical in addressing these risk factors for mitigating GBV in the context of disasters.

In light of the above arguments, this paper seeks to understand how the occurrence of climate change-induced disasters affects women and girls by exacerbating existing vulnerabilities to GBV. Additionally, the study also seeks to identify effective social work interventions for preventing, responding to, and supporting victims of GBV during disasters. The article also offered recommendations for social work practice during disasters to mitigate the risks of GBV against women and girls. By responding to these risk factors, social work practitioners can make meaningful contributions to protecting women and girls against violence during and after disaster occurrences. This, in turn, fosters a safer and more resilient environment for women and girls in disaster-prone areas who face heightened risks for GBV.

2. Literature review

Climate change and its related disasters have become a critical factor in exacerbating GBV during and after disasters, particularly for females, who are the most vulnerable group during such humanitarian crises. This section conceptualises GBV and explores the complex dynamics of GBV in the context of climate-change-related disasters, focusing on the perspectives and roles of social workers in addressing these vulnerabilities and risks.

2.1. Defining gender-based violence

Gender-based violence is widely recognised as a violation of human rights. It is conceptualised as “an umbrella term for any harmful act perpetrated against a person’s will, and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty” (Inter-Agency Standing Committee [IASC], 2015: 5). Both males and females can be subjected to GBV (UNHCR, 2020). However, women and girls face a high risk due to imbalances in social power and influence, resource control and participation in public life (IASC, 2015).

In addition, GBV has many forms, such as sexual violence, physical violence, economic violence, and emotional violence. Intimate partners are the most recognised perpetrators of GBV during humanitarian crises (IASC, 2015), where they subject their partners to physical, psychological, emotional and financial abuse. The most common acts of sexual violence involve rape, attempted rape, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, and unsolicited physical advances (GBVIMS Steering Committee, 2017). For young girls, sexual violence can be in the form of forced and early marriages. For instance, disasters often disrupt people’s livelihoods, resulting in financial instability. This financial situation often forces families to marry off their daughters (Sullivan et al., 2021). These early and forced child marriages are used as coping strategies in response to economic shocks.

In line with the above, financial stress during disaster events also forces the disaster survivors to engage in survival or transactional sex, where women and girls offer sex in exchange for food, security and money (Sullivan et al., 2021). Chikoko and Chihiya (2023) found that girls in Bikita, Zimbabwe, resorted to transactional sex following a drought that occurred in the area. Most of the young girls were sexually abused

and impregnated for food. This highlights the vulnerability of girls and women to GBV during and after disasters.

Physical violence as a form of GBV mainly occurs in intimate partner relationships. Rapinyana and Baratedi (2023) assert that physical GBV relates to any act of using physical force with the intention of causing harm to another individual. Ngonga (2016) define physical violence as the act or any behaviour that is intended to cause physical harm to the victim or threaten to cause harm. This may include acts such as beating, spanking, kicking, biting, and burning, with the perpetrator using or not using any weapons. This is a gross violation of human rights. Nyahunda et al. (2020) found that most women who were placed in temporary shelters during the Cyclone Idai disaster in Manicaland province were subjected to domestic violence from their partners, who would accuse them of not saving their valuables during flooding. Similarly, Nyahunda et al. (2021) found that frustrations emanating from experiencing disasters, coupled with spending a lot of time together as a couple, resulted in increased incidences of physical violence against women in Nyanga. This is an indication that disaster events trap women under unpleasant circumstances.

In addition, some cultural beliefs and practices perpetuate environments conducive for GBV to thrive. In Botswana, for instance, girls are taught that they are inferior to men, with some teachings suggesting that physical violence is a sign of love (Rapinyana and Baratedi, 2023). These cultural teachings are harmful as they normalise abuse, making it difficult for the victims to recognise and report this abusive behaviour, as they may view it as normal and acceptable. However, some men may also be victims of physical GBV, but such incidents are underreported as women are more likely to report such abuse as compared to men (Ngonga, 2016).

