FROM 'VICTIM' TO 'SURVIVOR': DECONSTRUCTING THE PERVASIVE NOTION OF VICTIMHOOD IN DISCOURSES AROUND PROGRAMMES DEALING WITH GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

Social workers are among key professionals rendering empowerment services to people affected by gender-based violence in South Africa. These services are rendered within the developmental and empowerment approaches that were introduced in the post-apartheid era. Although the introduction of democracy brought a paradigm shift towards a developmental approach, social welfare and social work, there is paucity of research that investigates the utilisation of the concept of "victim" within the empowerment services rendered to people harmed by gender-based violence. The concept of "victim" has not been extensively researched theoretically and empirically. This article critically analyses the usage of the concept of "victim" in the empowerment social work services and posits a deconstruction of the pervasive notion of victimhood in discourses around programmes dealing with gender-based violence. It is hoped that this article will stimulate debates and research focused on the labels adopted in the empowerment services, as well as in developmental and social work in different societal contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The scourge of gender-based violence has become a major concern in South Africa. As a result, there is more being done currently to curb this scourge by both the government and the private sector. This article strives to deconstruct the pervasive notion of victimhood in discourses around programmes dealing with gender-based violence against women in South Africa. First, it presents an overview of gender-based violence. Second, it discusses social construction theory and Afrocentrism theory, which are both used as the theoretical framework for this article. Third, it provides a summary of the research methodology adopted. Fourth, an overview of the developmental social work approach is presented, followed by the discussion on two themes – victim and survivor – in line with the relevant literature and the two theoretical lenses applied. Finally, the article offers some conclusions and provides recommendations.

OVERVIEW OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to violence that is directed against a person based on their sex or gender (Dlamini, 2021; Finchilescu & Dugard, 2021; Muluneh, Stultz, Francis & Agho, 2020). It is a manifestation of the unequal power relations that are supported by social norms and beliefs about dominance, power especially patriarchal authority. Social institutions formalise these relations through laws, policies and regulations (Sikweyiya *et al.* 2020). Gender-based violence includes physical violence, emotional damage (e.g. humiliation or intimidation), economic dependence (e.g. a male partner controlling the income of the family/spouse), and social isolation (e.g. a male partner preventing wife/partner from contacting her relatives) (Enaifoghe, Dlelana, Abosede & Dlamini, 2021). Research has shown that women and girls are mostly affected by gender-based violence (Adams, Mabusela & Dlamini, 2013; Dlamini, 2021; Graaff, 2017; Sidloyi, 2020).

GBV in South Africa has reached extreme and crisis proportions (Clark, 2020; Yesufu, 2022). It continues to make news headlines in South Africa despite the government's efforts to curb it. Femicide and intimate partner violence (IPV) are regarded as the leading forms of GBV (Manzanga, 2020; Matzopoulos *et al.*, 2019). Globally, one out of every three women reports having been a victim of gender-based violence (Bani *et al.*, 2020). Approximately every 3 hours a woman dies at the hands of a domestic partner (Dlamini, 2021), Not surprisingly, South Africa is regarded as one of the most violent countries in the world, coming in at number 38 out of 163 rated countries (Naidoo, 2022).

The rapid growth of GBV in South Africa is causing increased concern requiring imperative ongoing critical analysis and the engagement of different stakeholders (Enaifoghe *et al.*, 2021; Leburu-Masigo, 2020). Several studies have shown that GBV affects individuals in different socioeconomic, cultural, educational or political backgrounds of. Moreover, the phenomenon of GBV in South Africa is intense and widespread, affecting mostly women (Enaifoghe *et al.,* 2021; Gould, 2020; Graaff, 2017; Oparinde & Matsha, 2021; Rapanyane, 2020). It is true that men can also experience gender-based violence, but the focus of this article is on gender-based violence against women.

