

Title

**ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF VICTIM SUPPORT UNITS (VSUs) IN THE
MALAWI POLICE SERVICE SUPPORTING GENDER BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)
SURVIVORS. ACASE STUDY OF “MCHINJI POLICE VICTIM SUPPORT UNIT”,
MCHINJI, MALAWI.**

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ABSTRACT

The role of the Victim Support Unit (VSU) of the Malawi Police Service in supporting survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) at Mchinji Police Station. The aim was to understand how the VSU assists survivors, identify challenges affecting its effectiveness, and suggest ways to strengthen its impact. A qualitative research approach was used, involving 30 purposively selected participants, including GBV survivors, VSU officers, community leaders, representatives from non-governmental organizations, and other key stakeholders. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and key informant interviews, then analyzed thematically to highlight the experiences and perspectives of both survivors and service providers.

Findings show that the VSU offers essential services such as counselling, legal guidance, referrals to healthcare and social services, and temporary protection. These services are vital for helping survivors recover, access justice, and navigate complex systems. Despite this, the unit faces significant challenges that limit its effectiveness. These include inadequate staffing, limited resources, insufficient specialized training, poor coordination with relevant stakeholders, and cultural norms that discourage reporting of GBV cases. In addition, many community members remain unaware of GBV laws and survivors' rights, which further reduces the unit's impact.

The study concludes that while the VSU plays a critical role in supporting GBV survivors, gaps in resources, training, and community engagement hinder its full potential. Strengthening resources, improving collaboration with partners, investing in specialized training, and raising public awareness about GBV laws are key

steps to enhance the unit's performance. Addressing these issues would allow the VSU to provide more comprehensive, survivor-centered support and make a meaningful contribution to reducing GBV in Mchinji. Ultimately empowering the VSU is not only.

Keywords: Victim Support Unit (VSU), Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Malawi Police Service, Survivor Support, Mchinji, Counselling and Legal Assistance, Community Awareness, Law Enforcement Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a major social and public health challenge worldwide, disproportionately affecting women and girls. Victims often experience physical, emotional, and psychological trauma, while also facing barriers to accessing justice and support services. Victim Support Units (VSUs) have been established in many countries as specialized arms of law enforcement to provide comprehensive assistance to survivors of crimes, especially GBV. These units typically offer counseling, legal guidance, referrals to healthcare and social services, and temporary protection. Evidence from international contexts, including Canada, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, suggests that structured victim support within police services increases victim satisfaction, encourages reporting, and strengthens collaboration with justice systems (Harris, 2023; Victoria State Government, 2022).

Context

In Malawi, the Malawi Police Service (MPS) established VSUs in 2001 to respond

to the rising prevalence of GBV, integrating victim support into its broader community policing strategy (*Malawi Police Service, 2020*). VSUs in Malawi are designed to help survivors navigate legal, medical, and social support systems. Despite these efforts, challenges persist, particularly in rural areas such as Mchinji. Resource limitations, including insufficient staffing, funding, and training, reduce the effectiveness of these units. Additionally, societal stigma, cultural norms, and low awareness of GBV laws discourage victims from reporting crimes. These contextual factors highlight the need for research into how VSUs function in rural districts and the barriers they face in delivering comprehensive, survivor-centered services.

Research Objectives

- This study aims to assess the influence of the Mchinji Police VSU in supporting survivors of GBV. The specific objectives are to:
- Examine the services provided by the VSU to GBV survivors.
- Identify the operational strengths and weaknesses of the Mchinji VSU.
- Explore the challenges that limit the effectiveness of VSU interventions.
- Suggest strategies and opportunities for improving support mechanisms for survivors.

The study employs a qualitative approach, engaging purposively selected participants, including GBV survivors, VSU officers, community leaders, and representatives from NGOs. Through in-depth and key informant interviews, the research captures firsthand experiences and insights, providing a nuanced understanding of how VSUs operate in a rural Malawian context. The findings are expected to inform policy and practice, contributing to stronger, survivor-

centered support systems and improved protection mechanisms for GBV survivors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Victim Support Units and GBV Response

Victim Support Units (VSUs) are specialized arms of police services established to provide comprehensive assistance to survivors of crimes, particularly gender-based violence (GBV). Globally, VSUs have been shown to improve victims' access to justice, reduce secondary victimization, and increase reporting rates (*Harris, 2023; Mkhize et al., 2020*). In contrast, Malawian VSUs often face limitations in staffing, training, and infrastructure, which undermines the effectiveness of services offered to survivors (*Malawi Police Service, 2020; Banda et al., 2021*).