Furthermore, victims of GBV are subjected to economic violence, which is any behaviour that causes or is likely to cause financial harm to another individual. Rapinya and Baratedi (2023) posit that economic GBV relates to acts of excluding or denying someone access to financial resources. This may include denying access to property rights, renumerating employment, or not complying with one's economic responsibilities, such as childcare and maintenance. Usually, the perpetrators would be attempting to take full control of all financial resources to make their victims dependent on them for everything.

Lastly, emotional violence or psychological violence relates to the deliberate infliction of emotional pain or injury on another individual. It includes behaviours such as isolating an individual from his/her friends or family, restricting one's movements, insulting or humiliating someone and degrading. These behaviours seriously affect the victims, who may later struggle to view themselves as worthy (Rapinyana and Baratedi, 2023). Ngonga (2016) concur that emotional violence tends to have profound psychological repercussions on the victims as they have low self-esteem and may develop personality disorders. As such, professionals must intervene early and offer psychosocial support and trauma-informed counselling.

The above-discussed forms of GBV have critical short-term to long-term effects on the victims if help is not sought. Existing societal factors, such as power imbalances between men and women and cultural norms, perpetuate GBV. The occurrences of disasters can amplify these pre-existing conditions and increase GBV risks. As climate change and its related disasters intensify, it creates an environment where GBV is more likely to occur. In this context, it is critical to understand the nexus between climate change-related disasters and the

increase in GBV cases. This will likely help disaster-oriented social work practitioners develop effective intervention strategies to prevent and mitigate GBV risks during humanitarian crises.

2.2. The nexus between climate change and gender-based violence

Many studies have argued that the occurrence of disasters intensifies cases of GBV, with women and girls being the prime victims. As disasters continue to rise in frequency, intensity, and impact, women and girls continue to face a double tragedy. Machimbidza et al. (2022) posit that when disasters occur, women and girls are subjected to multiple forms of abuse and neglect. Thus, making social work interventions critical in advocating for the protection of women and girls during humanitarian crises.

Several factors contribute to rising cases of GBV during disasters. Literature has shown that disasters displace people, alter their livelihoods, cause food insecurity and disrupt social protection systems (IASC, 2015; Slick and Hertz, 2024; UNHCR, 2020). These factors create conditions that heighten the risk of GBV among girls and women. For instance, disasters such as droughts result in food insecurity for many households, thus forcing families to marry off their daughters or young girls being exploited in exchange for food. A study conducted in Malawi by Desai and Mandal (2021) found that young girls were forced into early marriages due to food insecurity emanating from climate change. Similarly, Chikoko and Chihiya (2023) also concur that climate change and its related disasters often leave many households food insecure, which may heighten young girls' risk for abuse and exploitation by older men in exchange for food.

In addition, climate-change-related disasters often destroy people's homes, forcing them into displacement. For instance, Cyclone Idai displaced 86,976 people in Malawi, 478,169 people in Mozambique and 50,905 people in Zimbabwe (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], 2020). These people are forced to live in temporary shelters in schools, community halls or temporary tents, where it is often overcrowded with women, men and children sharing living spaces. This places women and girls at heightened risk for sexual violence as they will be living in close proximity to potential perpetrators. Murphy et al. (2022) concur that internally displaced girls and women often face additional risk factors for gender-based violence while living in camps.

In Zimbabwe, following Cyclone Idai in Manicaland province, the internally displaced individuals were placed in centres such as the Tongogara Refugee Camp. These centres were unsafe for the girls and women as they exposed them to risks of abuse and transactional sex (Chatiza, 2019). Similarly, the IASC (2015) reports that most of the temporary shelters for displaced individuals pose significant risks of abuse for girls and women due to overcrowding and a lack of privacy in such settings. Most of these shelters do not have doors or partitions for changing clothes, thus heightening the risk of sexual harassment for young girls and women. As displacement continues, the scarcity of resources in temporary shelters, such as food scarcity, also exacerbates sexual exploitation (IASC, 2015).