Due to the sensitivity and complexity of GBV, it is unfortunately not often reported. The president of South Africa, Mr Ramaphosa, described the scourge of GBV as a "tip of the iceberg or silent epidemic" (Muleneh *et al.,* 2020). Sadly, most survivors are hesitant to reveal their experiences of violence for many reasons. Some of the barriers to reporting include fear of stigma and shame, financial barriers, lack of awareness of available services, fear of revenge, lack of law enforcement action, and attitudes towards violence as a normal component of life (Matzopoulous *et al.,* 2019; Muleneh *et al.,* 2020; Wilson & Butler, 2014). Muraya and Fry (2016) highlighted that survivors struggle with interpersonal relationships and have poor social support systems. These beliefs and barriers exacerbate the vulnerability of women, silencing and trapping them in their circumstances, and prolonging their suffering at the hands of the perpetrators. The strategy that is often used by the perpetrator (the man) is to dominate the various aspects of the woman's life. Given the complexity of the issues around GBV, robust and ongoing research and new approaches to tackling this problem in South Africa are urgently required (Mahlori, 2016).

In South Africa the scourge of GBV mirrors the misogynous repression that women encounter around the world (Christensen, 2019; Sithomola, 2020). For instance, in this country the causes of gender-based violence are attributed to the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, the entrenched patriarchal social structure, and the commodification and objectification of women (Christensem 2019; Dlamini, 2021; Graaff & Heinecken, 2017; Mutinta, 2022; Rapanyane, 2021; Sidloyi, 2020; Sithomola, 2020). Prevailing prejudices include societal norms that, for example, support the belief that wearing miniskirts leads to women being raped, therefore girls need to be taught how to dress. Such gendered points of view encourage the idea that the violation of women's rights is caused by their own refusal to conform to gendered cultural norms (Graaff & Heinecken, 2017). This kind of preconception is manifested in many under-resourced spaces such as townships (Sidloyi, 2020) and rural areas. But this does not imply that GBV in not prevalent in urban areas.

GBV has serious social, emotional, economic and social consequences for the lives of women and their significant others (Enaifoghe, 2019; Mahlori, 2016). For instance, research shows that GBV affects women's energy, compromises their physical and mental health, and erodes their self-esteem. While it can also lead to death, the survivors are likely to develop chronic pain, physical disability, substance abuse and mental illness such as depression (Enaifoghe *et al.,* 2021; Simister & Kowalewska, 2016). Moreover, women who experience gender-based violence are at high risk of social isolation and marginalisation, as well as relational attachment difficulties (Wilson & Butler, 2014). Enaifoghe (2019) notes that GBV can prevent women from realising their economic potential because of stigma and the physical and psychological trauma caused by the violence.

The democratic government in South Africa brought about a paradigm shift towards a developmental approach to social welfare in South Africa through the White Paper for Social Welfare (Republic of South Africa, 1997) to assist people in distress, including people harmed by GBV (Runganga, 2017). Chavalala (2016) notes that the transition to democracy encompassed the changing and alignment of old policies with the principles of the new-found democracy. The White Paper for Social Welfare provides the mandate for all social welfare services to be aligned with the developmental approach (Runganga, 2017). Another significant programme that was introduced at the advent of democracy was the victim empowerment programme (Leburu-Masigo, 2020). This programme is built on the developmental approach that is central to social work and highlights attributes such as victim-centredness, empowerment, partnership and participation (Runganga, 2017). The main intention of this programme is to provide access to the diverse services rendered to individuals who have experienced any form of harm, trauma and material loss through violence, crime, natural disaster and human accident through socioeconomic conditions (Department of Social Development, 2007).

However, there is one aspect that has been overlooked (Leburu-Masigo, 2020) by professionals rendering services to individuals who experience GBV, namely the notion of the "victim" in the empowerment services dealing with gender-based violence. Currently, there is a paucity of research examining the impact of labelling on people who have experienced crime and violence (Ben-David, 2020; Fohring, 2018), specifically in social work in South Africa. Studies show

that social workers have little knowledge about gender-based violence interventions and often lack confidence to intervene in such instances (Leburu-Masigo, 2020; Mahlori, 2016; Ntwape, 2014). Accordingly, the aim of this article is to deconstruct the pervasive notion of victimhood in discourses of programmes dealing with gender-based violence. There is not extensive theoretical and empirical research on the concept of "victim" (Fohring, 2018). Given the above context of GBV, the next section provides a more detailed consideration of the concept of "victim".

