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An assessment of the policing of intentional microaggressions in the Gauteng Province, South Africa

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Abstracts: South African statutes prohibit and criminalize unfair discrimination however, intimidation, hate speech, harassment, and defamation of character are prevalent in South Africa. Law enforcement must understand the dynamics of microaggressions, stay vigilant of women's responses to microaggressions in public, and have knowledge of the applicable legislations, in order to deter microaggressions and other forms of discrimination. One in three types of microaggressions are detectible, which is problematic for policing. Microassaults entail intentional microaggressions such as racial and gender slurs, which threaten women's dignity and have negative psychological consequences. The study was motivated by the pervasive threats of subtle violence against women in public in South Africa. Twenty police officials from the Vispol sector were recruited from six police stations in the Gauteng province, and purposive sampling technique was used. Participants provided written consent during face-to-face interviews. The objective was to assess the policing of microaggressions in the province. The research method was qualitative research, with an interpretive phenomenological design. The five dominant themes were, body Language, intimidation, gender-based discrimination, policing styles, and criminal laws. Results showed that most participants identified incidences of intentional microaggression through women's body language, perceived it as intimidation and gender-based discrimination, and used criminal laws to police it. Furthermore, most participants used the service policing style to intervene. Punitive measures were recommended to deter intentional microaggressions. The study recommended educational programmes to promote the use of Sign-language by women in domestic violence or other dangerous situations. The findings were ungeneralizable due to the small sample size.

Keywords: Communication, crime, discrimination, intimidation, microaggressions, safety.

Introduction

There is public consensus that the legislative provisions for gender equality are only effective if the safety of vulnerable groups is guaranteed. The categories of vulnerable groups may vary between countries. It is important to stress that the categories of vulnerable groups in South Africa includes women, children, elderly, disabled person, lesbian and gay people, rural communities, and etcetera. The study mainly focused on women. In South Africa, governments efforts to eradicate gender discrimination are continuously thwarted by a plethora of acts of aggression directs towards women [36]. Moral deviancies, unresolved cultural patriarchal norms are one of many factors that promote linguistic violence, hate speech and other questionable relational power dynamics between men and women in South Africa [9, 30, 49]. Men continue to perpetuate unhealth power dynamics when communicating with women in public, often evidenced as intimate partner violence (IVP), nuisance courtship and street harassment. A single conversation with a man may involve gender slurs, putdowns and other linguistics violence [16, 30]. Accumulative harm may result from a single encounter with a perpetrator therefore, no form of aggression is to 'micro'. Studies show that seventy percent (70%) of women in South Africa do not feel safe walking alone in public [56].

Women safety matters, and the public generally expects the South African Police Service (SAPS) to have basic understanding of social problems such as microaggressions. Their level of understanding should enable the police to readily identify microaggressions and a variety of subtle violence in public. Police should also understand their role, the applicable laws that can be used to deter microaggressions when applying a certain policing style to intervene, when vulnerable groups experience microaggression in public [36]. It is important to note that microaggressions have multiple dimensions which makes them difficult to detect at times. Therefore, the police must acknowledge victims' voices and worldviews or cultural differences to be able to address microaggressions in public. Selective attention is cautioned in the invisible world of microaggressions:

> "Microaggressions are about experiential reality and about listening to the voices of those oppressed, ignored, and silenced. Those voices tell stories of the many hurts, humiliations, lost opportunities, need for change, and the often-unintentional microaggression endured as they struggle against an unwelcoming, invalidating and even hostile campus climate and society" [39].

The urgency to address microaggressions has been globalized. An assessment of the policing of intentional microaggression in the Gauteng Province was motivated by prevailing macroaggressions and other pervasive threats of subtle violence against women across South Africa.

Literature Review

Policing intentional microaggressions requires awareness and responsiveness to women's perceptions of threats in public. The South African Constitution stipulates that Chapter 11 institutions are collectively responsible for the safety of citizen, but the police are largely responsible for crime deterrence across communities. Section 205(3) of the Constitution provides that:

> "The objectives of the police service are to prevent, combat and investigate crime, to maintain public order, to protect and secure the inhabitants of the Republic and their property, and to uphold and enforce the law" [44].

