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Evaluating microaggression in townships: A case study of the gender-based violence secondary victims in Soweto Township

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Abstracts: Historically most communities in sub-Saharan countries conformed to cultures that promote patriarchy. Patriarchal norms and values socialized in close and extended families prolong the disparities between genders. Most women are secondary victims of gender-based violence in South African. South African townships are residence to Black ethnic Bantu speakers who were historically marginalized and excluded from socio-economic opportunities. The exclusion continue to manifest as under representation of women in various economic sectors, which makes women dependent on males, which might be an intimate partner, spouse, or family member. The economic dependents on male counterparts made them vulnerable to threat of gendered violence. The purpose of the study focused on secondary victims' perceptions of microaggression. The objective was to establish women's safety perceptions in Soweto Township. The methodology of the study was a qualitative case study. Snowballing was used to identify forty female participants. Interview schedules were administered to all participants during a thirty-minute face-to-face interview. The study applied ethical considerations. The thematic content analysis conducted established three dominant themes termed fear of crime, gender, and township. Most participants perceived that the type of microaggression experienced was gender violence, and often occurred in public across the township context, and it contributed to their fear of crime. The study provides insight on the role of microaggression in the fearfulness of female residence in townships. The findings cannot be generalized due to sample size. The study recommended police visibility, which includes frequent foot patrols to address the fearfulness of secondary victims in the township.

Keywords: Equality, fear, gender, microaggression, prejudice.

Introduction

Most indigenous communities in sub-Saharan countries conform to cultures that promote patriarchy. Sexist ideologies not only perpetuates inequality but are protected by believers. Women who strongly uphold patriarchal norms not only idolized women who conform to these values systems but also defend men who demonstrate dominance over their female counterparts, wives, sisters and friends. Patriarchal women are less likely to experience cognitive dissonance caused by gender roles and social expectations, but this does not make them immune to gender-based violence [3]. They may become secondary victims of gender-based violence. A secondary victim is an indirect victim of a crime. A person is identified as a secondary victim of gender-based violence if she is exposed to or associated with a direct victim of gender-based violence, who might be a family member, friend, or neighbor [29].

Gendered violence varies and the continuum ranges from verbal assaults to physical violence which are all traumatic events. Microaggression features in the continuum of violence. Microaggression can manifest in three forms: microassaults which entail name-calling, avoidance and discriminatory behaviour; microinsults which entails put-downs or messages that convey rudeness and aim to humiliate; and microinvalidations which entail excluding, nullifying or negating the feelings or experiences of a person or social group to cause hurt [24]. The study focused on microaggression to establish women's safety perceptions and experiences of microaggression in the township. Microaggressions constitute constitutional crimes where in the victim's rights to dignity and freedom from discrimination are violated by people [41]. The prevalence of gender crimes in South African communities may signal poor policing. In terms of Section 205, the South African Police Service (SAPS) has a constitutional mandated to:

"Prevent and combat crime that may threaten the safety and security of any community; investigate any crime threatening the safety and security of any community; ensure that offenders are brought to justice; and participate in efforts to address the causes of crime" [45].

Subordinate policies that compel the SAPS to address gender crimes locally include the

Prevention and combating of hate crimes and hate speech act 16 of 2023 [46], Protection from harassment act 17 of 2011 [43], Domestic violence act 116 of 1998 [42], and etcetera. GBV and gendered crime are common in South African communities despite the implementation of these legal frameworks [32].

Literature Review

Historically most indigenous communities in sub-Saharan countries conform to cultural norms that promote patriarchy. Prejudice is embedded in some indigenous cultural norms. Prejudice entails negative attitudes toward a person or social group, which involves unwarranted dislike or fear predicated on stereotypes [49]. Patriarchy is an extreme manifestation of negative attitude towards women. Patriarchal norms and values socialized in close and extended families prolong the disparities between genders [12]. Ideologies not only perpetuates inequality but are also protected by believers. Women who strongly uphold patriarchal norms not only idolize women who conform to these values systems but also defend men who demonstrate dominance over their female counterparts, wives, sisters and friends [17]. Patriarchal women conform and promote gender roles that fulfill social expectations, but this does not make them immune to gender-based violence or microaggression [27]. Microaggression is implicit and explicit prejudice that manifest as microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations directed at a person or social group to cause hurt [24].