The concept of "victim" as a construct

A victim is any person who individually or collectively suffers harm including physical or emotional injury, economic loss or substantial impairment of their rights through acts of commission that are violations of national criminal laws or internationally recognised norms relating to human rights (Department of Social Development, 2007; Fohring, 2018; Saeed, 2016). Within the criminal justice system, the term "victim" describes a person who has been subjected to a crime. The word serves to indicate a particular status that confers certain rights under the law (Dubey & Jain, 2020).

When someone acquires the status of being a victim, that person becomes aware of their victimisation and social acknowledgement of the victimisation. This leads to the categorisation of the victim as someone who receives the "complete and legitimate status of victim" (Christie, 1986) when he or she is affected by violence or crime (Dubey & Jain, 2020). The legislation asserts the value of the victim by the way it protects them. This means that identifying oneself as a victim is disempowering (Dubey & Jain, 2020), and in other ways, using the term victim can classify people to be in need of care and assistance (Weisstub, 1986). The question arises: what does the law say about those who do not conform to these prescripts of not viewing themselves as victims?

The term "victim" carries a strong stigma in society that can lead to blame, defamation, weakness and shame for those to whom it is applied (Fohring, 2018). Originating in Greek, the word "victim" was used to refer to bodily signs intended to expose something uncommon and bad about the moral status of the bearer (Goffman, 1963). Hence, once the "victim" label is attached, any hope of a rapid recovery is diminished (van Dijk, 2009). A study conducted by Fohring (2018) found that people who are affected by crime find the label of "victim" to be highly undesirable and distance themselves from it, even when they acknowledge an incident to be a crime. For example, participants in the study stated that the term "victim" implies powerlessness and weakness. The participants pointed out that they do not see themselves as powerless or weak.

Several studies on the language of rape demonstrated that the way people label and discuss sexual assault affects how they perceive and react to it (Hockett, McGraw & Saucier, 2014; Parker & Mahlstedt, 2010). When examining the relation between the terms "victim" and "survivor," Parker and Mahlstedt (2010) argued that in this context these terms have similar meanings but distinctly separate connotations. In a case of a woman who has been raped "victim" and "survivor" denote the same condition, but suggest very different associations (Best 1997; Holstein & Miller 1990; Parker & Mahlstedt 2010; Thompson 2000).

Research on the self-conceptualisations of raped women has revealed these differences in meaning (Barry 1979; Best 1997; Holstein & Miller 1990; Parker & Mahlstedt 2010; Thompson 2000) of victim and survivor. Through qualitative research with women who had been raped, Thompson (2000) found that the "survivor" label carried connotations of "strength" and "recovery" for someone who was "over" the "rape", whereas the "victim" label carried connotations of "being weak, powerless, vulnerable, and still affected by the rape". Another study by McCaffrey (1998) on the effects of labels on rape-related perceptions showed that participants associated negative connotations with the "victim" label.

The article will now discuss the theoretical foundation for this study in the light of the overview of GBV above.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social constructionism and Afrocentrism are the theoretical lenses this article draws upon. The two theories are discussed below.

Social construction

Social constructionism is a theory applied in sociology and communication studies that asserts the world has been jointly constructed (Galbin, 2014). The key principle of this theory is that people's knowledge of the world, including their understanding of human beings, is a product of human thought rather than grounded in an observable, external reality. Human beings construct and negotiate identities for themselves and others through their everyday social interactions with each other (Burr, 2015; Lenkauskaitė, Colomer & Bubnys, 2020). Hence, language, as a system of socially shared symbolic meanings, is essential to the construction process (Burr, 2015).

This theory has significantly influenced the change in didactics. Constructivism argues that knowledge can only be understood if it is a product of the activity of the subject rather than a reflection of a given ontological state or structure. In the current digital age, it is not just the content that matters, but knowledge of the methods and knowledge-creation procedures that matter most – the capacity for knowledge construction. These principles demonstrate that knowledge is not given, but rather constructed by individuals in their consciousness and through social interactions (Lenkauskaitė *et al*, 2020).