The SAPS has a constitutional obligation to ensure women's safety. National statues such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (PEPUDA) No. 4 of 2000 reiterate this obligation [46]. This obligation is also articulated in international policies such as the United Nations Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs): SDG 16 principles focused on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, and SDG 5 principles focused on eliminating gender discrimination [14]. Women's safety matters because it is an indicator of social cohesion, tolerance, peace, and stability in communities. Women may experience 'safety needs' when experiencing threats of personal security, health, finances, crime, murder, extreme weather conditions, chronic illness, and unemployment [12]. Threats of gender crimes are concerning because they involve various forms of aggression. 'Aggression' can take many forms which range from relatively minor acts, serious acts, to more severe acts. Minor acts of aggression include name calling or negative remarking about someone; serious acts of aggression include kicking or punching; and severe acts of aggression include stabbing or shooting a person. When conceptualizing aggression behaviour and violence behaviour on a continuum of severity, aggressive behaviour is considered as relatively minor acts located at the low end of the spectrum, and violence are considered as severe acts located at the high end of the spectrum [2]. The fact that aggression can manifest in many forms highlights the multiplicity of gender crimes and the continuum severity of each crime, as evidenced in the eight types of violence against women. The eight types of violence experienced by women worldwide include: Physical violence which involves sexual assault; emotional or psychological violence which involves verbal abuse; sexual violence which involves sexual harassment; economic violence which involves financial abuse; digital violence which involves online stalking; institutional violence which involves healthcare violence; culture violence which involves forced marriage or honor killings; and medical violence which involves forced sterilization. These forms of violences constitute gender crimes [16].

All types of gender violence either involve microaggression or are precipitated by microaggressions. Microaggressions are a threat to women because they are harmful to their psychological wellbeing [24]. The dynamic nature of microaggressions implies that accumulative can harm occur in a single encounter with a perpetrator. Microaggressions are conceptualized as:

> "The everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" [40].

Most cases of microaggressions are performed unintentional but there are instances of intentional microaggression [28]. The three types of macroaggressions include microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations, and these differ in degree of intention. Microassaults are mostly considered intentional in comparison to microinsults and microinvalidations. The behaviour of the microaggressions can manifest as follows: Microassaults involve name calling, and subtle offensive comments or tone of voice; microinsults entail put-downs and rudeness aimed to humiliate; and microinvalidations includes behaviour such as excluding, disregarding or opposing the feelings and experiences of a person or vulnerable social group to cause hurt [24, 28]. Microaggressions are often committed by members of dominant groups, namely gender, racial and ethics groups in higher social hierarchies. For example, Locals may direct microaggressions toward immigrants, men toward gay or lesbian people, and fair-skinned people may perpetuate colorism toward dark-skinned people [28].