Furthermore, climate change-related disasters destroy people's livelihoods, placing many households in dire economic crisis. This loss of income and source of livelihood contributes significantly to the increased risk of GBV (Slick and Hertz, 2024) due to the associated loss. IASC (2015) posits that during disaster events, many individuals will have limited opportunities and finances to meet the needs of their families. This puts pressure on the household heads and results in tensions in the family, which may subsequently end in intimate partner violence. Additionally, the economic vulnerability caused by disaster events also increases the exposure of

women and girls to sexual exploitation by aid workers (IASC, 2015), as they would be willing to do anything to have access to money or food. In some cases, young girls and women will remain trapped in abusive relationships just for financial support.

Disasters can undermine existing social and child protection systems. During such events, law enforcement services often break down, creating an environment where perpetrators may exploit the situation, knowing their victims have no safe place to report them. The IASC (2015) reports that the occurrence of disasters often places young children at heightened risk of violence due to the breakdown of family and community structures that protect children against abuse and exploitation, as well as the lack of the rule of law. This breakdown significantly reduces access to protective services for victims of GBV, leaving them with limited options for seeking help. This underscores the need for robust protection services and mechanisms that function even during humanitarian crises.

2.3. Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by the Ecological Model by Heise (1998) to explain multi-level risk factors for GBV. The ecological approach conceptualises GBV as a multifaceted phenomenon characterised by an interplay among personal, situational and socio-cultural factors (Heise, 1998). The personal factors refer to the biological factors that influence the behaviour of an individual and increase their chances of either becoming victims or perpetrators of GBV (World Health Organisation, 2020). According to Heise (1998), these ontogenic or individual factors are the experiences or personalities that shape an individual's response to stressors. For instance, individuals who grew up in a violent environment where they witnessed GBV as children are likely to be abusive towards their partners.

Furthermore, Heise (1998) identified situational factors as the interactions in which individuals directly engage with others. This is also known as the microsystem. In the context of GBV, these microsystems relate to the family, which is one of the structures that is likely to increase the risk of GBV among girls and women. Heise (1998) links this structure to male dominance. As a result, males are perceived as having economic and decision-making authority. This dominance has resulted in high rates of violence against women.

In addition, the exosystem relates to the formal and informal social structures that indirectly affect an individual, such as the workplace and local institutions. Heise (1998) links factors such as unemployment to an increase in GBV occurrences. In the context of disasters, many people often lose their sources of livelihood and suffer economic losses, which then creates environments where violence can thrive.

Lastly, Heise (1998) identified macrosystem factors as the broad set of cultural norms, values and beliefs that shape people's attitudes towards violence and the conditions that allow GBV to persist. During humanitarian crises, these factors can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and create new risks for GBV, especially among females.

Applying the ecological model in this study enabled the researcher to systematically explore how multiple levels interact to heighten the risks of GBV, especially among females during disaster events. Each level of the ecological model represents a system that influences GBV risks. Additionally, applying this model in the context of climate change-induced disasters also shapes social work interventions at each level to mitigate the risks for GBV within the complex systems.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research approach and design

This study was underpinned by a qualitative research design using a case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the complexity of disasters in exacerbating GBV against females. Creswell (2022) argues that a qualitative research approach enables researchers to gain detailed insights into phenomena from a few individuals. A qualitative approach facilitated a rich and in-depth understanding of the social work practitioners' experiences, interventions and challenges in responding to GBV cases during climate change-induced disasters.

3.2. Participants of the study

Twenty-six social work practitioners from Manicaland province in Zimbabwe were purposively selected for inclusion in the study. Creswell (2022) posits that purposive sampling entails selecting study participants with adequate knowledge of the studied phenomenon to enable the researcher to understand the explored central phenomenon. Thus, social workers were selected based on their extensive knowledge of GBV during disasters since they work closely with the victims and survivors during interventions. Additionally, the social work practitioners had to possess a recognised social work qualification, practice in either a government department or a non-governmental organisation, practice in Manicaland Province, and be knowledgeable concerning social workers' roles and interventions.