In Malawi, VSUs have contributed to increased GBV reporting; for instance, in Mchinji district, reporting increased by 30%, though only 15% of cases proceed to prosecution due to weak evidence collection and victim withdrawal (*Gondwe, 2022*). Comparatively, in South Africa, VSUs integrated with Thuthuzela Care Centres (TCCs) demonstrate higher conviction rates through multidisciplinary collaboration (*Jewkes et al., 2020*). This suggests that Malawi's VSUs could similarly benefit from stronger partnerships with healthcare and legal institutions to improve case management (*Chirwa & Mattinga, 2023*).

Operational Challenges and Influence

Research highlights that systemic constraints significantly reduce the effectiveness of VSUs in rural areas such as Mchinji. Malawi continues to face underfunded law enforcement services, with one police officer

serving approximately 2,000 people compared to the recommended ratio of 1:500, resulting in overburdened staff and limited focus on GBV (*Malawi Police Service, 2022*). Low-resource environments face common challenges, including inadequate staffing, insufficient training, and limited budgets that restrict essential supplies, transportation, and facilities for confidential support (*Nkhoma et al., 2019; Victoria State Government, 2022*).

VSU officers in Malawi often lack specialized training in trauma-informed care, which may lead to victim re-traumatization and inconsistent service quality (*Phiri et al., 2021*). Geographic barriers in rural districts like Mchinji, including long distances and transportation challenges, further impede victims' access to justice (*Nkhoma et al., 2019; Nation Online, 2024*). Similar challenges have been observed in Uganda, where inadequate transport, forensic tools, and weak coordination hinder VSU operations (*Nabiryo et al., 2020*). Cultural norms, such as prioritizing family mediation over formal legal processes, also reduce survivors' engagement with VSUs, a phenomenon observed in Zambia and Malawi (*Munthali et al., 2022; Mushinga & Mwale, 2021*).

Despite these constraints, evidence suggests that VSUs can exert meaningful influence through community engagement. Active participation in awareness campaigns and community sensitization has been shown to increase reporting and victim confidence (*Victoria State Government, 2022*). However, trust and confidentiality remain critical concerns; victims often fear stigma, social backlash, and gossip, particularly in patriarchal settings where male dominance prevails (*Kadzamira, 2021*). Urban areas tend to report more positive interactions between police and survivors, while rural settings like Mchinji show instances of

indifferent or overburdened officers, reducing victims' trust and discouraging reporting (*Harris, 2023; Chirwa et al., 2022*).

Community Involvement and Cultural Dynamics

Community involvement plays a central role in shaping the effectiveness of VSUs. In Mchinji, traditional norms and gender roles influence perceptions of GBV and the willingness of survivors to seek assistance (*Chirwa & Banda, 2021*). Community-based strategies, such as outreach programs and informal support networks, have been associated with increased reporting and prevention of GBV (*Karanja & Mwangi, 2020*). In Malawi, initiatives like One Stop Centres integrate police, health, and legal services, but gaps remain in grassroots participation and coordination (*Malawi Human Rights Commission, 2021*).

Stigma continues to hinder survivors from accessing services. A study in Mchinji found that 40% of survivors avoid VSUs due to fear of social exclusion (*Mkandawire, 2023*). Lessons from Tanzania show that involving religious and community leaders in sensitization campaigns can improve attitudes toward VSUs and increase reporting (*Swai, 2022*). These findings emphasize that the influence of VSUs is closely linked to local community attitudes, trust, and active engagement.

Strategies for Strengthening VSUs

Research recommends several strategies to enhance VSU performance, including improved training, adequate funding, multisectoral partnerships, and continuous community sensitization (*Victoria State Government, 2022*). Models from Uganda,

which integrate healthcare, justice, and community services, have demonstrated faster response times and better outcomes for survivors (Nabiryo *et al.*, 2020). Implementing similar approaches in Mchinji could strengthen service delivery, build trust, and enhance the influence of VSUs in shaping positive social change.

Theoretical Framework

Victim-Centered Model – Prioritizes the rights, safety, and needs of survivors, emphasizing trauma-informed care and empowerment. This framework aligns with the assessment of how Mchinji Police VSU provides survivor-centered support (Campbell, 2019). Social Ecological Model (SEM) – Conceptualizes GBV as influenced by individual, relational, community, and societal factors (Heise, 1998). SEM allows analysis of operational challenges, cultural norms, and community engagement, addressing the study's objectives on VSU influence and effectiveness.