Patriarchal women may become secondary victims of gender-based violence through direct exposure or association with a direct victim of gender-based violence [29]. Studies shoos that a majority of people born in 1990s in the Gauteng province were exposed to or personally experienced violence in their homes, school, and community over the past two decades. The most common form of violence experienced was physical punishment by parents. Most importantly, economic factors were antecedents of violence in many families in the township [38].

South African townships are residence to many Black ethnic groups that were historically marginalized and excluded from socio-economic opportunities [31]. The exclusion continues to manifest as under representation of women in various economic sectors, which makes women dependent on males, which might be an intimate partner, spouse, a male sibling or other family members. This economic dependence on their male counterparts leaves them vulnerable and exposed to threats of gendered violence [12]. Gendered violence varies, and the continuum ranges from verbal assaults to physical violence which can be extremely traumatic [13].

The socio-cultural aspects of GBV in South Africa account for the staggering number (77%) of men that perpetrated controlling behaviour over women over the years [17]. The harmful cultural practices in South Africa are even more concerning. Some of the cultural practices include the virginity testing of adolescent girls between 16-18 years – "*Umemulo*" (white clay) is inserted in the girl to test for virginity. "*Ukutwala*" which entails forced marriages through abduction [18]. Some of the male centered practices include Polygamy [27], and "*Tsotsi*" masculinity which is hyper-masculinity resulting in harmful and risky behavior. Hyper-masculinity in the township can manifest as having relations with multiple sex partners, impregnating multiple girls or women, engaging in date rape, and engaging in nuisance courtship classified as street harassment [31]. Harmful cultural norms necessitate stringent intervention strategies aligned with SDG5 and SDG16 which aim to promote gender equality, peaceful and inclusive societies respectively [2]. Monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of these intervention strategies would be necessary because the safety perception of women tends to be negative in societies that exhibit gender inequalities and exclusion [35].

Safety perception entails motivation to avoid loss, which entails a state of protection from present and future harm. Safety perception is better understood when contextualized in terms of basic human needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs presents a hierarchical order of five needs: physiological needs, safety needs, love needs, esteem needs, and needs for self-actualization. Maslow's theory defines 'safety needs' as threats to personal wellbeing and financial security. Crime poses a significant threat to personal wellbeing and financial security. The theory postulates that humans are strongly motivated to attain perceived safety hence this need precedes physiological needs [37]. Effective policing is one of many social factors that can promote positive safety perception nationwide [9].

Proactive policing with tailor made responses to crime could effectively address fear of crime in affected communities. Problem-oriented policing (POP) is a proactive policing model that uses crime statistics to analyse crime, applies various crime theories to establish the crime modus operandi or routine criminal activities, identifies offender or environmental enablers, and develops tailored responses. The POP response to crime has four steps scanning, analysing, responses, and assessment that are termed SARA. POP can be applied to GBV and gender violence since it does not favour any particular kind of intervention. POP model advocates shared responsibility of SARA mechanisms in community and stakeholder collaboration. To ensure police accountability, the police service must routinely monitor and evaluate the POP implemented in communities grappling with GBV and gender violence. "POP is associated with a statistically significant overall reduction in crime and disorder of 34%". The success rate of POP in European heterogeneous communities is a good indicator of its prospects in South Africa's diverse communities [15].

The Visible Policing (VISPOL) unit in the SAPS provides proactive policing in South Africa. The VISPOL division combats crime through proactive and responsive policing services which involve partnerships. The partnerships include victim empowerment programmes, addressing drug dealing and the proliferation of firearms. The partnerships extend to community policing whereby the Community Police Forum (CFP) expands on the visible policing approach. Members of the CPF often act as the first line of defense to secondary victims of GBV and other affected parties. The police-community partnership does not guarantee safety as factors such as infrastructural resources and shortage of manpower can negatively impact policing. In 2020 the SAPS did not achieve its target workforce of 98%, and up to date there are vacant posts in VISPOL, forensics, detective services and Administration [2020]. The Gauteng Province reported high crime rates at the backdrop of staff shortages in the SAPS [28].