The individuals' ability to construct their understanding of the world is connected to their thoughts and perceptions (Gablin, 2014; Katzarova & Katzarova, 2019). The implication is that the thoughts of the different stakeholders based on the language/concepts in GBV programmes, especially the individuals who are directly receiving the services, have an impact of their understanding of the experience. Social constructionism argues that people's relations are given structure and content by the culture, economic conditions and the power relations around them (Gablin, 2014). The circumstances under which people construct knowledge and even their sense of themselves differ and change over time and from place to place (Burr, 2015).

Language is not static; it changes with time. The theory helps us to understand the development of the socio-economic and political circumstances since the term victim was constructed. The way in which individuals are socialised has also changed. This is why most women and

activists have become vocal on rethinking the prescribed roles between men and women. Therefore, it is important to reconsider, deconstruct and reconstruct the interventions that were put in place to curb GBV and to align them with the current socio-economic and political circumstances trends.

In society the construction of language and labels has a significant impact on people's daily interactions because of the power of such words and terms. Constructivist theory enables us to highlight how individuals and events are constructed. This theory shows that the constructs are adopted by people without their personal involvement in the process of creating their meanings or the labels (Garcia, 2013). Such constructions can have negative or positive consequences in the person's life. When the construction of a word or label occurs, certain expectations are put into place. For instance, there is a Setswana proverb that says *Leina lebe seromo*, which means the name given to a child will determine the direction that the child will take in life. This is akin to the English maxim "give a dog a bad name and hang him" (Makofane, 2014).

This section has explained that the construct of the concept of "victim" consists of socially constructed beliefs, ideas and assumptions (Katzarova & Katzarova, 2019) that influences how human beings live. Constructivist theory clarifies the process of constructing concepts. The theory can be used by social workers rendering services to individuals who experience GBV to understand how they construct their identity. The theory further illustrates the power that lies within labels and their intended as well as unintended consequences. For this reason, understanding the process of concept construction is critical in policy development and implementation. Afrocentric theory is equally important to understand the phenomenon under investigation. The following section discusses Afrocentric theory.

Afrocentric theory

Afrocentric theory is a philosophical and theoretical construct in the field of African studies, which has its own set of laws, generalisations, methods and theories (Pellerin, 2012). This theory places the focus on African people and their contribution to history (Rapanyane, 2021). The theory asserts that no phenomenon can be fully comprehended without being able to contextualise it. This in turn implies that every phenomenon must be examined and researched in relation to both physical space and psychological time. The individual who wishes to research the phenomenon (in this case, deconstructing the pervasive notion of victimhood) should attempt to pinpoint its dynamic and diverse nature (Rapanyane, 2020). This theory also assists to remove the masks of eloquence that disguise privilege, power and position (Rapanyane, 2021). The adoption of Afrocentric theory is deemed particularly appropriate to shape the perspective on the causes of GBV against women in a specific context (Moreroa & Rapanyane, 2021)

The adoption of this theory is driven by the desire to promote a shift in thinking and study ideas, events, concepts, political and economic processes and personalities from the perspective of African people (Rapanyane, 2020). Mogoboya and Montle (2018) argued that South Africa continues to experience an identity crisis in the post-colonial era, especially with regard to the way that women are portrayed in different communities. As a social worker, the author of this article intends to advance this shift in thinking about how women are viewed and treated, and

to deconstruct the pervasive notion of victimhood in discourses around programmes dealing with gender-based violence.

This is significant to develop best practices for discernible and life-altering outcomes that place women at the centre of the discourse and respond to their needs. More importantly, for the social work profession to remain relevant to the wider African community, African-centred theory should be placed alongside long-standing theories that are used to understand the social ills faced in Africa (Bent-Goodley, Fairfax & Carlton-LaNey, 2017). These authors note that as a viable theory for social workers to use in practice, Afrocentricity uses African philosophies, history and culture as a starting place for interpreting social and psychological phenomena to create relevant approaches to personal, family and community healing and societal change.

