

Publisher



African Journal of Social Work

Afri. j. soc. work

© National Association of Social Workers Zimbabwe/Author(s)

ISSN Print 1563-3934

ISSN Online 2409-5605

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Indexed & Accredited with: African Journals Online (AJOL) | University of Zimbabwe Accredited Journals (UZAJ) | SCOPUS (Elsevier) | Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) | Society of African Journal Editors (SAJE) | Asian Digital Library (ADL) | African Social Work & Development Network (ASWDNet) | Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) - South Africa | SJR | CNKI - China | Journal Publishing Practices & Standards (JPPS) | EBSCO | DOI

Intersections of victimisation, criminalisation, and gender equality: Advancing rights, equality, and empowerment for all women and girls

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KEY DATES: Submitted: March 2025; Reviewed: August 2025; Accepted: December 2025; Published: February 2026

KEY DECLARATIONS: Funding: None | Conflict of Interest: None

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Robinson S., Mbonambi N. N. and Teko L. (2026). Intersections of victimisation, criminalisation, and gender equality: Advancing rights, equality, and empowerment for all women and girls. *African Journal of Social Work*, 16(1), Special Issue on Women and girls in conflict: intersections of victimization, criminalization, and justice, 1-5. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajsw.v16i1.1>

This special issue of the African Journal of Social Work emerges from the University of Pretoria's Social Work and Criminology Research Symposium held on 13 August 2025, themed "Intersections of Victimisation, Criminalisation, and Gender Equality: Advancing Rights, Equality, and Empowerment for All Women and Girls." Convened during Women's Month, the symposium created a space to connect research with action and to foreground the structural conditions that shape women's pathways into, through, and beyond the criminal justice system. The aim of the special issue is to extend the conversation on the crucial issue beyond the symposium and further disseminate critical work to the broader audience.

The initiative aligned with South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) goal of eliminating gender inequality by 2030, as well as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 on Gender Equality and SDG 16 on Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. In line with the Women's Month theme, "For all women and girls: rights, equality, and empowerment," the symposium sought to expand understanding of how poverty, inequality, and gender based violence create pathways to criminalisation; to advance gender responsive and community driven policy solutions; and to provide a platform for women with lived experience to inform justice reform and social transformation.

In South Africa, structural inequality, persistent poverty, and widespread gender-based violence continue to shape the lives of women and girls. Although incarcerated women constitute a small percentage of the overall prison population, their journeys into conflict with the law are often rooted in intersecting socioeconomic and gendered injustices rather than inherent criminality. The pre-incarceration realities remain marginal in mainstream policy discourse and criminal justice interventions. As a result, systems frequently punish women for the consequences of inequality and violence without addressing the structural drivers of their marginalisation. The symposium therefore centred the need to move beyond carceral responses and to confront the social, economic, and gendered conditions that shape women's vulnerability. Research consistently shows that pathways into the criminal justice system are forged long before arrest or sentencing. Poverty, exclusion from formal employment, limited access to education, and survival responses to food and housing insecurity play a significant role. At the same time, gender-based violence, often beginning in childhood and extending into adulthood, creates cycles of trauma, coercion, and constrained choices. Many women enter harmful relationships, informal economies, or criminalised activities in contexts shaped by desperation, abuse, or lack of alternatives. This aspect is viewed from a victim-offender cycle where women's circumstances and disadvantages that placed them as victims contributed to the pathways to criminalisation and more prominently offender (Berrand, 2020; Obe et al, 2018). Without exploring the various contributing factors and experiences, this cycle will continue, and women will continue to be disadvantaged and experience factors contributing to criminalisation.

The papers in this special issue reflect the key themes that structured the symposium. The first theme examined pathways to criminalisation and the impact of structural inequalities on women. Contributions explored socio-economic vulnerability, racial and class inequality, coercive relationships, mental health, substance use, the criminalisation of survival strategies, and the gendered dimensions of migration. Attention is also given to the role of social work in early intervention and prevention, including school-based initiatives, child protection responses, and trauma-informed community outreach.

The second theme focused on women in conflict with the law, during incarceration, and after release. Authors interrogate gender insensitive correctional environments, the invisibility of women in male-dominated systems, and the imperative to uphold human rights and dignity in custody. Papers address access to health care, psychosocial support, rehabilitation, and family contact, as well as the challenges of stigma, housing instability, and economic insecurity upon release. The transformative potential and ethical responsibilities of social work practice in correctional settings are critically examined.

