



What Drives Gender Based Violence? The Case of Lusikisiki

1. Introduction¹

Gender Based Violence (GBV) has been declared a disaster and a pandemic which casts a long shadow of violence and suffering across our society intergenerationally. Gendered norms are not independent of the social, economic and cultural conditions in which they are shaped. Tandi Nzimande, the Chief Executive Officer at the GBVF Response Fund, emphasizes that “nearly 30 years after South Africa’s Constitution promised dignity and equality for all, too many women continue to live in fear and face violence. Ending this crisis requires urgent, co-ordinated action from government, civil society, the private sector and communities to turn rights on paper into safety and justice in practice”.² In order to effect meaningful change it is critical to understand the underlying causes. Clinical psychologist Dr Zimbini Ogle’s new book *‘Under Siege: Gender, Violence and Betrayal’*, based on her research in the Lusikisiki area of the Eastern Cape, analyses the toxic mix of factors driving our sexual violence pandemic. An understanding of these factors will contribute to developing effective strategies to drive meaningful change.

2. The Lusikisiki Area

Lusikisiki is a rural, semi-urban town in the Ingquza Hill Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape Province. The area was formally constituted as a *Bantustan*. In 2021, Lusikisiki ranked number one in South Africa in terms of the national crime rate; these crimes included domestic robbery and sexual harassment.³ On 28th September 2024, two mass shootings took place there, killing 18 people and injuring 5 others.⁴ The victims included multiple elderly women.

While overall provincial crime statistics in the

Eastern Cape have shown some fluctuations, Lusikisiki has consistently featured as a top rape hotspot for several years, often referred to as a ‘rape capital’.⁵ Sexual offences continue to present a severe, ongoing challenge to community safety in the region. Based on the most recent available data as of 11th May 2026, Lusikisiki continues to have critically high rates of sexual offences. According to SAPS crime statistics for the first quarter of 2025/2026, Lusikisiki recorded 65 rape cases, ranking it as the 3rd-highest police station nationally for reported rape cases. Nearly 49 per cent of survivors in recent studies were under the age of 18, with many cases being ‘family-related’. The incidence of teenage pregnancy is high. In the 2019/2020 financial year, 671 deliveries were registered by girls between the ages of 10 - 14 years and 17 211 by girls between the ages of 15 and 17 years old in the Eastern Cape.⁶

Lusikisiki is haunted by the violent legacy of colonization, dispossession of land, migrant labour and the apartheid policies of separate development.⁷ The town faces severe socio-economic challenges, including a high rate of unemployment and high illiteracy rates. A lack of quality education and skills development contributes directly to the staggering unemployment figures. The economy is heavily dependent on public sector jobs such as healthcare and education, social grants, and subsistence agriculture.⁸ About 49 per cent of the population are categorized as poor and many families struggle to access and afford nutritious food. Most of the population is young. The area is predominantly rural, characterized by major infrastructural backlogs. Basic services like running water, adequate sanitation, and reliable electricity remain limited.

Gender scholar and activist Dr Lisa Vetten

points out that “in the final analysis, identifying a particular place as a hot spot for rape doesn’t automatically explain why more violence occurs there. But it does encourage us to start asking the right questions about the relationships between rape, time and place”.⁹

3. Drivers of Sexual Violence

The excessive use of drugs and alcohol is a major catalyst of sexual violence. Local leaders have flagged unregulated, all-night taverns and shebeens as primary venues that facilitate gender-based violence. Unlicensed shebeens often ignore mandated operating hours, fuelling alcohol abuse and creating vulnerable environments where intoxication and late hours impair judgment and leave patrons – especially women who remain late – highly vulnerable to being targeted. Furthermore, the normalization of excessive drinking in these spaces can foster an environment where predatory behaviour and violence are tolerated or go unnoticed by bystanders.¹⁰ The rural and semi-urban layout of Lusikisiki creates isolation, with women and children travelling long distances unaccompanied and being frequently targeted while doing so.

Enduring patriarchal beliefs and practices like *ukuthwala* (abducting young girls for marriage) continue to undermine the rights of women and children. These conditions often leave women economically dependent on their abusers. Domestic violence plays a very destructive role in the socialization of children of both sexes – boys grow up to regard such behaviour as normal, while girls are likely to grow up to regard it as the ‘lot of women’. There is a self-perpetuating inter-generational cycle of violence and a deep-seated lack of faith in the criminal justice system. Victims often report that criminals are not afraid of the law, and investigation delays – such as waiting for DNA results – allow offenders to commit further crimes while on bail.