Microaggressions may differ across social settings in one country, and this form of violence is often sustained by social norms. The role of cultural norms in microaggressions, gender crimes, and other social ills is well documented [27]. Relational aggression varies across cultural contexts, and is accounted for by ethnocentrism, racism, xenophobia, and other forms of intolerance [9]. Vulnerable groups may experience these forms of intolerance in multicultural states with super diversity, as evidenced in the multinational existence of residence in Johannesburg, South Africa. Johannesburg is a residence to more than twelve South African ethnic groups, and its superdiversity also involves immigrants from Asia, Europe and the Sub-Saharan region [22]. Intolerance is more prevent in urban settings as compared to rural settings [9]. Cultural differences can have devastating consequences on people. Studies showed that some verbal communication has been misconstrued as threats in superdiverse communities, which resulted in retaliation and confrontation [19, 37]. Nonverbal communication with hidden demeaning messages can cause trauma, elicit retaliation and confrontation [18]. Responding to microaggression is risky. "*The guide to responding to microaggressions*" toolkit developed Dr. Nadal indicates that perpetrators tend to respond defensively towards victims that retaliate against microaggressions [53]. It may not be easy for victims ask for help in dangerous situations, especially when the perpetrator is in proximity. Studies showed that victims of domestic violence struggled to ask for police help when their spouse was present. Therefore, the police must consider behavioural differences across culture in order register communication that signal danger. Ambiguities of symbolic language can contribute to miscommunication between the police and victims or the victims and perpetrators [50]. Power dynamics are entrenched in communication. Çiğdem studied cross-cultural communication between local and immigrants and established that communication between people was an expression of power dynamics in social spheres. [10]. Power dynamics can manifest in communication between children and adults, women and men, and other social categories. Intimidation is one of many examples of overt display of power dynamics between men and women. Reoccurring microaggressions can be experienced by victims as threats, bullying and intimidations [18]. Intimidation is prevalent across South Africa. The rate of hate crimes reported in South Africa between 2013 and 2017 was intimidation (34%), hate speech (24%), harassment (22%), and defamation of character (11%) [52]. Recent studies established a strong correlation between discrimination and intimidation [6].

Police orientation towards microaggression and similar acts of intimidation may contribute to the deterrence of gender crimes in public. Police awareness and understanding of the notions of microaggressions may impacts on their policing style. The police may use three types of policing styles to fulfill their mandates, and these are conceptualized as follows: "legalistic policing style" ensures strict law enforcement activities; "watchman policing style" involves maintaining peace which is achieved by monitoring traffic stops near schools, recreational facilities deemed as hotspots for delinquents , and other specific target; and "service policing style" which involves serving communities by solving various social problems affecting residence. Each policing style serves as guidelines for police officials' role orientation. [15]. For example, a single slur can cause a dispute and police may detain a perpetrator that retaliates against the victim or the police [52]. The range of policing styles indicate that the role of police in deterring crime should not be punitive.

The performance of the SAPS is monitored by many legislative bodies such as the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) and the Directorate of Priority Crime Investigation (DPCI) also known as Hawks [47]. The constitutional obligation of the law SAPS is of interest to the public because any form of violence against vulnerable groups is an indictment on the Vispol sector. The purpose of the study was to explore the policing of intentional microaggressions directed at women in public, in the Gauteng Province.

Problem statement

The complex nature of gender-based (GBV) is concerning, given that women can experience eight types of gender violence in communities worldwide [16]. Studies show that subtle violence such as microaggressions are precursors to overt physical violence, repeated slights or hate-speech can escalate to noticeable violence [27]. The complex nature of Microaggressions make it difficult to detect. Microassaults entails intentional attacks directed at vulnerable groups such as women with the aim of causing fear, harm, and prejudice [55]. Overt microaggressions such as microassaults can be experiences as hate speech, gender or racial slurs, and other forms of linguistic violence. Studies showed that verbal violence was more prevalent than sexual violence and physical violence in South Africa [26, 52]. The gender crimes in South Africa are five (5) times higher than the global rate [8], which constitutes a blatant threat to women's constitutional right to dignity, safety and security [26, 44]. The Gauteng province continues to have the highest gender crimes as compared to other provinces in the country, and this compromises women's safety and livelihoods. High crime rates also contribute to fear and poor mental health [25]. South Africa must strive to accomplish its developmental goal of eliminating gender discrimination and promoting safety for vulnerable groups [5]. In order to fulfil this obligation, the criminal justice system must use various strategies to combat violence against women, this includes research on possible human rights violations [38]. The study falls within this niche area and explored the policing of microaggression in the Gauteng province.