3.3. Instrumentation and data gathering process

Focus group discussions were conducted with the selected 26 social work practitioners. A focus group discussion guide with open-ended questions was used as a research instrument to gather data from the practitioners. Three focus group discussions were conducted, with two having nine participants each and one having eight participants. The focus group discussion guide covered questions such as:

- What are the main types of GBV faced by women and girls in your community?
- How do climate change-related disasters increase the risk or severity of GBV?
- What role do social workers play in responding to these GBV cases?

3.4. Data analysis

The collected data was analysed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2012) guidelines, which include familiarisation, coding, theme generation, theme reviewing, defining and naming themes, and writing up. To become thoroughly familiar with the gathered data, the researcher transcribed the recordings, repeatedly reviewed the transcripts to identify emerging patterns, and wrote down notes throughout the process. Then the researcher went on to label and organise the collected data into meaningful groups. This led to the development of a thematic table with possible themes for the study. The researcher ensured that these formulated potential themes had sufficient data to support each theme. The potential themes were then refined, ensuring that the data and the identified themes form a coherent story on social workers' responses to GBV during climate change-related disasters in Manicaland province in Zimbabwe. Lastly, the researcher presented

a concise account of the vulnerabilities of females to GBV during disasters and social workers' interventions for preventing, responding to, and supporting victims of GBV.

3.5. Research Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of the Witwatersrand (07 June 2021/ No. H21/04/35). Written informed consent was obtained from the social work practitioners. A participant information sheet was provided to the practitioners, summarising the research, its purpose, and the role of the participants. This information ensured that participants could make an informed decision about their involvement in the study. The researcher also ensured the confidentiality of the information shared during the focus group discussions by protecting the participants' identities and personal information during data analysis and presentation.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Risk factors contributing to vulnerabilities

4.1.1. Forced displacement

The study participants reported that several disasters were experienced in Manicaland province, which destroyed many homes and resulted in the forced displacement of many families. The Manicaland province was affected by cyclone Dineo in 2017, cyclone Idai in 2019 and cyclone Eloise in 2021, among other climate change-related disasters. The forced displacements caused by these disasters place women and young girls at significant risk for GBV due to overcrowding in the centres. Consistent with the ecological model, forced displacement often disrupts protective community and relational systems, thus heightening the vulnerability of females at multiple ecological levels. The participants in this study described how forced displacement following disaster occurrences led to overcrowded shelters and loss of social networks, heightening exposure to violence. The following narrations from social work practitioners during focus group discussions confirm this:

One of the practitioners in the focus group discussions stated that:

"I have been working here in Manicaland province since 2015, and there have been a lot of disasters, especially cyclones and floods, which destroyed people's homes. ... We evacuate to temporary shelters in schools or tents so that they can at least have a roof over their head. Many families will be accommodated in 1 classroom if they are at a school or in 1 church hall if they are evacuated to a church"

"We get reports of gender-based violence cases and sometimes sexual abuse cases from these shelters"

"... so both children and adults will stay together in the community hall or school classrooms they use as temporary shelter. They will have shelter, but at times, these shelters are not safe, especially

for girls and women. I said this because we receive cases of women who their partners abuse and also some children who become victims of rape.”

The above narrations by the social work practitioners during focus group discussions highlight the precarious living conditions forced displacement creates, which significantly increases women and girls' vulnerability to GBV in Manicaland province. This validates previous studies that revealed that forced displacement heightens the risks for GBV against girls and women (Chatiza, 2019; ISAC, 2015; Murphy et al., 2022). Individuals internally displaced due to disasters are placed in camps or tents for temporary shelter.

