

Glimpsing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) in Somalia: A Qualitative Secondary Research

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Abstract

Review Article

The call for effective response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) cannot be ignored. The interventions and preventive mechanisms, though helpful, are not adequate, considering the growth of cases of violence. Moreover, the severe underreporting of incidences cited in several reports and acknowledged in scholarly research as contributing factors to the conundrum surrounding SGBV, cannot be underestimated either, particularly in the case of Somalia. Scoring much below bar in all development indicators, the Horn of Africa nation has a complicated history of gender marginalization as a cultural norm. The multi-diagonal challenges the country is grappling with is the consequence of the inherited socio-cultural attitude of bias against women, reinforced through generations of little action to heal the wound. This review article examines through published secondary sources on the nature of SGBV in Somalia. The selected corpus includes books, chapters, scholarly articles and reports by international organizations working in the humanitarian and development sector in Somalia. It contributes to the scant body of literature and concern raised over the SGBV scourge tormenting the lives of an enormous number of Somali women.

Keywords: Cultural bias, customary law, gender discrimination, psycho-trauma, social work.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, scholars have intensified their investigation on gender and women studies. While higher learning institutions developed courses on gender and women's studies in higher degree learning at Master's and PhD certificates, international and local NGOs, community-based organizations, state authorities and the UN have all contributed to the enhancement of women's and girls' wellbeing. In many countries, gender-specific laws and legislations have been introduced, allowing women to have constitutional rights that had not existed before their introduction, although "only 14 countries in the world [...] offer full legal protections to women [including] Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain and Sweden as well as Germany and the Netherlands" (World Economic Forum, 2023). The new shift of focusing on gender, without doubt, was caused by social constructs perpetrated mainly by men of high authority in society, either as parents, elders, community leaders, or men

occupying top positions in the national government or in the management of private organizations and corporates.

The difficulties women face in different sectors of society have made scholars and other members of society take gender as a serious matter. Accordingly, various types of abuse, their nature, and their perpetrators have been identified as issues integral to the improvement of women's wellbeing. Society has realized the need to create safe spaces for women and girls in order for them to take their role as members of the citizenry and contribute their part to the development of their country and society. Based on the negative developments faced by women, focus has been put on gender abuse and gender-based violence by interrogating the subject from various angles and in different contexts.

Researchers have studied the phenomenon from its root causes, the impact it has on the victims psychologically, how discrimination of women harms the economy of a nation and society as well as development in general, while other experts observed the

physical and mental issues violence and abuse can cause to women and girls. In addition, there are scholars and researchers who observe gender issues as an integral part of social work, thereby creating awareness on the need to train social workers with sufficient education to support the survivors of violence and abuse.

The emphasis on education and training in social work, as relates to gender abuse and violence against women, places social workers in a very prominent position in society. Their role in dealing with cases of abuse, vulnerability, poverty, human rights, and other challenges involving mental health problems are necessary in formulating social work policy in any country. Training and recruiting social workers in the universal agenda against gender-based violence (GBV) and gender sexual abuse (GSA), as reiterated by Eno *et al.*, (2022a, 2022b), can neither be overlooked nor underestimated as they play a vital role in dealing with the varied nature and forms of GBV and GSA that occur in many different ways, contexts, and environments.

Although all stakeholders in the fight against gender abuse agree on its effect on women and society, and they all have the same goal of improving the rights and social wellbeing of women and girls, the term gender-based violence (GBV) is defined in diverse ways and to different details. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2022), particularly in a report titled Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally, explains Gender-Based Violence as: “any harmful threat or act directed at an individual or group based on actual or perceived sex, gender, gender identity or expression, sex characteristics, sexual orientation, and/or lack of adherence to varying socially constructed norms around masculinity and femininity.” In the report, USAID presents a very broad definition which, as some would argue, benchmarks its definition on the context of western societies where some of the elements and intentions in the meaning are not agreeable to other cultures, traditions, and societies.