Research objectives and research questions

The study aimed to raise awareness on the policing of microaggressions across three metropolitan municipalities in the Gauteng province. A research objective highlights the intent and reason for conducting the study [11]. The primary objective of the study was to identify the contributions and challenges associated with sustainable developmental goals (SDGs): SDG5 focusing on gender equality and human rights, and SDG16 focusing on addressing violence and eliminating fear in communities. To assessed the policing of microaggressions in the Gauteng province, the study formulated five research objectives as follows: To establish how SAPS officials conceptualize microaggression, to establish if SAPS officials perceive microaggression as gender-based discrimination (GBV), to establish police awareness of legal frameworks applicable to the policing of microaggression, to establish police perceptions of their role in the policing of acts of discrimination in public spaces, and to establish how police identify microaggression in public. The study used five open-ended research questions, listed below [54]:

1. How do SAPS officials conceptualize microaggression?
2. Do SAPS officials perceive microaggressions as gender-based discriminations?
3. What legal frameworks do SAPS officials use to police microaggressions?
4. What is the role of SAPS officials in the policing of discrimination committed in public?
5. What signs do SAPS officials use to identify microaggression in public?

Research Methodology

A research methodology is a wholistic plan that outlines the design and approach for sampling, tools or instruments of data collection and evaluation, and the scientific theory used to explain the findings. A research method can be qualitative mainly focused on relationship between variables, hypothesis testing; quantitative focused on exploring phenomena and portraying peoples' perceptions of social issues; or mixed-method which is a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods [35]. The study was qualitative.

Research paradigm and design

The study used an interpretive research paradigm which involved qualitative methods, assumes multiple subjective realities, and was context specific. The descriptive phenomenological study used an interpretive paradigm which focused mainly on exploring people's experiences and perceptions of social events, objects or subjects of interest. This entailed the Husserlian phenomenological approach of bracketing to mitigate biases. The reason for adopting this approach was because it focused on understanding individuals' experiences and perceptions of a phenomena rather than co-creating meaning with participants. Furthermore, descriptive phenomenological does not rigidly apply theoretical frameworks and upholds participants' perspectives throughout data collection and analysis stages [33]. The study focused on the phenomena of microaggression. It explored the policing of microaggressions across three metropolitan municipalities in the Gauteng province namely, Tshwane, Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni [21]. The research population was the SAPS which constitutes the administration, visible policing, detective services, crime intelligence, protection and security services [29]. The target population was the Visible Policing (VIPOL) Sector in

the three metropolitan municipalities identified. Members of the VISPOL sector are responsible for crime prevention activities such as patrols and visible policing in communities across South Africa [34].

A non-random technique termed purposive sampling was used to identify participants. Purposive sampling is known for its judgmental or biased approach [1]. Purposive sampling was suitable for the study as it permitted the admission of participants based on researcher's subjective view of participant availability and ability to provide information on the studied phenomena [33]. The sample of twenty (20) police officials were recruited from Community Service Centres (CSCs) termed police stations in South Africa. Two CSCs were identified from each metropolitan municipalities and these included, the Silverton Police Station, Douglasdale police station, SAPS Primrose Police Station, Jeppe police station, SAPS Lyttleton Police Station, and SAPS Dududza Police Station.

Data collection methods

The study received ethical approval from two institutions, the University of South Africa (UNISA) Research Ethics Committee (REC) and the SAPS Research Ethics Division. The project reference number was #7679. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect information from participants. Interviews entail a conversation between an interviewer and interviewee, with the aim of sharing information that provides insight on the phenomena of interest [31]. Interview schedules were administered to participants during 30 minutes face-to-face interviews. Ethical consideration entailed briefing participants about the nature and purpose of the study, informing them of their rights to remain anonymous, right to privacy, right to withdraw at any stage of the study, and not to be labelled [3]. None of the participants received incentives for participating in the study. Disclosure entailed informing participants that the study was not funded, it was ethically approved, and conformed to the research standards of Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) No. 4 of 2013 [48].