However, Chatiza (2019) argues that these temporary shelters are unsafe spaces, particularly for women and children, placing them at significant risk for GBV. Chatiza (2019) contends that during the Cyclone Idai disaster in Manicaland province in 2019, reports of abuse of internally displaced women and children were seen. A non-governmental organisation responding to the crisis handled 49 cases of physical abuse and 31 cases of sexual abuse, including rape, among internally displaced individuals. This shows that exposure to disasters is closely linked to gender-based violence, as the displacement that accompanies disasters exacerbates existing vulnerabilities, particularly for women and girls. Thus, it underscored the need for social work interventions to protect girls and women from human rights violations during humanitarian crises.

4.1.2. Loss of livelihood

This study established that the sources of livelihood and income for families in Manicaland province were disrupted by the intense and frequent climate change-induced disasters. The social work practitioners in this study stated that this livelihood alteration and disruption of income increases the risks of GBV against girls and women during disaster events. This is attributed to the economic instability accompanying the loss of income or livelihood. The study established that the locals rely on agriculture. When flooding occurs, it washes away all the crops and animals, leaving the families food insecure and with no source of livelihood. As a result, the victims of these climate change-induced disasters resort to harmful coping mechanisms to survive. On this point, one of the social work practitioners during the focus group discussions stated that:

“... and men become frustrated after losing everything, and they then take out their frustrations on their wives by harassing them or even beating them”

This statement shows that the stress and frustrations associated with livelihood alterations during disasters in Manicaland province heighten the risk of GBV against women. This finding is consistent with the findings of Nyahunda et al. (2021) in Nyanga, which showed that disaster events often result in frustrations that can affect intimate partner relationships significantly, with women as the weaker partners being subjected to abuse.

Additionally, to cushion the economic instability resulting from the loss of livelihood and income, many families resort to harmful coping mechanisms such as forcing their daughters into early marriages or women and girls engaging in transactional sex. The following narrations from the social work practitioners confirm this:

“... and then some families marry off their daughters so that they have fewer people to feed and also to get something in the form of lobola”

“...it is disheartening to witness girls as young as 16 years being married off”

The above confirms that disaster events heighten the risk of violence for young girls and women. Inasmuch as the families may view early marriage as a survival mechanism during times of disaster, they, however, fail to realise that they are violating those young girls' rights and possibly trapping them into abusive relationships. This finding validates earlier studies that revealed that climate change and its related disasters drive children into early and forced marriages (Desai and Mandal, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2021). This shows that disaster events represent a double tragedy for young girls, as they face not only the immediate risks of disasters but also must endure human rights violations. Additionally, these early marriages also have long-term consequences for the victims as they limit their future opportunities and well-being.

Another harmful coping mechanism used by disaster-induced internally displaced individuals in Manicaland province is transactional sex. One of the social work practitioners mentioned the following:

“... and another thing that happens around here during such disasters is survival sex, where women use sex to secure basic needs like food so that they can feed their children”

The statement aligns with the findings of a study conducted by Chikoko and Chihiya (2023) in Buhera. Their research revealed that the drought in Buhera left many families impoverished and food insecure, prompting young girls to resort to transactional sex in exchange for food. Sullivan et al. (2021) confirm that women and girls affected by disaster events engage in transactional sex for security, food, or shelter, viewing it as a strategy to alleviate their financial struggles. However, this increases their vulnerability to sexual exploitation and violence.

4.1.3. Weakened protection systems

It has been established that disaster events disrupt the existing protection systems in the affected communities. The perpetrators leverage the weak law enforcement mechanisms and disruption of normal existing protection systems to abuse and exploit women and girls. Thus, contributing to the high prevalence of GBV during humanitarian crises in Manicaland province. In support of this, one of the social work practitioners mentioned the following:

“...and then we see a rise in gender-based violence cases after disasters occur because the perpetrators know that with the disruption of all services, they can act freely.”