The Eastern Cape Province has reported escalating incidents where vulnerable elderly women have been allegedly attacked and raped in their homes as they are suspected of witchcraft.¹¹ A Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) 2023 report reveals that young and elderly women in Lusikisiki bear the brunt of violent crime and GBV.¹² While overall provincial crime stats in the Eastern Cape have shown some fluctuations, Lusikisiki has consistently featured as a top rape hotspot for

several years, often referred to as a ‘rape capital’.¹³ The report found that “migration of men from the area, to work on mines in areas like Rustenburg, Marikana and Johannesburg, makes women-headed households vulnerable to continuous raids of rape. Male violence is normalised early with young girls commonly bullied in schools and slandered for not submitting to boys’ aggression”.¹⁴

A further CSVR study found that contributing factors in communities riven by GBV include unemployment, poverty, substance abuse, harmful social norms, lack of social support, socio-economic inequalities and a culture of grooming of children.¹⁵ There has been an escalation in the severity of this violence to the extent that it seems normative. Furthermore, the violence and crime directed at women and children is often committed by people they know in places where they should be safe – home, family, school and community.

4. Culture of Violence

Dr Ogle points out that boys in the area are subject to severe beatings from a young age in a culture that encourages violence.¹⁶ This is further encouraged in initiation schools. This brutalization of boys and men is compounded by a patriarchal culture of entitlement that reduces a woman to a static object meant for consumption, validation, or sexual gratification, completely ignoring her autonomy. Dr Ogle continues that, while women sustain households and are the source of nurture, they are seen as objects to be of service and “assume a place of nothing”. In order to satisfy their psychological need for power, men enforce strict submission over women at home. Acknowledged dependence on women makes men feel ‘lesser’. This power dynamic relies on reducing women to a position of submission, validating the objectifying view that they lack the full capacity for independent choices. This results in the deep alienation of all those involved – both the ‘object’ and the ‘objectified’. Women and girls are regarded as ‘prey’.

Women and girls are useful scapegoats for the sense of shame and humiliation that men carry in post-apartheid South Africa. Many do not experience their own rights and continue to feel powerless. Unemployment and the inability to provide for the family/dependants are powerful stressors. Dehumanizing living conditions and grinding poverty persist. Qualitative research

with men “who rape women and with offenders incarcerated for violence shows that they are similarly influenced by a complex interplay of masculinities and dynamics within familial and intimate relationships, exposure to violence, untreated psychopathology and systemic institutional failures”.¹⁷

It is important to acknowledge that much violence is also experienced by men. Between January and March 2025, there were 5 727 murders nationally, averaging 62 per day. Of these, 4 890 victims were male and 837 female – roughly 54 men and nine women killed each day.¹⁸ Men are predominantly the perpetrators in both categories. South Africa’s femicide rate remains at crisis levels and is roughly six times the global average. Research suggests that, due to continuous exposure to low-income community conflicts, boys suffer from high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “This manifests as appetitive aggression (an attraction to cruelty), meaning they are disproportionately both the primary victims and the eventual perpetrators of homicidal violence in the country.”¹⁹

5. The Art of Loving as an Antidote

Dr Ogle refers to psychoanalyst Eric Fromm’s famous book, *The Art of Loving*, which directly rejects the concept of treating another person as an object.²⁰ His social-psychological framework directly explains the root causes of sexual domination, domestic abuse, and violence against women. Fromm notes that the ultimate expression of treating someone as an object is the desire to have complete, absolute control over them, which is the root of psychological sadism. A violent or abusive partner wants to completely erase the victim’s independent will. A person who feels powerless, insecure, or alienated often uses physical or emotional violence to feel omnipotent and strong. He viewed such violence not as an innate biological instinct, but as an expression of existential impotence, malignant aggression, and a craving for absolute control over another human being.

Sexual desire divorced from any humanistic qualities becomes purely narcissistic and objectifying, reducing the partner to a biological instrument used for physical release. If the other person is regarded as an object to you, you will inevitably try to exploit, dominate, or control them for your own purposes. He posits that you

cannot truly know an object; you can only use it or observe it from the outside. True love requires penetrating deep into the core of another person’s being. Mature love is dependent on four components coming together and working in concert: care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. If any one of these pieces is missing, there can be no mature love. Fromm did not see violence and destructiveness as innate human instincts, but as products of specific psychological and social conditions.²¹

6. What Needs to be Done?

Aluta Sneke and C. Anzio Jacobs of the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund writing in the *Daily Maverick* on the International Day of the Boy Child on the 16th May, argue that “the framing of boys’ inclusion as a diversion from girls’ empowerment is analytically weak. It misunderstands the relational nature of gender-based violence. Girls’ safety cannot be secured in isolation from the socialisation of boys. Nor can boys’ wellbeing be addressed without engaging the structural conditions that shape gendered power”.²² They argue that an effective approach to the prevention of violence “interrogates the system that produces harm and asks what interventions are required to transform it”.²³ When society focuses strictly on punitive discipline rather than addressing the root emotional pain that boys carry, it inadvertently fuels the cycle of GBV.