Problem statement

Some individuals strongly endorse moral traditional values that resist feminist claims in socio-political contexts where feminist progress challenges dominant cultural narrative. These ideologies perpetuate intolerance [11]. The Declaration of Principles on Tolerance was established to combat acts of intolerance, xenophobia, exclusion, and discrimination directed against national, ethnic, immigrant, and vulnerable groups within society [47]. The UNESCO's principles on tolerance are enshrined in some South African legislation and policies. The Bill of Right, Chapter 2 of the South African Constitution affirms the right to dignity and prohibits discrimination [41]. Prejudice and gender discrimination perpetuate inequality and inhibit women's safety in communities where collective efficiency is compromised [34]. Gender-based violence (GBV) is a common form of gender discrimination in patriarchal communities worldwide [20]. Harmful patriarchal norms practiced by both men and women are equally harmful, as they promote dehumanization of women as noted in GBV and femicide cases [32, 48]. GBV tends to involve various types of microaggression that cause tremendous psychological harm to victims [13]. GBV results from intergroup behaviour whereby men affirm their dominance over females through aggressive methods [5].

In general, women are not safe. Safety is a basic human need, and there are various social factors and physical activities that influence people' safety perceptions [52]. Safety is "the protection of women from various forms of harm, violence, and discrimination" [13]. Studies show that 86% of women experience microaggression such as sexist insults in public [23]. Studies also show that 70 % of women in South Africa do not feel safe walking alone in public [51]. Threats to women must be identified and strategically eliminated to achieve gender equality in communities worldwide.

Research objectives and questions

This study focused on microaggression to examine how it is perceived by secondary victims of gender-based violence residing in a South African township. The three objectives of the study were to determine: If participants feel safe in their community, to establish the most common type of microaggression men committed against women, and to ascertain how women respond to microaggression directed towards them by men. The research questions are listed below:

1. Do you feel safe in your community?
2. What is the most common type of microaggression men commit against women and girls in your family?
3. How do you respond to microaggression directed towards you by men?

Research Methods

The word 'methodology' is an umbrella term used to refer to research strategies. A research strategy must specify the research methods, and the method includes tools or procedures, sampling technique, data collection and analysis techniques used [50].

Research paradigm and design

A paradigm is a theoretical framework with general beliefs and principles that inform how researcher views the world and understands or constructs organised studies around a specific context. The three types of paradigms of research are positivism, critical realism, and interpretivism. All three paradigms can be used in qualitative research [50]. The research was a qualitative case study that used an interpretive paradigm to gain insight on the phenomenon of microaggression. There are three types of case studies: (a) an intrinsic case study is guided by interest in a subject and findings have limited transferability, (b) and instrumental case study focus on a particular situation or phenomenon, and (c) a collective case study examines more than one case study to gain insight and understanding of the subject or phenomenon of interest. This was a multiple case study. "A multiple or collective case study will allow the researcher to analyse within each setting and across settings". The method enables one to explore differences within and between cases [4].

The multiple case study consisted of four (4) groups that consisted of not more than ten (10) participants. The multiple case study approach was suitable for establishing common experiences of microaggression, given the complex nature of microaggression. This approach ensured that the focus was on key issues, namely the macroaggression as a phenomenon of interest and the unique experiences of women. The method also provided insight on differences in microaggressions experienced in one of the most densely populated townships, in the Gauteng province.

The research population of this phenomenological study was the secondary victims GVB residing in Johannesburg municipality, in the Gauteng province. The target population was secondary victims of GVB residing in Soweto Township. Soweto Township is twenty kilometres from Johannesburg city [16]. Four case groups were identified from four select residential areas in Soweto Township. The four areas were selected based on their geographic proximity to Johannesburg city and accessibility of participants. Geographic proximity or rather accessibility is a key feature of a purposive sampling approach. The sampling plan included a purposive approach and snowballing. Purposive sampling entailed deliberate selection; and the snowballing approach opened room for interested parties that were identified during information exchange between participants that were already included in the study [36]. The inclusion of a few snowballed participants was informed by the researcher's deliberate selection. Therefore, sampling was predominantly purposive, as purposeful sampling is often deemed appropriate for case studies [4]. An ideal case study constitutes of 3 or 12 participants. Collective case studies tend to have bigger samples, hence the case study had forty (40) participants. Data saturation influenced the size of the four groups in the case study because data collection ceased when interviews stopped producing new information [39].

The participation criteria were determined by the characteristics of population such as age and place of residency [30]. The overall participation criteria was 18 to 65 years, gender, race, residency in a township in the Gauteng province, and prior direct expose or close association with a victim of gender-based violence. Minors, unwilling participants, and women who directly experienced gender-based violence with the last six months were excluded from the study. Participants were assured of anonymity and were afforded the right to withdraw at any stage of the study [7]. Formal consent was received from each participant, and no incentives were offered to participants.