Mitigation against bias in research was necessary given the fact that phenomenological studies tend to be bias. The following procedures were followed to mitigate against internal biases during data collection: The questions were posed to the participants in a non-directional manner to avoid leading and influencing the participants' responses to questions asked. Mitigating against leading questions was continuous and it involved self-monitoring though reflective notes during interview sessions. To ensure transparency, all participants were informed that writing reflective notes were part of the interview process and were intended to regulate the interviewer, to curb the interviewer's inherent beliefs and worldviews from influencing the way she transcribed participants' responses. The study mitigated against selection biases to prevent unrepresentative sample by ensuring that the participants met all the research criteria. The process involved asking all participants to conform if they had met all the research criteria, as the interviewer ticked her checklist to verify participants' suitability. The process did not absolve that fact that purposive sampling is by nature characterised by bias selection which involved recruiting readily available prospective participants in the research setting. Participant bias was avoided by excluding sympathetic participants. Prolonged engagements with participants facilitated member-checks. Member-check were planned. Participants that were deemed to be familiar or overly agreeable with the interviewer were excluded to mitigate against conformity [33]. Reflective notes were continuously taken to mitigate against bias. In addition to that, participants were provided an opportunity to read through their transcripts, to verify the accuracy of their answers [13]. Data saturation was achieved with information gathered from 20 participants [54].

Data analysis methods

Data analysis method entails the use of scientific tools and systems to evaluate the information collected during a study [20]. Thematic content analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti. to generate emerging themes. The data analysis procedure was iterative, which entailed data cleaning, data coding, identification of patterns, and the development of dominant themes [32].

Guba and Lincoln's (1989) measures of trustworthiness applied to the study included the criteria credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. The criteria served the follow purpose: Credibility ensured truthfulness by measuring what the study intended to measure; confirmability ensured objectivity; dependability ensured that the processes were dependable, which meant that detailed descriptive information about the processes used must enable others to repeat the study; transferability ensured the transferability of findings to other settings [4].

Results and discussions

All twenty participants filled the interview schedules. The demographic information of the sample was as follows: Gender (10) males and (10) females; age range was 30-58 years; years of tenure in the SAPS was 1-35 years; ethnicity was Afrikaans (2), Sepedi (6), Setswana (2), Tshivenda (4), Tsonga (1), Xhosa (1), and Zulu (4); and, level of

education was Grade 12 (7) and tertiary education (13). The five dominant themes that emerged from the data included body Language, intimidation, gender-based discrimination, policing styles, and criminal laws. The frequency distribution of the emerging themes is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Emerging themes and quotes

Dominant themes	Frequency of sub-themes	Quotes
1. Intimidation	Intimidation (8), harassment (3), both intimidation and harassment (2), both intimidation and defamation (1), bullying (1), labelled as a nonsense word (1), and other terminology (4).	P03 said: "Harassment". P07 said: "Intimidation". P05 said: "Aggression is something that manifests to violence. Microaggression does not exist – the word does not make sense. It is not violence. It is only an insult". P08 said: "It is provocation as they want you to retaliate and do them harm". P11 said: "It is both intimidation and harassment because they go hand-in-hand". P15 said: "Microaggression is a crime in a form of intimidation".
2. Gender-based discrimination	Gender-based discrimination (8), GBV (5), both gender-based discrimination and GBV (3), harassment (1), prejudice (1), and other (1).	P03 said: "Gender-based discrimination against men or women". P06 said: "Harassment". P08 said: "Prejudice". P10 said: "Discrimination". P12 said: "They fall under gender-based violence". P13 said: "It is both discrimination and gender-based violence".
3. Body Language	Verbal (2), non-verbal (8), and a combination of verbal and non-verbal (9) type of Communication.	P03 said: "Facial expression, tone of words in response to another person". P05 said: "Normally a victim will call the SAPS, and we separate the people in confrontation or in a domestic incident". P06 said: "Body language, voice, words uttered". P08 said: "Facial expressions tell you that the microaggression is intended or intentional". P11 said: "Body language - facial expression, waving arm in a panic motion to seek help".
4. Criminal laws	South African criminal statutes (15), other (5).	P02 said: "We can do awareness campaigns and maintain public order". P03 said: "Harassment Order". P06 said: "Criminal procedure Act 51 of 1977". P07 said: "Criminal procedure Act 51 of 1977 and the Constitution because it protects rights to equality". P012 said: "Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998".
5. Policing styles	Protectors (11), arbitrators (4), others (6).	P10 said: "Protect and serve". P11 said: "I am a public protector 24/7 regardless of being off duty". P13 said: "I am a protector of the community 24/7". P17 said: "To approach the situation and advise the victim to either open a case docket or apply for prosecution order at Magistrate Court". P18 said: "As a protector. As an officer, I must guide civilians". P19 said: "I would not like to be involved while off duty".