The third theme centred on women as victims of violence and crime. Contributions analyse the impact of sexual, physical, emotional, and economic abuse on mental health, economic independence, and vulnerability to criminalisation. Authors consider secondary victimisation within institutions, the evolving role of technology in both enabling and addressing gender-based violence, and trauma-informed interventions that support healing, safety, and empowerment.

A fourth theme examined incarceration and its impact on families and children. Papers explore the experiences of incarcerated mothers, including those who are pregnant or primary caregivers, and the developmental and emotional effects of maternal incarceration on children. Family-focused and strengths-based social work approaches are highlighted, with attention to sustaining parent-child relationships, intergenerational impacts, and pathways to reunification and healing.

The final theme addressed empowerment and community-led responses to gender-based violence and women's criminalisation. Contributions discuss restorative justice, GBV interventions, diversion, and non-custodial measures tailored to women's realities; community-based empowerment programmes; technological innovations; and participatory approaches that co-create solutions with affected women and communities. Across these papers, collaboration between academia, government, civil society, and communities emerges as central to advancing gender justice. The papers below addressed the above themes and contributed to the important conversation about female incarceration, victimisation and challenges they are faced with on a daily basis.

The paper by Jean Paul Pophaim and Francois Steyn examined *the lived experiences and service needs of women experiencing homelessness*, recognising the multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage that shape their pathways and outcomes. This paper outlined homelessness as a socio-economic factor that shaped the pathways into criminalisation. The paper suggests that social workers are well-positioned to draw on the findings of the study to advocate for inclusive and intersectional approaches.

Krinesha George looked at understanding the pathways to criminalisation for women in disparate societies. The study found that the impact of victimisation emphasised that experiences such as childhood abuse, domestic violence, and economic strain resulted in women committing crimes as a strategy of survival or a coping mechanism. The second aspect related to the consequences of the gender deal, revealing that restrictive gender norms and continuous economic exclusion developed cycles of desperation, which left women in situations vulnerable to criminality. The findings demonstrate that female crime isn't about deviance but rather about surviving systemic inequality and victimisation

Lucy Kofi's paper *explored how women's survival strategies, including transactional sex, informal caregiving, and community food sharing, are shaped and criminalised through intersecting systems of structural violence*. The paper revealed how IPV functions not only as a symptom of systemic stress but also as a mechanism of control in spaces where women are cornered.

Mzukisi Xweso and Catherina Schenck looked at women in the informal trading of metal in rural areas. The paper *explored the work and health-vulnerabilities faced by female scrap collectors in the rural area*. It was found that female scrap collectors face multiple hardships, including hazardous working conditions and a lack of social protection, all of which undermine their rights to human dignity and decent work, further contributing to the ever-ongoing issue females face in the country, especially around informal employment and trading.

A paper by Okarie Ajah and Tshimangadzo Magadze posits that in rural Nigerian communities, cultural narratives often shape perceptions of gender roles, morality, and justice, contributing to victim-blaming attitudes toward women who experience violence. Against this backdrop, the author *explored how such narratives impact access to support services and the overall empowerment of female survivors from Longwe's Empowerment Framework*. The review highlighted systemic gaps in service provision and proposes culturally responsive interventions that promote agency, awareness, and decision-making power for women. This is important, as the paper shifts towards the need for responsive interventions that address the problem, and not only focus on identifying the issue.

Azwihangwisi Judith Mphidi and Debra Pheiffer focused on important issues of Gender Based violence and underutilised strategies for Empowering Women Survivors of Violence and Marginalisation in Africa. Empowerment strategies for women survivors often rely on conventional measures such as legal reform, shelters, and aid, which overlook community-rooted innovations. Against this background, *the paper explored underutilised, culturally anchored strategies across African regions, including faith-based advocacy, storytelling cooperatives, indigenous healing, women's energy initiatives, and stokvel networks*. This paper considered a unique and important perspective of locally contextual strategies to GBV intervention. The paper indicated that policies and programmes must support locally driven, survivor-led models to address survivors' complex needs from safety to self-actualisation. Having culturally and contextually relevant interventions supported by policy can possibly contribute to the alleviation of the problem.

A population often not recognised at times are the undocumented and marginalised migrant women's experiences of victimisation. Elizabeth Erlank and Didier Bizimana focused on this population by *understanding the experiences of undocumented women in Tshwane from an intersectional perspective, examining the intersection of institutional victimisation, systemic exclusion, and gendered vulnerabilities, while also offering possibilities for social work responses to these realities*. What was revealed was that undocumented women's vulnerabilities and marginalisation are persistent, and their systemic exclusion from basic education, employment, and healthcare. Exclusion from these resources often places women at risk of further marginalization and victimization, and thus recommendations were put forward by the author.