The above statement gives credence to the findings by WHO (2020) that the disruption of protective systems and decreased access to services exacerbate the risk of violence against females. Similar observations were made by IASC (2015) that if the law and order. As such, the government and organisations must put in place effective mechanisms to support and protect women and girls from violence during such critical times. Social workers, as key role players in promoting social justice and protecting human rights, should, therefore, be proactive in their approach to ensure the protection of girls and women who are most vulnerable during disaster events.

4.2. Social work intervention strategies

Social work practice is critical during disasters as it seeks to protect human rights. Shayamano et al. (2025) argue that social work practitioners play an intrinsic role during disasters to enhance resilience for the affected people and communities. This study has established that climate change and its related disasters heighten the risks of exposure to violence for young girls and women. This section discusses the social work intervention strategies to prevent, respond to, and support victims of GBV during humanitarian crises in Manicaland province, Zimbabwe.

4.2.1. Creating child-friendly spaces for children

The study findings and existing literature suggest that children are vulnerable to sexual abuse during disasters due to internal displacement, where they are forced to share living spaces with adults who may be potential perpetrators. As such, to protect these vulnerable girls, social work practitioners create child-friendly spaces to enable the children to report such cases and access psychosocial support. The social work practitioners in this study indicated that their intervention strategies during disasters encompass creating child-friendly spaces for children. The practitioners indicated that this child-friendly space is a program implemented by the United Nations Population Fund and the Department of Social Development, with support from various local organisations to focus on children's and women's issues during disaster events. The following narrations confirm this:

"There is a child-friendly spaces program being implemented during disasters... first implemented during cyclone Idai and is now being implemented on several occasions to support children affected by disasters. We set up the space in the evacuation centres"

"...we often have cases of children being sexually abused by adults in the temporary shelters, and some have no one to report to since they will be from families that do not have adults, those child-headed families, and it traumatises them"

"From the cases that we have always been handling when these disasters occur, we have noticed a rise in abuse cases of children and mostly these children do not report such abuse because of fear. So as social workers, we then focus on having these child-friendly spaces set up so that such children can be free to discuss and disclose the abuse."

"I am glad that these child-friendly spaces exist because they have been really helpful, because they allow children and young girls to report abuse cases"

The above shows the importance of safe spaces during disasters as they provide secure environments conducive for GBV victims to open up and share their experiences. This will, therefore, facilitate effective interventions by professionals to support the victims. The social work practitioners also noted that these spaces help reduce the risk of further violence and have been seen as enabling environments that increase case reporting and access to services. This aligns with the GBV guidelines by IASC (2015) that suggest implementing women-, adolescents- and children-friendly spaces during disasters to facilitate nurturing environments.

4.2.2. Awareness campaigns

The social work practitioners reported engaging in community awareness campaigns about GBV. The practitioners reported that they often organise and facilitate community workshops, dialogues and programs that engage diverse community members, including men, aimed at promoting gender equality within communities and challenging discriminatory practices that increase women and girls' vulnerability during disasters. Social workers argued that these community awareness campaigns are essential, and they help communities to recognise the heightened risk of GBV during disasters and encourage collective responsibility for the prevention of such incidents. During these campaigns, the practitioners would be educating the communities about child protection issues, children's and human rights, gender-based violence, reporting mechanisms and services offered by social workers. On this point, the social work practitioners stated:

"As social workers, we do awareness campaigns in communities, which are important as they help change societal attitudes towards gender-based violence. I believe that this will encourage community members to take action against gender-based violence against girls and women."

"...yeah, these awareness campaigns are important as they raise awareness on gender-based violence issues, and it will also encourage violated girls and women to report such incidents and seek professional help"

The above narrations underscore the importance of social work practice in protecting and supporting women and children from the risks of GBV during humanitarian crises. From an ecological model perspective, these awareness campaigns are part of the mesosystem interventions where the practitioners focus on challenging harmful practices and fostering collective responsibility for preventing GBV against women and girls during disasters. The above finding validates the recommendation by the IASC (2015) that humanitarian actors must promote awareness of GBV and ensure safe interventions. From this, the researcher argues that social work practitioners can leverage national and global campaigns to raise awareness of GBV, such as the Sixteen Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. These initiatives call for adherence to international human rights laws to protect adolescent girls and adult women.