An Afrocentric approach is centred on the humanism and humanistic ethics necessary to address Africa's many issues such as gender-based violence, promoting social solidarity and a more firmly rooted social democracy to serve as the lifeblood of societies (Asante, 2014; Sewpaul, Kreitzer & Raniga, 2021). This is in line with the values of social work: the right to self-determination, the emphasis on strengths rather than weaknesses, and an appreciation and valuing of all human experiences (Mabvurira, 2020). Adopting an Afrocentric approach when dealing with a complex issue such as gender-based violence is important for social workers, as they can use their new-found knowledge to advance practice innovation, critical thinking, social justice and human rights from an empowerment perspective (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017).

In social work practice, an Afrocentric approach is based on traditional African philosophical assumptions that are used to clarify and solve social problems (Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018). Afrocentricity is not just a practice principle or idea; it is also a way of thinking, acting and living to advance social justice and human rights (Bent-Goodley, 2009; Dyson & Smith Brice, 2016). It can inform relationships with diverse communities and can create space for important dialogues to take place that start with respect and a genuine commitment to build understanding and create bridges between groups (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017).

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the aim of this article, a document analysis approach was employed. Document analysis is a rigorous and orderly method for reviewing documents (Kayesa & Shung-King, 2021; Wach & Ward, 2013) both printed and electronic material online (Bowen, 2009). It includes personal and non-personal documents such as archives, annual reports, guidelines, policy documents, diaries and letters (Busetto, Wolofang & Gumbinger, 2020), books, academic journal articles, and institutional reports (Morgan, 2022). This method is applied to provide context, to supplement other types of research data, track change over time and corroborate sources (Bowen, 2009). The documents were reviewed to help answer the two fundamental research questions which guided this study:

1) Does the concept victim resonate with developmental social work practice?; and

2) How can social workers be used to deconstruct the pervasive notion of victimhood in discourses around programmes dealing with gender-based violence?

The document analysis consisted of the four steps from the READ approach adopted from Dalglish, Khalid and McMahon (2020). The steps are (1) Ready your materials, (2) Extract data, (3) Analyse data and (4) Distil your findings. For the first step (reading the material) the author set the parameters of the nature of this article and allocated 6 months to analyse the documents. This process was guided by the topic. The author also used a long view of several decades to understand how constructions of victimhood were made globally. The second step (extracting the data) was done using an Excel spreadsheet, where each row is a document and each column is a category of information that the author needed to extract the basic data such as the document title, author and date. These documents were the read to extract specific data relating to the research questions (Dalglish *et al*., 2020).

Step 3 (analysing the data) involved engaging in the meaning-making process. During this step, Dalglish *et al*. (2020) organised information into categories related to the central questions of the research. Cresswell (2013) notes that data collection and analysis are iterative processes and characterised by an emergent design, meaning that developing findings continually inform whether and how to obtain and interpret further data. The fourth and last step (distilling your findings) entails pattern recognition within the data, with emerging themes forming the categories for analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This process involved a focused re-reading and reviewing of data. Consequently, the author conducted coding and category construction based on the data characteristics to uncover the themes pertinent to the phenomenon under investigation. The themes that emerged from this process in this study are: overview of gender-based violence, construction of the concept of victim, construction of the concept of survivor and developmental social work (Bowen, 2009).

Overview of developmental social work in South Africa

Developmental social work is an integrated, holistic approach to social work that acknowledges and responds to the relationship between individuals and their environments, associations of micro and macro practice, uses strength-based and unbiased models, approaches and interventions, and collaborations to promote social and economic inclusion and well-being (Gray, 2006; Lombard, 2007; Mayadas & Elliott, 2001; Midgley, 1995; Patel & Hochfeld, 2008; Patel, 2005).

In the social work discipline globally, the developmental approach represents a paradigm shift that focuses on developmental theory and practice in social work processes (Midgley, 2010; Patel, 2005). In African countries, the need to restore the social development approach in social work was reiterated in 1995 during the Copenhagen meeting, which declared that people need to be placed at the centre of development – treating people as subjects of development and not objects of development (Manyama, 2018). In South Africa, the developmental approach to social welfare and social work was adopted as national government policy in 1997 (Patel & Hochfeld, 2013). It aims to achieve social and economic justice through strengthening the livelihood capabilities of people and their communities (Patel, 2005).