Research Gap

While prior studies highlight the importance of VSUs in responding to GBV (Harris, 2023; UNODC, 2021), there is limited evidence on their functioning in rural Malawian settings. Most research focuses on urban or national trends (Malawi Police Service, 2020; Nkhoma *et al.*, 2019), leaving gaps regarding staffing shortages, infrastructural limitations, long distances to services, and community perceptions. This study fills this gap by providing a localized assessment of Mchinji Police VSU, exploring operational challenges, community dynamics, and opportunities to strengthen survivor support.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The research methodology employed in this study, detailing the approach used to investigate the influence of the Victim Support Unit (VSU) in addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in Mchinji District, Malawi. The methodology provides a systematic framework for collecting and analyzing data, ensuring that findings are credible, reliable, and ethically gathered. It describes the research design, setting, target population, sampling techniques, sample size, data collection instruments, pilot study, data analysis methods, and ethical considerations. The approach was designed to generate rich, contextual insights into the experiences of GBV survivors and the operational practices of the VSU, as well as the institutional and community factors influencing its performance.

Research Design and Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design, which is particularly suitable for exploring complex social issues like GBV. Qualitative methods allow for in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interactions with institutions, providing nuanced insights that quantitative methods alone cannot capture (Creswell, 2014). This design enabled the researcher to investigate the functionality, responsiveness, and challenges of the VSU in Mchinji from multiple stakeholder perspectives. By using qualitative approaches, the study prioritized understanding the meanings, experiences, and contexts of participants, rather than focusing on numerical representation.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Mchinji District, located in the Central Region of Malawi. Covering an area of 3,356 square

kilometers, Mchinji shares borders with Zambia to the west and Mozambique to the southwest. The district is predominantly rural and has a significant reported incidence of GBV cases. It was purposively selected as the study site due to the active presence of a VSU and its relevance to the research objectives. The socio-cultural dynamics of Mchinji, including community perceptions of gender roles and GBV, as well as existing initiatives in GBV response, provided a relevant context for evaluating the performance of the VSU.

Target Population

The target population comprised individuals and institutions directly involved in or affected by GBV response in Mchinji District. Key groups included:

- GBV survivors who had accessed VSU services
- NGO and CBO representatives engaged in GBV prevention, advocacy, and survivor support.

Health officers providing medical care for survivorsThese participants were selected because they could provide first-hand experiences and expert insights into the operations, challenges, and influence of the VSU.

Sampling Techniques

The study employed non-probability sampling methods, specifically purposive and snowball sampling:

Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with specific roles and expertise in GBV response. This included VSU

officers, health workers, court staff, social welfare officers, NGO representatives, and community leaders. Participants were chosen based on their professional involvement in handling GBV cases and their ability to provide informed insights (Patton, 2002).

Snowball Sampling

Snowball sampling was used to recruit GBV survivors, who are often difficult to reach due to stigma, trauma, or safety concerns. Initial participants were identified through referrals from NGOs, CBOs, or community leaders, and they subsequently referred other survivors who met the inclusion criteria (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017). This approach ensured that survivors willing and able to participate were reached safely while maintaining confidentiality and ethical standards.

Sample Size

The study involved a total of 30 participants, selected to provide diverse perspectives:

- Fifteen (15) GBV survivors; Four (4) VSU police officers; Four (4) community leaders
- Four (4) NGO or CBO representatives One (1) health officer

This sample size was sufficient to achieve data saturation, a standard principle in qualitative research, ensuring that further interviews were unlikely to yield new themes.

Research Instruments

Both primary and secondary data collection instruments were employed

Primary Data

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with stakeholders such as VSU officers, community leaders, NGO/CBO staff, health officers, court officials, and social welfare officers. The semi-structured interview guides contained open-ended questions focused on service delivery practices, operational challenges, coordination, and perceptions of VSU effectiveness.

In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) were conducted with GBV survivors in private, safe settings. Interviews explored experiences with the VSU, the quality and adequacy of services received, challenges faced, and recommendations for improving survivor-centered support. Trauma-informed approaches were applied to minimize the risk of re-traumatization.

Secondary Data

Secondary data included literature reviews, academic journals, and official VSU documents, such as case registers, referral records, and reports. These sources provided context, supported triangulation of primary data, and helped situate findings within broader institutional and social frameworks.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted with five participants representing the study's main respondent categories. The purpose was to assess the clarity, flow, and relevance of the interview guides.