The dominant themes presented in Table 1 were conceptualized as follows:

Theme 1, intimidation. The theme emerged from the question "how do SAPS officials conceptualize microaggression?". Results showed that most participants conceptualized microaggression as a form of intimidation. Previous studies established that intimidation was prevalent in South Africa [52]. The term "intimidation" is not defined in the Intimidation Act 72 of 1982 however the statute criminalizes intimidatory conduct. The Act provides that:

"Any person who – (a) without lawful reason and with intent to compel or induce any person or persons of a particular nature, class or kind or person in general to do or to abstain from doing any act or to assume or to abandon a particular standpoint – (i) assault, injures or cause damage to any person; or (ii) in any manner threatens to kill, assault, injure or cause damage to any person or persons of a particular nature, class or kind… shall be guilty of offense" [42].

Theme 2, gender-based discrimination. The theme emerged from the question "do SAPS officials perceive microaggressions as gender-based discriminations?" Results showed that most participants perceive microaggressions as gender-based discriminations. The South African Constitution prohibits gender discrimination, and Section 9(3) provides as follows:

"The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language, and birth" (South Africa 1996).

Theme 3, body Language. The theme emerged from the question "what signs do SAPS officials use to identify microaggression in public?" Results showed that most participants observed body language to identify incidences of microaggression in public. Body language is nonverbal communication that involves mimics, gestures, and body movements that are performed intentionally or unintentionally. Body language may vary across sociocultural settings because body movement may slightly differ depending on the type of gestures used. The varieties of body movement include biting nails, repeated blinking or rubbing eyes, chin or nose, rubbing hands together, frantic nodding of head, hanging hands over the head, and other movements [51]. Sign Language is a globally established form of intentionally non-verbal communication that involves hand gestures. Intentional non-verbal communication includes flexing a combination of figures to form different visual signs termed "figure spelling of alphabets" [7]. When communication is ambiguous, police must use their discretion to interpret messages women express through body language. The finding advance understanding of the importance sustainable development like empowerment of women to effectively ask for police help, which is aligned with SDG5.

Theme 4, criminal laws. The theme emerged from the question "what legal frameworks do SAPS officials use to police microaggressions?". Results showed that most participants used South African criminal statues such as the CPA of 1977 and the DVA of 1998 to police microaggressions [41, 45]. The South African criminal statues participants discussed provide guidelines for law enforcement and prosecutors to act against gender crimes within the country's boundaries. Reports showed that one incident of microaggression such as a single slur can warrant arrest and prosecution in South Africa [52]. The finding advance understanding of the importance of criminal statutes in advancing sustainable development goals, promoting law and order akin to SDG 16.

Theme 5, policing styles. The theme emerged from the question "what is the role of SAPS officials in the policing of discrimination committed in public?". Results showed that most participants perceived themselves as public protectors akin to the community policing styles, otherwise known as the service policing style which focuses on resolving disputes and various solving social problems affecting communities [15]. The Vispol sector has the largest budget in comparison to other divisions and its policing style is informed by statutes such as the South African Police Service Act, No. 68 of 1995 [23, 43]. The large Vispol budget indicates that the government prioritizes community safety.