One of the themes of the developmental approach is the link between development and participation (Chavalala, 2016). The theme calls for social welfare beneficiaries to be actively involved in the planning, delivery and evaluation of social welfare services. All people should

actively participate in the economic, social, political and cultural spheres, placing the emphasis on previously excluded or marginalised individuals (Midgley, 2014). The theme requires that social workers should view the individuals as active participants in their own development rather than passive recipients of services (Green, 2012; Patel, 2015). This requires social workers to promote the participation of individuals in all aspects of service delivery (Green & Nieman, 2003; Ife, 2012). However, 29 years into South Africa's democracy, there is minimal involvement and participation of women in the programmes and empowerment services for individuals experiencing GBV.

Construct of the concept "survivor"

People who experience GBV have to deal with trauma-related negative emotions and physical reactions (Pynoos *et al.*, 2008). The experience may lead to the feelings of panic, anxiety, depression and hopelessness, and can challenge one's hopes for the future. These symptoms might in turn result in the development of post-traumatic stress and other mental, physical and social illnesses (Sebaeng, Davhana-Maselesele & Manyedi, 2016). In this regard, the term survivor can play a significant role on one's journey towards healing and recovery, reaching closure and continuing to live an optimal life. This is critical for an individual who has been harmed to attain maximum wellness (Kaiser, 2008).

The term "survivor" is dominant in the medical discipline specifically among patients diagnosed with cancer. It entered cancer discourse in 1985 when Dr Fitzhugh Mullan described his experience in the *New England Journal of Medicine*: "Seasons of Survival" (Kaiser, 2008; Kolata, 2004; Mullan, 1985). Dr Mullan later established the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship, which worked to shift the perception of cancer patients from being "victims" to "survivors" and a person was formally defined as a survivor "from the time of diagnosis and for the balance of life" (National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship, 1995).

In the article titled "Confronting 'Victim' Discourses: The Identity Work of Battered Women", Leisenring (2006) demonstrates how battered women both draw from and reject victim discourses. Leisenring notes that the term "survivor" has also emerged in recent decades as an alternative identity to that of "victim". Dunn (2001) argues that a survivor identity protects women from the stigma of being a victim, as it connotes attributes that are more culturally valued such as strength, personal responsibility and agency. The term "survivor" is associated with strength and positive coping with a potentially life-threatening experience (Papendick & Bohner, 2017).

The term "survivor" implies person qualities such as initiative and agency (Barry, 1979). The term stresses the focus on proactive resistance and recovery (Convery, 2006), as well as a rejection of ascribed passivity (Lamb, 1999). These connotations are often the basis of therapeutic work with women who were raped. Adoption of the "survivor" identity is seen as an attempt to focus on a person's strengths and to support their capability to cope with their experience (Anderson & Gold, 1994). Women with a "survivor" identity focus on positive aspects and ways to change and carry on with their lives (Mills, 1985).

DISCUSSION

This article has shown that GBV is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon and is caused by a range of factors such as misogynous repression, the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, and an entrenched patriarchal social structure. This complexity requires a critical perspective to deconstruct the associated pervasive notions of victimhood. However, the deconstruction is neither simple nor straightforward. As this article demonstrates, the way in which people talk and label a phenomenon shapes their understanding and treatment to that phenomenon. The labels often carry different meanings in the different locations and contexts that people find themselves in.

Through constructivist theory, this article has illustrated how labels and meanings are constructed in ways that are often detrimental, illustrating the power of names. It is noted that the label "victim" is used with great frequency to refer to women who have experienced GBV. Arguably, being a victim is neither simple nor straightforward (Walklate, 2017), yet it is necessary to be classified as a "victim" to get assistance from the criminal justice system (Dubey & Jain, 2020). However, there is great ambiguity attached to the label. The ambiguity of the term "victim" stems from the negative connotations associated with the label. For instance, "victim" is associated with weakness, stigma (Garcia, 2013; Lacerda, 2016) and disempowerment (Hocket *et al*., 2014).