The study was ethical approved by a research ethics committee in an academic institution, in South Africa. It adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) No.4 of 2013 [44]. The Act protects personal information by regulating the flow of all personal information in South Africa [44]. Data was anonymized immediately after interviews, and pseudo names were assigned during data analysis and reporting of findings. Participants were also informed that the study was not funded, the data would be made available for future research on request directed to the author. The researcher declared that there was no conflict of interest in conducting the study; and disclosed that the study was in part fulfillment of a postdoctoral fellowship [7].

Data collection and data analysis methods

A data collection process is a systematic process of gathering information, assessing findings, and structuring the data or information on variables of interest in a way that is in sync with the research questions, and aims to produce scientific results. Qualitative methods of data collection include interviews, observations, and document review [10].

The study applied interviews to collect data from participants. The interview types include contact-interviews which are done face-to-face and non-contact interviews which use telephones. A face-to-face interview differs from other types of interviews based on three dimensions: (a) the type of questions used which range from closed questions, semi-open questions or open questions, (b) the structure of the interviews which range from structured, semi-structured or unstructured interviews, and (c) the amount of standardisation which range from standardisation of the questionnaire, the wording of questions, the interviewer's behaviour or reaction to a participant's questions. The interview type used in the study was semi-structured, with open-ended questions, and standardised interviewer's behaviour or reaction to a participant's questions. The case study focused on microaggression therefore the interview was standardised by clarifying and conceptualising microaggression. The open interview approach allowed the interviewer to diligently note down the interviewee responses, observe body language, pay attention to humming, and other reactions to the questions [30].

An interview schedule with a list of questions to guide the interviewer was administered to participants during face-to-face interviews. The qualitative interview method had a tight schedule, and each interview lasted for thirty minutes. A thematic analysis (TA) method was used to assess the data collected. Qualitative content analysis (CA) and thematic analysis (TA) facilitate contextual understanding of participants' subjective experiences. The TA process was used to find patterns of meaning in the data. The process involved reading and immersion in data to identify the most common phrases or words that could constitute categories. A category entails codes that provide understanding of the interpretive meaning of data [6]. Categories common in all four case groups were labelled dominant themes. TA was conducted using Atlas ti computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). The TA entailed an interactive descriptive process. A list of code groups and visual descriptive maps were developed using Atlas ti [40]. To ensure legitimacy of the qualitative study steps were taken to prevent biases. Biases of the data collected was mitigated by exporting the unaltered transcripts onto Atlas ti to avoid the reproduction or reconstruction of responses. This means that the written text in the transcripts was copied or rather typed onto word documents to retain the originality of responses, then uploaded onto Atlas ti for coding. Retaining the responses in the original form was key to reporting data saturation [30, 40].

The measures of trustworthiness applied in the case-study comprised of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability [4]. Credibility concerns the truthfulness of findings, transferability concerns the potential for extrapolation, dependability refers to data stability over time, and conformability refers to the extent to which the others can confirm the accuracy and relevance of the data [10, 22]. Bracketing was also applied to the study as this stance entails suspension of personal view to eliminate bias during data collection and analysis. Bracketing was necessary because the data analyses in qualitative studies are iterative and deemed prone to bias [25]. The study used the TA method because it permits a range of theoretical interpretations of data [6].

The research theory applied

Social Identity Theory (SIT) by Tajfel and Turner was applied to interpret data as it provides a framework for explaining how psychological process influence intergroup behaviour. The SIT postulates that individual identity-related motivations predict one's tendencies to discriminate against members of other social groups. Intergroup discrimination starts with the self [14]. Social identity refers to an individual self-concept which is a construct of self-perception in relation to group members of a relevant social group. How one perceived themselves as a member of a social group can lead to discriminatory tendencies such as in-group bias. The type of group identity can lead to different types of discrimination. Discrimination can be based on gender, ethnic, race or religion. Lack of education, uncertainty and perceived threat to the group are some of the factors that contribute to discriminatory tendencies towards out-group members. Studies of gender discrimination established significant male backlash against female leaders, which results from perceived threat to the in-group social norms, and a violation of male identity [5].