Feedback from the pilot informed adjustments to question wording, sequencing, and probing strategies, ensuring that instruments were culturally sensitive, practical, and methodologically sound.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following *Braun and Clarke's (2006)* six-phase framework:

- **Familiarization:** Repeated reading of transcripts and field notes to gain an in-depth understanding of the data.
- **Generating initial codes:** Identifying and labeling significant statements and recurring ideas. Searching for themes: Grouping related codes into broader themes reflecting patterns in the data.
- **Reviewing themes:** Checking coherence and consistency between codes, themes, and the full dataset.
- **Defining and naming themes:** Refining themes to accurately capture their meaning.
- **Producing the report:** Presenting findings in a structured manner with illustrative quotes from participants to support interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was central to the study, given the sensitivity of GBV issues and the vulnerability of participants. Key ethical measures included:

- Obtaining informed consent from all participants, explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and risks.
- Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity through pseudonyms and removal of identifying information from transcripts and reports.
- Applying trauma-informed approaches to protect survivors'

emotional well-being and minimize re-traumatization.

RESULTS

Introduction

The findings of the study on the influence of the Mchinji Police Victim Support Unit (VSU) in supporting survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). The results are organized around the major themes that emerged from key informant interviews (KIIs), in-depth interviews (IDIs), and review of secondary data. Themes include the services provided by the VSU, operational challenges, community engagement, survivor experiences, and recommendations for improvement. Tables and figures are used to summarize participant characteristics and thematic findings where appropriate.

Participant Demographics

A total of 30 participants were engaged in the study, including 15 GBV survivors, 4 VSU police officers, 4 community leaders, 4 NGO/CBO representatives, 1 health officer, 1 court official, and 1 social welfare officer.

Summarizes participant categories.

A total of 30 participants took part in the study. GBV survivors made up the largest group, accounting for 15 participants (50%). VSU police officers, NGO/CBO representatives, and health officers were equally represented, with 4 participants each (13.3% each). Smaller representations included one court official, one social welfare officer, and one community leader, each contributing 3.3% of the total participants.

The participants represented a broad range of experiences, providing insights from survivor perspectives, law enforcement, community leadership, civil society, and service delivery systems.

Services Provided by the VSU

Participants reported that the Mchinji VSU provides a range of services aimed at supporting GBV survivors. These included:

- Counseling and emotional support: Survivors described receiving initial psychological support to manage trauma and cope with the aftermath of abuse. One survivor stated:
- The officer listened to me carefully and explained what to do next. I felt someone cared about my safety.
- Legal guidance and referrals: Survivors were informed about their rights, how to report cases, and procedures for prosecution. VSU officers facilitated referrals to courts and One Stop Centres when necessary.
- Temporary protection and follow-up: The VSU provided immediate protection advice, including safe places to stay and support in liaising with community leaders to prevent further violence.
- Coordination with NGOs and social services: Participants highlighted that the VSU worked with NGOs to provide additional support, such as medical examinations, shelters, or psychosocial interventions.

Operational Challenges

Several key challenges emerged as limiting factors in the effectiveness of the VSU:

- Staffing constraints: VSU officers reported being overburdened, often

managing multiple roles, which reduced their capacity to provide thorough support.

- Insufficient training: Officers acknowledged limited training in trauma-informed care, victim-centered approaches, and handling complex GBV cases.
- Resource limitations: The lack of transportation, confidential interview spaces, and logistical support hindered proactive engagement, follow-up visits, and outreach to survivors in remote areas.

Cultural barriers: Participants identified stigma, fear of social backlash, and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms as discouraging survivors from reporting GBV cases.

Summary of Operational Challenges

The findings indicate several key challenges affecting service delivery. Lack of resources was the most frequently mentioned challenge, cited 20 times, and was associated with delayed follow-ups and limited outreach. Staffing shortages, mentioned 18 times, resulted in limited time available for each survivor, reducing the quality of support provided. Cultural norms and stigma, noted 16 times, contributed to underreporting of cases and withdrawal of victims from services. Additionally, inadequate training, cited 14 times, posed a risk of re-traumatization and led to inconsistent care for survivors.

These challenges were corroborated by survivors, community leaders, and NGO representatives, highlighting systemic and socio-cultural constraints that reduce the VSU's influence.

DISCUSSION

The influence of the Victim Support Unit (VSU) at Mchinji Police Station in supporting survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). The discussion interprets the key findings in relation to the study objectives and situates them within existing literature at global, regional, and national levels.