The practitioners involved in this study emphasised their use of global campaigns in Manicaland to raise awareness about GBV issues. These organisations educate communities using local languages to ensure effective communication with the locals in Manicaland province. However, Chatiza (2019) argues that most organisations are under-resourced, which makes it challenging to conduct awareness campaigns. To address this, organisations need to collaborate effectively to secure funding for such activities.

4.2.3. Linking survivors and victims with resource systems

This study has established that disaster events destroy people's houses and livelihoods, leaving many families homeless and vulnerable. As such, it becomes critical for social work practitioners to support those families by linking them with resource systems to support their immediate and long-term needs. The practitioners acknowledged that they link the victims and survivors of GBV with organisations that can offer them holistic support and services they require to return to their normal functioning. One of the practitioners stated:

"...we do not offer all the services that GBV survivors need, so we then link them with organisations that offer the services and support so that they can regain control over their lives."

Another practitioner commented that:

"Economic support is also important for GBV survivors. Most of the victims here have no access to financial resources, especially women, and that is why they end up being victims of gender-based violence, because they would be relying on their husbands financially."

The above statements show the importance of social work practice in linking people with resource systems. From the focus group discussions, many practitioners indicated that most women in Manicaland end up staying in abusive intimate partner relationships because they lack financial independence. Hence, the social work practitioner believes linking survivors with economic support programmes and income-generating opportunities can significantly help them change their lives. This gives credence to the GBVIMS Steering Committee (2017), which opines that women who have gone through GBV need adequate support and assistance in accessing the needed resources.

In addition, during humanitarian crises, services may be overstretched, and other critical infrastructure, such as hospitals and clinics, may have been destroyed. Thus, strengthening the referral system and ensuring effective linkage to resource systems becomes a key intervention to reduce harm and support recovery for the affected populations. It is also critical to note that the services are not only confined to financial support, but they also encompass other critical services needed by victims of GBV, such as healthcare, legal aid support and support in obtaining a protection order. For instance, one of the social work practitioners in the study indicated that she once assisted one of the GBV victims who had visited their offices by linking her with support networks that enabled her to obtain a protection order against her husband, who was subjecting her to physical violence. These interventions highlight the importance of having robust referral networks as they can ensure favourable outcomes for the GBV survivors and victims' by ensuring that their needs are met holistically.

4.2.4. Psychosocial support

The social work practitioners acknowledged that GBV has significant impacts on the mental health and well-being of the victims. Psychosocial support is vital for helping survivors cope with the emotional and psychological impacts of GBV. These services are designed to empower survivors by helping them rebuild self-esteem and regain control over their lives. The social work practitioners stated that they support victims of GBV during disasters so they can process their traumatic experiences. Some of the social work practitioners stated:

"...it is very traumatic, so the survivors need to seek professional help to process this trauma"

"Being affected by disasters itself is stressful for the disaster victims, and experiencing gender-based violence adds to the stress"

The above narrations highlight the double tragedy that women experience during humanitarian crises, having to deal with the effects of disasters and dealing with the violation of their human rights. This has

detrimental effects on their mental health and well-being. This highlights the important role that social workers play in responding to GBV issues during disaster events by providing support to the victims. Nyahunda et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of social workers in providing psychosocial support to victims of GBV, and the study found that practitioners offer counselling services to these victims.

4.2.5. Provision of immediate relief

The practitioners in this study reported that they coordinate the distribution of resources such as food, clothing, sanitary products and hygiene products to the victims of climate change-related disasters in Manicaland. The social workers believe that the availability of these essential resources to the disaster victims is critical, as it also lessens the vulnerabilities that may increase the risk of GBV for women and girls during such humanitarian emergencies. This is because the women will not be depending on men for these basic necessities. Thus, this intervention addresses some of the factors that can drive GBV through dependency. Additionally, the provision of emergency resources to disaster victims acts as both a protective and an enabling intervention. One of the practitioners noted that the social workers offer immediate relief to disaster victims by highlighting that:

"I work at an NGO, so in responding to disasters, the organisation provides food handouts to those affected by the disasters. As a social worker at that organisation, I will be responsible for managing and distributing the food relief programme."