Results

All questions were answered completely by forty (40) Black African females who were between 20-64 years. Findings showed a homogenous indigenous ethnicity that included languages such as Zulu, Sepedi, Tswana, Xhosa, Tsonga and Ndebele. Some participants self-identified as South Africans that spoke an African language. Three dominant themes were identified in the data include fear of crime, gender, and township and these are discussed below.

Theme 1, Fear of crime. Fear entails a physical feeling of alarm or feeling of dread that is caused by one's awareness or expectation of danger and is often associated with certain physiological changes such as increased heartbeat, heavy breath, visible sweating and other skin responses. "Fear is generated and sustained by a sense of risk, threat, and vulnerability that is comprised of perceived likelihood, consequence, and control". The fear of crime can negatively affect the well-being and productivity of affected people [19]. A few quotes are tabled below to elaborate on this theme.

Table 1: Theme1 - fear of crime

No	Quotes	Participants
1.	"Yes."	P6
2.	"Yes."	P24
3.	"Shouting."	P20

Table 1 above provides responses to the question "do you feel safe in your community?" Data showed that most participants (39) stated "yes" to affirm their experiences of microaggression in Soweto Township. This negative experience implies that the participants were not safe from harm in their community. Not feeling safe may contribute to fear of crime.

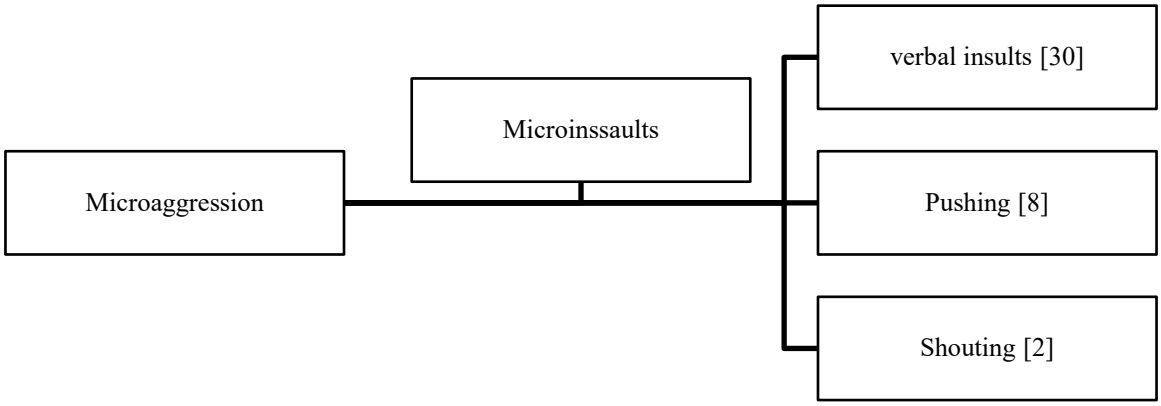
Theme 2, Gender. The study assessed gender as a dichotomous subject since researchers in social sciences tend to conceptualise 'gender' as binary in data collection instruments such as a survey interview schedule or questionnaire. The South African policing responsibilities on enforcing laws that prevent gender violence are informed by policies and frameworks that often define gender of male or female at the 'legal gender". The term "legal gender" refers to gender assigned at birth, which is determined by the physical visual appearance of a baby's gentiles. Legal gender is assignment in legal documents such as the birth certificates. Some countries make the legal gender salient in passports, drivers' licences and marriage certificates [26]. The term gender featured in the interview schedule to collect sample demographics and was later identified as a dominant theme in the data. The study used legal gender to assess gender differences at a social level, as the theme "gender" indicated power inequalities that manifest as microaggression towards women in the township. Some quotes are provided in Table 2 to elaborate on the theme.

Table 2: Theme 2 - gender

No.	Quotes	Participants
1.	"Men tend to insult."	P14
2.	"He will insult and be physical."	P15
3.	"Most men fear retaliation from the public, so they tend to insult more than physically assault."	P23

Table 2 above provides responses to the question, what is the most common type of microaggression men commit against women and girls in your family? All participants were female which implies that microaggression constitutes gendered violence. Furthermore, most participants reported that men were often microaggressive towards women and girls, which supports the development of the theme "gender". The data indicates that most participants not only experienced microaggression but were secondary victims of gender violence since their family members were victims of microaggression. Figure 1 below, indicates that the most common type of microaggression experienced by females was verbal insults (30); and least form of aggression reported included pushing (8) and shouting (2).