However, USAID stretches its definition by acknowledging that the problem also affects “individuals of all gender identities” that include “women, girls, and gender non-conforming individuals,” highlighting their accommodation in the definition of groups and practices of “non-conforming individuals,” considered in certain societies as unacceptable. It further indicates how all these sectors of society within the gender bracket are not affected in the same magnitude but that they all encounter “a disproportionate risk of gender-based violence across every context due to their unequal status in society,” (USAID 2022:8).

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) frequently takes place as a consequence of improper social attitudes and cultural practices that encourage gender inequality by placing women in a lower rank than

men (Ssanyu *et al.*, 2022; UNHCR 2003); while Palermo *et al.*, (2013), conducting a demographic and health survey carried out between 2004 and 2011 and participated by 284,281 women in 24 countries, only 7% of the survivors reported the violence they experienced to a formal source, compared to 40% who previously encountered GBV and disclosed their ordeal to someone. It is important to note that the explanation provided here accounts for GBV as it occurs in its physical, conventional way as initiated between perpetrator and victim, while virtually mediated GBV situations are increasingly taking advantage of minors and unsuspecting women who become victims of perpetrators met in the virtual world (Brown and Hegarty 2021; UNFPA 2021).

II. SGBV: A GLOBAL THREAT

Majority of SGBV is caused by people who are very close to the victim, often called an intimate partner. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is common as the perpetrator and victim usually have frequent contact due to their relationship as partners living in the same place or are individually who, due to their intimacy as partners, tend to meet frequently. Aside from this type of GBV or other forms of sexual abuse, there are many incidences of abuse and violence that are neither reported to the authorities nor filed in statistical reports where SGBV issues are archived on official databases.

These types of crimes are mainly committed by individuals who are acquaintances, friends, or possibly a least suspected individual very close to the victim such as a clergy who is often met in the church, a teacher frequently contacted in the classroom or in the school environment, a highly regarded figure in society with a certain dignified position or a personal doctor who has access to the victim as a client/patient who visits the perpetrator's clinic or hospital for medical assistance (Collins 2014).

Though used for different names and connotations such as GBV, gender sexual abuse, abuse against women and girls, violence against women, etc. the conundrum is prevalent in societies all over the world, regardless of whether it is in the developed world or developing countries. It is recognized as a social vice whose confrontation requires a global approach, hence the attraction of global intervention at diverse levels and contexts.

As a result of the knowledge acquired through the numerous research studies carried out in different parts of the world, SGBV attracted an unprecedented attention that engages various sectors of social institutions and professional bodies that include social workers, shelter managers, legal and medical professionals, as well as policymakers, leaders, and other functionaries of government and its legislature organ (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2025; Abukar *et al.*, 2025).

One of the factors complicating the approach to address the violence, among others, is the fact that many victims are reluctant to report the incident of abuse, or violence (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2025; Ssanyu *et al.*, 2022). In cases where the occurrence of an abuse or a violence has not been reported, it becomes very difficult for the authorities to confine the culprit in custody and away from other members of society who would fall victim as a result of his act of violence. One of the strategies developed to deal with GBV is the focus on prevention, rather than dealing with cases after the abuses and violence have taken place (Abukar *et al.*, 2025).

Awareness training and special committees are established in some communities in order to deal with the problem well before it has taken place. Preventive approaches of this nature and efforts to confront the vice are necessitated by the fact that in many circumstances, GBV or GSA cases are not informed to the authorities and remain absent from the statistics recorded to measure the level of occurrence of abuse in the concerned community (Gordon 2009; Pitts and Schwartz 1997). Unrecorded cases usually take place because of a variety of reasons some of which are influenced by the social status of the perpetrator who might be in a high social position or in other positions of authority because of which the victim feels discouraged from either seeking legal redress or informing other members who would have helped in such a situation (Herman 1997).

Elsewhere, Collins (2014) posits that despite the frequent occurrences of rape and other forms of gender violence and abuse by strangers, violence that occurs between acquaintances tend to be more common and larger in frequency. In situations where the victim is familiar with the perpetrator, it is likely that such violence is not reported. As studies by Frazier & Seales (1997), Wood *et al.*, (2008), and Collins (2014) reveal, rape cases by strangers seem to have more chances of reporting than violence by intimate partners and acquaintances due to the victim's perception of considering rape by a stranger as exactly what the term is supposed to mean.