Child-advocacy groups like the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund and The Character Company actively create safe spaces where boys can process trauma, express fear, and learn non-violent frameworks of strength.²⁴ These groups aim to break the intergenerational cycle of GBV by dismantling toxic stereotypes. Recognising that men are vulnerable to trauma is a prerequisite for prevention.²⁵

Preventing sexual violence in Lusikisiki requires a multi-layered approach that addresses rural vulnerabilities, improves local policing, and strengthens community support networks. Leaders emphasize that addressing this ‘pandemic’ requires more than just behaviour change; it demands structural reform, stricter law enforcement, and targeted educational campaigns for men and boys. Authorities are pushing for stricter adherence to licensing agreements, forcing taverns to close at legally designated times. Local groups are partnering with police to increase patrols around known

problem areas and escort vulnerable individuals home safely. Victims should have immediate access to medical, legal, and psychosocial support under one roof, specifically through the local Thuthuzela Care Centre (TCC) model.²⁶ Collaborating with local traditional leaders would help to ensure community-level justice, deter perpetrators, and break the silence around abusive practices.

The implementation of community-based education campaigns focusing on youth would do much to challenge patriarchal norms, promote

healthy relationships, and address the high rates of teenage pregnancy. The provision of funding, housing, and economic opportunities for rural women would limit their financial dependence on abusers and shield them from exploitation.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, Eric Fromm emphasises that “what we need is not increasing control of aggression and violence but reduction of destructiveness and violence by making individual and social life more meaningful and human”.²⁷

Lois Law

Project Co-ordinator

lois@cplo.org.za

¹ On 14th May 2026 the SACBC Parliamentary Liaison Office hosted a webinar on ‘What Drives Gender Based Violence?’ The webinar was addressed by Dr Zimbini Ogle, who discussed her recently published book *‘Under Siege: Gender, Violence and Betrayal’*, based on her research in the Lusikisiki area, which analyses the toxic mix of factors driving our sexual violence pandemic. This paper owes much to her presentation.

² https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2026-03-22-human-rights-promise-rings-hollow-as-violence-against-women-persists/?dm_medium=internal&dm_campaign=similar-articles&dm_medium=card-link&dm_campaign=similar-articles

³ <https://www.dailydispatch.co.za/news/2021-02-22-lusikisiki-again-a-hotspot-for-rape-incidences/>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_Lusikisiki_shootings

⁵ <https://www.dailydispatch.co.za/news/2026-02-10-crime-stats-down-but-sexual-offences-on-the-increase-in-eastern-cape/>

⁶ <https://www.gov.za/news/media-advisories/government-activities/social-development-host-teenage-pregnancy-round-table>

⁷ <https://www.dailydispatch.co.za/news/2026-02-10-crime-stats-down-but-sexual-offences-on-the-increase-in-eastern-cape/>

⁸ https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Main-sources-of-livelihood-in-Tsolo-and-Lusikisiki-respectively_fig3_347677326

⁹ <https://bhekisisa.org/article/2021-05-03-rape-time-place-how-to-understand-sas-geography-of-violence/>

¹⁰ <https://www.dailydispatch.co.za/news/2022-03-15-why-is-lusikisiki-the-rape-capital-of-south-africa/>

¹¹ <https://cge.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/NEWSFLASH103.pdf>

¹² <https://elitshanews.org.za/2023/09/08/migrant-labour-and-superstitions-combine-to-make-elderly-women-and-young-girls-in-lusikisiki-vulnerable>

¹³ <https://www.dailydispatch.co.za/news/2026-02-10-crime-stats-down-but-sexual-offences-on-the-increase-in-eastern-cape/>

¹⁴ <https://elitshanews.org.za/2023/09/08/migrant-labour-and-superstitions-combine-to-make-elderly-women-and-young-girls-in-lusikisiki-vulnerable>

¹⁵ <https://elitshanews.org.za/2023/09/08/migrant-labour-and-superstitions-combine-to-make-elderly-women-and-young-girls-in-lusikisiki-vulnerable>

¹⁶ CPLO Webinar

¹⁷ <https://gh.bmj.com/content/9/4/e014912>

¹⁸ <https://africacheck.org/infofinder/explore-facts/how-many-men-and-women-respectively-are-murdered-daily-south-africa>

¹⁹ <https://kops.uni-konstanz.de/entities/dataset/68cee4e7-e40b-46b4-85d3-002a7e3e2d3b>

²⁰ *The Art of Loving* by Eric Fromm, Unwin, 1976

²¹ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12950794/>

²² https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-05-15-when-boys-are-left-behind-creating-safe-pathways-for-healing-belonging-and-protection/?dm_source=blocks-grid-square

²³ https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-05-15-when-boys-are-left-behind-creating-safe-pathways-for-healing-belonging-and-protection/?dm_source=blocks-grid-square

²⁴ https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-05-15-when-boys-are-left-behind-creating-safe-pathways-for-healing-belonging-and-protection/?dm_source=blocks-grid-square

²⁵ <https://gh.bmj.com/content/9/4/e014912>

²⁶ A Thuthuzela Care Centre (TCC) is a one-stop facility designed to provide comprehensive, integrated support to survivors of sexual violence, rape, and GBV.

²⁷ Unpublished paper written by Erich Fromm and prepared to be published in a “Year Book”, presumably in 1970.

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