Current legal intervention for victims of GBV mainly focuses on a mix of common laws and customary laws South Africa creating legal pluralism. Patrick Bashizi Bashige Murhula holds the position that due to the existence of these two, they create a complex especially when it comes to women's rights, more specifically because customary laws subordinate women's rights to those of men. Henceforth, his study *aimed to investigate how legal pluralism can address injustices faced by women experiencing Gender based violence (GBV)*. His findings showed that customary laws, rooted in patriarchal traditions, often restrict women's rights and exacerbate GBV. Addressing these issues calls for significant reform. This outlines the importance of legislative intervention in addressing victimisation in GBV. Aligning customary law with national law on women's rights and South Africa's constitutional mandates is crucial. Such alignment will protect women's rights and create a legal environment based on fairness and inclusion.

Gender-Based violence cuts across contexts, and it is a phenomenon not only prevalent in communities but also in higher education settings. GBV in higher education has started getting recognition and focus over the years. This was exemplified by a paper by Sibusiso Baloyi and Ntandoyenkosi Maphosa, *who explored GBV*

experiences of South African females in higher education institutions. The study found that female students experienced various types of GBV, and the authors argue that there is a need for the development of policies that promote equality amongst students in HEIs whilst implementing holistic and collaborative efforts in the fight against GBV in HEIs. This suggests that victimisation cuts into Higher education spaces, where it is presumed it is safe for students to a greater extent, the risk factors are present, especially for women.

The above paper highlighted recommendations around the need for policy. This component is important; what was more important was to look at current policies in place for survivors of GBV in accessing the needed services. This view was explored by Lebogang Ramalepe, Liberty Mambondiani, and Ayanda Ndlovu in their paper on Psychological Support for Women Survivors of Gender Based Violence (GBV): Examining Policy and Practice in South Africa's Thuthuzela Care Centres through a theoretical policy analysis approach. What they found was that while policies acknowledge the need for psychosocial support for survivors, they often lack detailed, enforceable guidelines for consistent and contextually relevant implementation across TCCs. Their paper also argues for the strengthening of policy directives and contextually relevant capacitation of the TCC. This underlines the need for a review of policies around GBV intervention across many contexts.

Lungelo Mdletshe built on the critical discourse of how IPV is a silent pandemic that affects women in higher education institutions. AS IPV is a form of GBV, the study focused on *examining the socio-cultural, emotional, and economic factors that contribute to the underreporting of IPV, with the aim of reframing the silence through African Theory.* What was found was that victims often prioritize relational harmony over personal safety, internalizing social expectations that uphold male authority and discourage disclosure. This highlights the importance of focusing on survivor centred and culturally grounded interventions to address the structural inequality contributing to IPV.

Building on the call for survivor centred, culturally grounded intervention, Mary Kgole's paper focused on empowering victims of IPV through development of practice guidelines for social workers to enhance victim empowerment. With the study rooted in South Africa, and IPV being a pandemic, developing practice guidelines was crucial for ensuring high-quality, competent, and impactful services. The study developed practice guidelines to be used by social workers.

The breadth of participation at the symposium underscored the commitment to collaboration and exploring ways of mitigating women's experience of victimisation, better support of women in conflict with the law and the pathways that contributed to their criminalisation, and most importantly promote gender equality. What was prominent and important in the papers was the value of ubuntu in the fight against the injustices faced by women and girls. This suggests going back to our roots of ubuntu care and compassion. Collectively, the contributions in this special issue challenge us to rethink how we respond to women and girls who experience violence, poverty, and criminalisation. We call for structural reform, ubuntu care, gender responsive practice, and sustained cross-sector collaboration. Above all, they affirm that advancing rights, equality, and empowerment for all women and girls requires centring lived experience, confronting systemic injustice, and committing to justice that is both transformative, inclusive and ubuntu focused.

The editors would like to thank everyone who contributed to the research symposium, the blind reviewers for reviewing papers, and authors for their contribution to the special issue. We would like to thank the Department of Social Work and Criminology and the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria. We would like to encourage readers to engage with the content of the papers and consider utilising the information in your everyday practice in achieving the SDG's.

As Nelson Mandela reminds us, "*For every woman and girl violently attacked, we reduce our humanity.*" In advancing this work, we are called to restore and protect our shared humanity through research, advocacy, and compassionate social practice.

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