The GBV pandemic cannot be underestimated as it affects more women and girls than we could assume. According to statistical evidence widely circulated and quoted in the academic arena, one in every three women is reported to have experienced a kind of violence and abuse, be it physical or sexual assault, in the course of her life (Ouedraogo and Stenzel 2021; WHO 2013; IOM 2013; UNODC & UNW 2022). While none of the abuses experienced can be underrated in any circumstance, evidence singles out femicide as the most tragic factor of all abuses categorized under GBV, costing the lives of about 45,000 women and girls who were killed worldwide by family members or intimate partners, as reported in a joint report by the United Nations Office for

Drug and Crime and the United Nations Women (UNODC & UNW 2022). The evidence sends shockwaves at the knowledge that by average, well over five women or girls are victims of homicide in every hour of the day as committed by a member of the family by a madness many call as 'honor killing'. Comparing acts of homicide committed against men and women, all over the world, the report highlights the following:

While the overwhelming majority of homicides worldwide are committed against men and boys (81%), women and girls are disproportionately affected by homicidal violence in the private sphere. Approximately 56% of all female homicides are committed by intimate partners or other family members, while only 11% of all male homicides are perpetrated in the private sphere. (UNODC & UN Women 2022:5).

Among the variables researchers observe include that of the economic factor GBV incurs society and the nation, apart from the frequently acknowledged harms related to physical, emotional and psychological injuries. The report demonstrates how GBV and associated violence expose economic threats with extensively damaging consequences on state institutions as well private enterprises due to the absence of females from work and the productivity time wasted in hospitals or recovery from the impact of violence and abuse (ILO and UN Women, 2019). Another report by UN Women (2016) and quoted in Ouedraogo and Stenzel (2021:3), the cost of violence against women cross-sectoral estimate including public, private, and social entities is estimated at a crucial figure of \$1.5 trillion all over the world—a hefty amount that could cover a large proportion of development budgets required to improve the lives of many needy people on the universe.

According to Ouedraogo and Stenzel (2021:3), a valuation conducted by the World Bank (2018) focusing on the negative inclinations of GBV on national economies, showed that violence against women could make a financial damage costing approximately 3.7 percent of GDP in some countries—a stern warning against the implications of GBV on national economies. For reasons of its backwardness in several human development indicators, Sub-Saharan Africa is featured as the region with the topmost rates of GBV and other abuse against women, despite the absence of sufficient studies examining the economic potential GBV has on its economic performance. On the other hand, it is in South Africa that a study by KGMP (2014) disclosed that gender-based violence exerts significant impact on the country's economy at an estimate between 0.9 and 1.3 percent of GDP annually (KGMP, 2014, Ouedraogo and Stenzel 2021:3). Another research study conducted in the Republic of Ghana informs how the West African country suffers from the effects of violence against women which cripples its economic potential by around

0.9% of national GDP (Raghavendra *et al.*, 2019, Ouedraogo and Stenzel 2021:3).

In a recent World Bank report, global statistics estimated women abuse committed by the victim's intimate partner at 38% and exceeds violence by a non-partner individual which is 7% of several variables rated, while the danger from female genital mutilation (FGM) continued as about 200 million women were abused in the fatal malpractice (World Bank 2019). The prevalence of GBV in every community and escalation of incidents of violence have risen the need for informed intervention in order to assist the victims so as to at least minimize the menace. A strategic policy towards addressing GBV, therefore, places the services of trained social workers and psycho-trauma counsellors at the core of any implementation of programs aimed at dealing with the mitigation of the vice and caring for the victims. Due to the necessity of providing service to the victims, social work as a profession has become an indispensable contact point where shocked and traumatized victims primarily seek assistance (Tefera 2022; Moosa 2022; Leburu-Masigo 2020).

Alongside the injuries physically suffered are augmented other agonies including unwanted pregnancies, contraction of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS, psycho-sexual injuries, premature childbirth and maternal mortality, among others, as elaborated by Heise *et al.*, (2002) and Dunkle *et al.*, (2004). Additionally, risks of suffering further ailments like depression and mental problems, indulgence in substance abuse, and loss of self-esteem are among the excruciating pains and experiences undergone and tolerated throughout the entire life of the victim, while the most serious impact is the decision made out of frustration and depression that finally leads to deliberate termination of one's life by committing suicide (Heise *et al.*, 2002).