Theoretical interpretation of findings

The Social Learning theory (SLT) states that information about a social phenomenon is acquired through observation, and behavioural responses are learnt through social interactions. Furthermore, memories facilitate evidence-based decision making [17]. The rational for applying the SLT to the study was that it facilitates understanding of the dynamics between prior exposure and reactions to similar events, in this case intentional microaggressions. In other words, prior exposure to negative social interactions and the behavioural responses of victims are memorized by people. The recollection of these negative social interactions explains why some people would be able to identify gestures and body language that signals distress.

The interpretation of research findings was that the participants were familiar with certain body Language in cases of intimidation or gender-based discrimination, and used criminal laws and service policing styles to police the intentional microaggressions. The study argued that participants' familiarity with victims' body Language in dangerous situations implies that intentional microaggressions was prevalent in the three metropolitan municipalities, and participants were aware when women were unable to communicate verbally to request for help.

The study noted the following additional findings: Although victims of microaggression were not the subject of investigation, the study argued that since behaviour was learnt through social interactions, it was possible that the women that the participants were referring to had used body language that was associated with distress signals in the three metropolitan municipalities. Furthermore, none of the participants discussed variations in the body language between women from various ethnic groups, which implies that there was a possibility that regardless of cultural diversity, the women used gestures that were common in the three metropolitan municipalities. The findings advance understanding of sustainable development SDG5 and SDG16, the urgency of eliminating gender inequalities and fear across communities, and protecting the human rights of all women and girls.

Conclusions and recommendations

The conclusions drawn from the findings followed mitigation of internal bases, which involved following processes: The credibility of findings was established by ascertaining accuracy of information drawn from the participants' coded data and original transcripts. Triangulation was continuously applied to ensure credibility of data. A detailed audit trial was developed to ensured dependability of finding and transparency throughout the study. Transparently entailed managing descriptive notes on the steps taken by the researcher from the onset of the research project, the activities or processes of developing the data, and the activities leading reporting the research findings. The reflective notes were used during the data collection and analysis stage of the study. The descriptive audit trial detailed the study to ensured trustworthiness of the data and confirmability of the established findings. Researcher notes describing participants' behaviour, experiences, and the research context were maintained to ensure transferability and to mitigate bias. Participants' expressions and behaviour were not interrupted and were acknowledged without doubts. The participants were continuously assured that their explanations on police awareness of legal frameworks applicable to the policing of microaggression, police perceptions of their role in the policing of discrimination in public spaces, and how police identify microaggression in public were important contributions to the study. They were informed that the information they provided would contribute towards developing the sustainable development of gender equality and discrimination, addressing violence and eliminating fear in communities. The above strategies ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the conclusions drawn from the findings [33].

The findings highlighted police understanding and commitment to managing gender violence in South Africa, a key principle of SDG 5 and 16. The conclusion drawn was that, South Africa has a high crime rate. Intimidation, hate speech, and harassment are one of many forms of gender violence that involve microaggressions. Given the prevalence of gender crimes in the Gauteng province, it could be a norm for women to use body language when responding to microaggressions in the public. In terms of the SLT when the police are repeatedly exposed to gender crimes such as intentional microaggressions, they not only memorize women's behavioural responses to the perpetrator, but they make informed decisions when responding. Furthermore, participants were aware when women were unable to communicate verbally to request for help when they encountered intentional microaggression. Conversely, women who were victims of intentional microaggression in public had a repertoire of body-language as a form of safe-communication in dangerous situations. The findings indicate that the participants did not view intentional microaggressions as a minor offense, they perceived themselves as public protectors and used the service policing style to intervene. The participants conformed to their constitutionally mandated roles, which is to serve and protect residence. The study recommended punitive actions against perpetrators of intentional microaggression as a strategy to eliminate gender discrimination in the Gauteng province. The study also recommended introducing intervention programmes to educate women on Sign Language or universal hand gestures that can be used to promote effective communication in dangerous situations like IPV, domestic violence and other gender crimes. Furthermore, the proposed intervention programmes should be introduced to public schools, recreational centers and other settings. Future research on strategies police use to identify microaggressions in public nationwide was recommended to foster innovative strategies to combat microaggressions and various forms of gender discrimination in South Africa.

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