The above response shows the role of social workers in addressing the immediate needs of disaster victims. Literature has shown that social workers offer immediate relief during humanitarian crises to the survivors (Matlakala et al., 2021). This will likely reduce the risk factors for violence.

5. Summary of findings

The social work practitioners asserted that the occurrence of climate change-induced disasters in Manicaland province exacerbates the risk of GBV against women and young girls by intensifying pre-existing gender inequalities. They reported that disasters have negative impacts on the ecosystem, resulting in forced internal displacement and livelihood alterations, which creates an environment conducive for violence to thrive.

The study indicates that internal displacement caused by disasters increases the risk of violence for girls and women due to overcrowding in temporary shelters where disaster victims are housed. Most of these temporary shelters are unsafe, with limited privacy, placing vulnerable women and girls at risk of sexual abuse and harassment. The social work practitioners in this study emphasised that the conditions within these temporary shelters expose vulnerable populations to predators.

The study also established that disasters alter families' livelihoods, causing economic instability and stress. The social work practitioners reported that loss of income and property perpetuates intimate partner violence due to economic stress. This economic instability also forces disaster victims and survivors to engage in harmful coping strategies for survival. Some of the most common strategies reported by social work practitioners are survival or transactional sex and child marriages. These practices expose women and girls to a cycle of abuse and exploitation.

Another factor that contributes to the vulnerability of women and girls to GBV that has been established in this study is a weakened protection system and the lack of law enforcement systems, thereby creating an environment that allows GBV to thrive. This reduces access to protective services for survivors of GBV, leaving the victimised women and girls with limited options for seeking help or reporting the incidents.

Social workers have been playing a critical role in ensuring the protection of girls and women during crises, as well as providing the necessary support for victims of GBV. The practitioners reported that they provide psychosocial support to the victims of GBV so that they could be able to return to their normal functioning. The practitioners also support the victims by creating child-friendly spaces for children to report abuse cases and get professional help. At a meso level, the practitioners do awareness campaigns in communities on GBV issues, aiming to change attitudes and address harmful practices such as child marriages. Additionally, social work practice during disasters also focuses on linking the GBV victims with resource systems to ensure comprehensive support for the victims.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This study explored the intersection between the occurrence of disasters and an increase in GBV cases. The study found that disasters caused by climate change exacerbate existing gender inequalities and foster an environment that increases the risk of gender-based violence, putting vulnerable women and girls at risk. Internal displacement, loss of livelihood sources and weakened protection and law enforcement systems during these disaster events have been identified as risk factors contributing to the vulnerabilities of women and girls to GBV in Manicaland province. As climate change-induced disasters increase in frequency and intensity, the risk factors contributing to the vulnerability of women and girls to GBV will persistently become more severe. As such, there is a pressing need to develop and implement comprehensive strategies that proactively address these vulnerabilities.

Disaster-oriented social work practice is uniquely positioned to lead such efforts. Micro-level interventions include directly supporting women and girls affected by GBV during and after disasters by providing psychosocial support services such as trauma-informed counselling. At the mezzo level, the practitioners engage in community efforts to address the vulnerabilities through community-based awareness campaigns on GBV. However, these efforts may be affected by some systematic gaps, such as a lack of adequate resources. Thus, this study recommends effective collaboration among organisations responding to disasters for resource mobilisation. Social work practitioners also need to intensify community-based awareness campaigns to challenge harmful cultural practices that create a cycle of violence against girls and women. Additionally, there is a need to develop and strengthen community-based protection systems that remain functional even during crises.

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