The dreadful consequences of GBV was studied by Kessler and coauthors conducted a survey of GBV related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) covering 29 types of traumata from over 68,800 respondents selected from 24 countries representing low, medium and high-income nations (Kessler *et al.*, 2017). Kessler and co-researchers discovered that out of the 29 trauma variables analyzed, "intimate partner sexual violence accounted for nearly 42.7% of all person-years with PTSD..." a problematic health issue hard to neglect (Kessler *et al.*, 2017:1)

Studying the copious volume of growing literature on GBV and related sexual abuses inform the need to not study GBV from a single perspective that aims to single it out as just a sexual abuse. In fact, factors that are inclined to be primary causes of gender discrimination, cultural bias, professional inequality, low education, and poor health, need to be addressed in order

to create better living space for women in all sectors of social development (UNESCO 2020).

III. SGBV: AN EVIL IN SOMALIA

A very recent study by Abukar *et al.*, (2025:52) explores SGBV in Somalia, particularly in the city of Baidoa in the Southwest State of the country. It analyzes the situation by reviewing selected sources from available literature by scholars and stakeholder organizations from the international community engaged in the funding and implementation of humanitarian and development programs in the country. Invoking one such source, Abukar and colleagues state, "a report by Gender Based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS) in 2021 indicated that 62% of the reported GBV incidents were physical assault, 11% rape, 10% sexual assault, 7% denial of resources, 6% psychological/emotional abuse, and 4 % forced/early marriage." However, Abukar *et al.* bring forth a major concern that, despite the violence and abuse, a majority of these incidents are seldom reported because many women believe that partner conflicts are private matters better addressed through cultural and traditional approaches, although the remedial system of compensation of the Somali customary law (xeer) does neither satisfactorily address nor is consummate to the magnitude of the violence and abuse experienced by the women, (Abukar *et al.*, 2025:52).

The Somali Health and Demographic Survey 2020 report by the Directorate of National Statistics (DNS) of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), reveals, during the period covered in the report, 99% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 have been subjected to FGM, a fatal practice which many members of society do not consider to be a violation of the human rights of women and girls—a (mis)belief many use as a justification, one that also makes the baleful act pervade as a strong social norm because there is still a large population among the society who consider FGM as a prerequisite for girls' marriage (DNS—FGS 2020).

Applying document analysis of studies in the public domain such as organizational reports by diverse agencies working in Somalia, as well as individual and teamed authors, Abukar and colleagues' research had a limited scope of coverage by focusing only on Baidoa, the capital city of Bay region which doubles as the provisional capital of the administration of the Southwest State of Somalia. They present a detailed account of the most vulnerable among the victims, writing how "adult married women, adolescent girls, widows, divorced women, female headed households, pregnant and lactating women, orphans, women and girls living with disabilities are disproportionately subjected to various forms of gender violence and discrimination emanating from social status and gendered social norms" (Abukar

et al.,2025:52). In their analysis, Abukar and co-researchers acknowledge the steps taken to improve the situation while admitting the low level of reporting cases of violence “due to fear of stigmatization and retaliation,” (ibid, p. 53).

Abukar *et al.*, navigate through sources and analyze factual statements about interventive initiatives by local organizations who operate under difficult circumstances with scanty financial resources provided by international organizations under partnership contracts as implementing agencies. The local implementing partners use a variety of community-based approaches such as women networks, engagement of community elders, engagement and empowerment of women and educated young females from the local higher learning institutions to participate in the awareness raising campaigns and associated SVBV prevention exercises (Abukar *et al.*,2025). Among other subjects, Abukar *et al.*’s (2025) study raised the importance of local participation and intervention by all stakeholder organizations and donors actively engaged in Somalia’s recovery agenda, emphasizing the need to focus also on prevention as an indispensable tool to mitigate occurrences of incidences of abuse and violence.