Through applying the theories of social constructivism and Afrocentrism, it was found that labels are so powerful that they can become the determinant forces that guide people' choices as to what to accept and what to reject. People become convinced by labels and settle for them without probing to unpack their hidden components (Agbenyega, 2003). The power of the spoken word such as "victim" has the potential to stigmatise and dehumanise. Makofane (2014) states that stigmatising beliefs are those unjustified negative things people believe about others that involve a moral judgement. This is also shown by Lacerda (2016) and Garcia (2013), who explain that the word's origin lies in the Latin term "victima": the animal offered in sacrifice to the gods. This article has questioned why persons who have been harmed be referred to the term that originally denotes lambs and goats killed in ancient sacrificial rituals?

The author acknowledges usage of this term matters for women who need to get assistance from the criminal justice system. However, arguing from the developmental approach upon which social work services are based in South Africa and the empowerment approach, this usage becomes problematic. Hence, the term "survivor" has been put forward to be included in the terminology of the legislative framework. This was done on the basis of Afrocentric theory which is centred on the humanism and humanistic ethics such as respecting the right to self-determination, valuing all human experiences and focusing on strengths rather than flaws. The central focus of this article has been the women who experience GBV. The concept "victim" may not fully or accurately reflect how women who have experienced GBV identify themselves, personally or publicly, nor may it fully or accurately reflect how others perceive them (Hockett *et al*., 2014). The authors further note that dimensions of power and resilience are attached to the term "survivor" as compared to "victim".

Notwithstanding the impact of GBV and the legal implications, it is suggested that both terms – "victims" and "survivors" – should be utilised by social workers. However, the emphasis should be on helping the individuals to move from the sense of their identity as victims towards a mindset focused on themselves as survivors, especially for those individuals who often struggle to extricate themselves from abusive situations and whose voices are silenced. In this context, developmental social work can be used to enable GBV clients to acknowledge their feelings of vulnerability and explore ways to empower themselves as survivors. Some studies conducted in the United Kingdom and the United States found that insistence on the victim identity can be detrimental for women's post-separation recovery and self-efficacy, because it clashes with the way abused partners view themselves (Donovan & Hester, 2010), and contributed to victim mentality (Leisenring, 2006).

Other studies in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom found that women feel reluctant to identify themselves as victims of violence because of the potential damage that the victim identity can do to their own self-image (Brosi & Rolling, 2010; Dovan & Hester, 2010). Hence, with the need to address the stigmatisation associated with the "victim" identity, a discourse of survivorhood was created. This discourse emphasises women's resistance, their ability to cope and the choices made for surviving the violence. The recognition of women's strengths and resilience is also a sign of moving away from victimhood (Glumbíková & Gojová 2020), and instead becoming a symbol of healing and recovery (Brosi & Rolling, 2010; Kong, 2021).

It is also important to acknowledge that healing and recovering from GBV is not a linear process. The complexity of the navigation through these identities should be acknowledged. As noted by Allen and Woziniak (2010), the process of navigating through healing and recovering from GBV encompasses social, spiritual, cultural and psychological processes. Through developmental social work, social workers are well positioned to advocate for the holistic healing and recovery for survivors of GBV. This can be done in a way that the advent of survivorhood does not marginalise or minimise victimhood. Leisenring (2006) notes while victimhood might constrain women from articulating their experience and personhood differently; emerging from a sense of being weak and powerless, a focus on survivorhood can enable them to seek help and articulate their needs. Within this context, the restraining of victimhood creates a platform where survivorhood is embraced as a counter-practice against victimhood (Kong, 2021).