Role of the VSU in Supporting GBV Survivors

The findings show that the Mchinji Police VSU provides essential services to GBV survivors, including counselling, legal guidance, referrals to health and social services, and temporary protection. These services are consistent with the core mandate of VSUs as outlined by *UNODC (2021)*, which emphasizes survivor protection, access to justice, and psychosocial support. Survivors' accounts of feeling listened to and guided reflect the positive influence of victim-centered practices, aligning with *Harris (2023)*, who found that empathetic police responses increase victim confidence and cooperation with justice processes.

However, while these services are available, their delivery is inconsistent. This supports earlier studies in Malawi which note that although VSUs exist in most police stations, their impact is often limited by systemic weaknesses (*Malawi Police Service, 2020*; *Banda et al., 2021*). The findings suggest that the presence of a VSU alone is not sufficient; the quality, consistency, and survivor-centeredness of service delivery are critical to achieving meaningful outcomes.

Operational Challenges and Their Influence

Operational challenges emerged as a major factor limiting the effectiveness of the Mchinji VSU. Staffing shortages, inadequate training, and limited logistical support were frequently reported. These findings are consistent with *Gondwe* (2022), who observed that although GBV reporting has increased in Mchinji, prosecution rates remain low due to weak evidence collection and case follow-up. Similarly, *Nkhoma et al.* (2019) highlight that most VSUs in low-resource settings operate with minimal personnel, often without specialized training.

The lack of trauma-informed training reported in this study raises concerns about secondary victimization. *Phiri et al.* (2021) emphasize that survivors value empathetic, respectful, and confidential engagement, and failure to provide this can discourage continued participation in the justice process. Comparatively, countries such as South Africa, where VSUs are integrated with Thuthuzela Care Centres, demonstrate improved conviction rates through multidisciplinary collaboration (*Jewkes et al.*, 2020). This comparison suggests that Malawi's VSUs, including Mchinji, could benefit from stronger institutional partnerships.

Community Engagement, Trust, and Cultural Barriers

Community attitudes and cultural norms strongly influenced the effectiveness of the VSU. Fear of stigma, gossip, and social rejection discouraged many survivors from reporting GBV cases, particularly in rural areas. This finding aligns with *Mkandawire* (2023), who reported that a significant proportion of GBV survivors in Mchinji avoid formal reporting due to fear of social exclusion. Similar patterns have been observed in Zambia and Uganda, where traditional mediation often undermines

formal justice mechanisms (*Mushinga & Mwale*, 2021; *Nabiryo et al.*, 2020).

Despite these barriers, the study found that community sensitization efforts increased awareness and reporting. This supports *Karanja and Mwangi's* (2020) findings in Kenya, which show that community policing and outreach improve trust in VSUs. The results reinforce the Social Ecological Model, demonstrating that VSU effectiveness is shaped not only by institutional capacity but also by community norms, relationships, and societal structures.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings highlight the need for a more holistic approach to strengthening VSUs in rural settings. Improving staffing levels, providing continuous trauma-informed training, enhancing logistical support, and strengthening collaboration with health, legal, and social welfare institutions are critical. Furthermore, sustained community engagement involving traditional and religious leaders could help address stigma and improve survivor confidence, as demonstrated in Tanzania (*Swai*, 2022).

It assessed the influence of the Victim Support Unit at Mchinji Police Station in supporting survivors of gender-based violence. The findings demonstrate that the VSU plays a vital role in providing counselling, legal guidance, referrals, and protection services, contributing positively to survivor support and access to justice. However, the effectiveness of the unit is significantly constrained by inadequate staffing, limited resources, insufficient specialized training, weak inter-agency coordination, and deeply rooted cultural norms that discourage reporting.

The confirms that while institutional structures for GBV response exist in Malawi, their impact in rural districts such as Mchinji remains limited without sustained investment and community engagement. Trust, confidentiality, and empathetic police–survivor interactions emerged as key factors influencing reporting and continued participation in the justice process. Strengthening VSUs therefore requires not only material and human resources but also survivor-centered practices and strong partnerships with communities and service providers.

By providing a localized assessment of the Mchinji Police VSU, this study contributes to existing literature and highlights practical areas for improvement in GBV response. Addressing the identified gaps has the potential to enhance survivor protection, improve justice outcomes, and support broader efforts to reduce gender-based violence in rural Malawi.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed the influence of the Victim Support Unit (VSU) at Mchinji Police Station in supporting survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). The findings demonstrate that the VSU plays an important role in providing essential services such as counselling, legal guidance, referrals to health and social services, and temporary protection. These services contribute to survivor recovery, increased reporting of GBV cases, and improved access to justice. Survivors who received empathetic and confidential support reported greater confidence in engaging with the police and pursuing their cases.

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