Figure 1: Type of microaggression experienced



Swearing and shouting constitute verbal aggression. Pushing is a minor act of aggression which was perceived as an insult by participants [1]. The study categorized the verbal insults and other forms of verbal aggression as microinsults because participants perceived these behavioural types as put-downs that conveyed men's rudeness and insensitivity to women [24].

Theme 3, Township. Townships were historically predominantly Black-dominated residential areas established between 1950 and the early 1980s to resettle millions of native South Africans that were forcefully removed in accordance with the then segregation laws, to achieved ideal geographic segregation along racial lines. Townships were established in the periphery of cities in South Africa to exclude and restrict the movement of indigenous Black South Africans. The social exclusion perpetuated poverty and the dismal living conditions of township residence. Post-apartheid government revitalization programmes have improved the infrastructure, education and living conditions township communities. Decades of discrimination has resulted in the development of informal economies and funding mechanisms or dwellings that support the livelihoods of many households. Consequently, townships tend to have diverse communities coexisting in confined spaces [21]. In summation, a Township is a geographic location with multiple residential sites populated by certain communities. Whereas a community is a group of people that share a location, background, identity or experiences that keeps them connected through established traditions and patterns of behaviour that are written or cultural within certain boundaries [8]. Table 3 presents a few quotes that elaborate on this theme.

Table 3: Theme3 - township

No	Quotes	Participants
1.	"Report to the police station."	P10
2.	"Report to the police."	P18
3.	"Telling the community."	P19

Table 3 above provides responses to the question, how do you respond to microaggression directed towards you by men? Most participants (18) reported microaggression. The reporting of microaggression to a stake holder highlights the importance of a functional community, hence the categorization of theme termed 'Township'.

The study had limitations and generalizability concerns. The limitations pertained to the lack of probing questions. The case study did not focus on comparisons but sought to capture the uniqueness of participants' experiences and perceptions of microaggression [30]. The type of interview used open-ended questions aimed at eliciting specific, elaborate and non-ambiguous responses from participants [30]. The sample was small, and the study was context-dependent which limits generalizability of the findings [33].

Discussion

The significance of the findings was that most participant (39) experienced microaggression from men in the township, and microinsults were the most common type of microaggression perpetuated against the women and girls. The findings indicate power dynamics and the vulnerability of women from victimization in townships. Results also show that eight (8) of the forty (40) participants confronted men who microaggressed against them. Reporting microaggression was the most common response or rather defense strategy participants used to manage the microaggression. The three dominant themes identified in the data included the 'fear of crime', gender', and 'township' which highlighted issues of safety and gender inequality prolonged by gender violence that manifest as microaggression in Soweto township.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study showed that most secondary victims of GBV were fearful and did not confront men who microaggressed against them. They perceived that the type of microaggression they experienced was gendered violence, often experienced in public across the township context, and contributed to their fear of crime. The study contributes to discourse against violence but equally advocates gender equality by highlighting the role of microaggression in the safety perception of women residing in the township.

In terms of the "*Social identity theory*" the microaggression women experience is a phenomenon of intergroup behaviour whereby the ingroup (men) discriminate against the outgroup (women) to achieve self-esteem, and to maintain the status quo. The findings are significant in that secondary victims' perception of microaggression can immensely contributed to policy development and various initiatives aimed at combatting gender-based violence.

The three recommendations proposed are as follows: (a) Police visibility in townships should be intensified to address the fear of crime by secondary victims of GBV. (b) Technology such as drones should be deployed in townships to deter microaggression. (c) The police service should introduce behavioural corrective programmes in townships to address discrimination and sexist attitudes harmful to women. These initiatives could promote tolerance, which is a key characteristic of the UN SDG 5 and 16. Policing should continue to play a critical role in preventing gender violence as a strategy to counter negative effects of the fear of crime in townships, and to protect the well-being of vulnerable groups.

The following steps were taken to mitigate internal biases of the data collected: All participants were asked to confirm the accuracy of the responses captured on the interview schedule, the researcher took reflective notes to identify personal biases, feedback on the research method used was sought from peers, data was anonymized to avoid personal biases on responses given, and Atlas ti. was used to develop themes from the data as opposed to manual coding that is prone to researcher bias. In addition to that, the following steps were taken to mitigate internal biases on the conclusions: Both negative and positive findings were reported, and misreporting was avoided by presenting all research findings and proving conclusions based on the findings.

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