The process of deconstructing the pervasive notions of victimhood, healing and recovery from GBV requires collaborative effort between social workers and clients. Cooke, Daiches and Hickey (2015) conducted a study on the impact of survivors of personality disorders delivering training to medical professionals. The study found that not only did the survivors report an improvement in their self-esteem, but they also felt that the experience was beneficial for their recovery, as past challenging experiences were reframed to take on new meaning. Another study of youth survivors of mental health illness delivering mental health support programme showed that the survivors reported feeling valued, and that the experience facilitated the reclaiming of their agency and control (Mayer & McKenzie, 2017). This process is significant because it enables the survivors to reorganise their identity structure as a "professional" (Respect in Sports, 2021). The process of deconstruction (Mountjoy *et al.*, 2022) is also

explicated by Jones and Pietilä (2020) who evaluated the transformation process of becoming an "expert by experience". The authors demonstrated that the experience helped the survivors to recontextualise their experience and to construct a new identity (i.e. as a professional or political activist).

The article further showed that at present constructivism is one of the most common theories to explain the nature of knowledge acquisition. Lenkauskaite *et al.* (2020) who reported that the transformation of society has drawn upon and promotes mainly constructivist thinking. This is relevant for the analysis of the construction of the concept of "victim" within developmental social work practice. This sparsity in the literature on the concept of the "victim" calls for an examination of the limited manner in which current definitions reveals a need for an expanded conceptual lens that incorporates moral experience, or what is most at stake for people who have experienced GBV (Yang *et al.*, 2007). Equally important, through the Afrocentric approach, this article contextualised the phenomenon of gender-based violence against women within the embroidery of history and culture. It also promoted a shift in thinking on how women on the African continent are viewed and treated to analyse the pervasive notion of victimhood in discourses around programmes dealing with gender-based violence.

Document analysis indicated a dearth of literature that explores the deconstruction of victimhood. There is a need to realign social work practice and education with an Afrocentric approach when addressing gender-based violence on the continent. In academic institutions Afrocentric theory must be included among the long-standing theories that are taught in social work education (Bent-Goodley *et al*., 2017). Doing so is important so that new scholarship can be developed reinforcing its powerful influence on finding solutions and creating new thinking within an African context (El-Bassel *et al., 2010*). In practice, women should be placed at the centre of the discussions, interventions and policy development. This notion is supported by Xerou, Papadima-Sophocleous and Parmaxi (2016), who reported that concepts are better understood when the people affected directly construct the label themselves and it can be shared with the world.

CONCLUSION

This article consisted of a document analysis of publications that report on victimhood, gender-based violence and empowerment services. This demonstrated that the phenomenon of GBV is complex and multifaceted. With reference to the theories of constructivism and Afrocentrism, this article sought to interrogate the pervasive notions of victimhood in discourses around programmes dealing with gender-based violence. The constructivist theory illustrated how labels are constructed and meanings attached to them, while the Afrocentric theory provided a means to examine the multifaceted nature of GBV against women; this information could be used to advance innovation in practice, critical thinking, promotion of social justice and human rights from an empowerment perspective. As indicated in the introduction, the services provided to people who have been subjected to GBV in South Africa are rendered within a victim empowerment framework. The assumptions of the empowerment approach are that the clients are the experts on their lives, the practitioners are the collaborative partners, and programmes should be based on a client's expressed needs. The empowering

practice shapes programmes by drawing on the needs of clients, build on the strengths of people, revises interventions, and pays ongoing attention to power differentials (Simon, 1994).

This article also offered recommendations for social work practice and academic settings to help deconstruct the discourses of victimhood. Importantly, caution must be exercised when using the term "victim" as the term may lead people to discriminate and stigmatise those who have been harmed by violence purposefully or inadvertently (Makofane, 2014). Papendick and Bohner (2017) asserts that in daily communications about GBV, people use the socially established term "victim", which refers to the person who falls victim to the perpetrator. Using this term has become so natural that speakers and readers may mostly be unaware of its implications. Yet the term may evoke associations influencing the impression of the person it refers to, such as imagining him or her as someone who is weak physically and emotionally. It is vital that the legislative framework embrace a developmental approach and protect the rights of those most vulnerable to GBV to contribute to this reconceptualisation of victimhood. This needs to occur through formal and informal robust discussions in different spheres of government. The discussion should include those affected individuals who have experienced GBV or violence, and professionals rendering services to these individuals. Research on the labels adopted in the legislative frameworks addressing GBV should also be encouraged.

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