In a broad survey study participated by 2376 women and 2257 men in Somalia, Wirtz *et al.*, (2018:6) found that “collectively, physical and sexual violence affect 36% of women and 22% of men” in the three regions of Puntland, Somaliland, and Southern and Central Somalia. Wirtz *et al.*’s results establish details in which “Perpetrators of physical violence during childhood among women included family members (43%), father/stepfather (29%) and teachers (15%), while neighbors (20%), someone from another clan (18%) and strangers (15%) were reported as perpetrators of sexual violence during childhood,” (ibid, p. 4).

Relative to Abukar *et al.*’s study which dealt with GBV in the context on Baidoa city in the Southwest of Somalia and advocated for context-based interventions and prevention of SGBV, Ibrahim and coauthors’ (2025) review article surveyed secondary sources to unravel the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) in Somalia, the cultural burden faced by GBV victims and survivors, and the need for qualified community social workers and psycho-sexual trauma counselors. Basing their argument on the basis of social work education and professional practice as a very recent arrival in Somali society, Ibrahim *et al.*, perceive professional training as an effective way of addressing the SGBV predicament which they describe as “a scourge which has silently consumed the social fabric of the Somali society and Somali women in particular” (Ibrahim *et al.*,2025:98).

Unlike other studies and reports on GBV in Somalia and analyzed in the current essay, one of the major issues Ibrahim and co-researchers highlight is the deployment of well-trained social workers and psycho-social counselors with adequate skills and are able to attend to the various levels of trauma encountered by the victims of SGBV. Furthermore, Ibrahim *et al.*, reiterate on the significance of a nationwide policy on SGBV, legislation that governs it, and enforcement of laws without intervention of customary laws known in Somalia as *xeer*. Ibrahim *et al.*, cushion their argument on lack of adherence to the law since “...effective measures have not been employed that address the dysfunctional cultural beliefs and other underlying biases against women” (Ibrahim *et al.*,2025:101), in a country where the scourge of SGBV remains a prevalent pandemic, yet described as “severely underreported...” in reports of organizations on the ground who are knowledgeable of the nature of the problem and its victims (UNSOM & UN-OHCHR [n.d.], p. 11).

Dahie *et al.*, used primary data in a survey participated by 384 women and girls selected from 5 camps populated by internally displaced persons (IDPs). It was a study that concentrated on the single district of Daynile in Mogadishu, with 94.5% of the randomly selected size of the participants being from the Southwest State of Somalia (p. 4). The results by Dahie and associates confirm the heightening rate at which incidences of GBV were occurring “from three incidents in January to 17 in December 2021,” in spite of the severe underreporting in the country about incidents of violence related to SGBV (Dahie *et al.*, 2023:4). A cross-sectional comparative analysis of the nature of violence revealed various frequency levels with physical assault topping the score at 44% and well above psychological abuse with 24.5%. Third place was forced marriage which returned a result of 18.0%, followed by attempted rape 7.5%, and rape 3.8%. Denial of resources, a mechanism used as an effective tool of coercion in certain situations, was experienced by 1.9% of the survey participants (ibid, p. 5).

IV. CONCLUSION

This essay used a qualitative survey of a select body of existing materials to discuss SGBV in the context of Somalia. A majority of the sources on SGBV in Somalia is contributed by international organizations operating in the country while scholarly contributions on the subject are meagerly too scanty in number. The analyzed sources elucidate the problem from different geographical scope. While some of them claimed to have covered the entire country, others had a limited scope surveying only on a specific city or district, compared to others that dealt with selected numbers of IDP camps in one of the districts in the capital Mogadishu. All the analyzed documents are in agreement of SGBV as a serious problem in the country, indicating insufficiency of a trained community social workers and psycho-social

counselors with expertise in psycho-trauma counseling. From an academic as well as policy perspective, the paucity of the literature on SGBV gives a reflection of how the young generation of Somali scholars, experts, and specialists of Somali studies have paid very little attention to the subject, both as a discipline of study and a research topic. In order to close the gap, this study recommends, at least, the immediate introduction of courses on gender and women studies in higher learning institutions, if offering a diploma or degree program is currently not possible.

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