Factors Influencing Intimate Partner Violence against Men in Lusaka, Zambia

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Abstract

Gender Based Violence (GBV) against men is largely invisible, unrecognized and trivialized. As compared to GBV against women, society chooses not to believe that GBV can be initiated by women. A limitless amount of literature on GBV against women shows that it has been an endemic problem that is as a result of various factors. Using data from a qualitative study based on 30 men in Lusaka district, this paper examines and documents the nature, forms and the consequences of female violence against men in Zambia. The common forms of violence found were physical, verbal, sexual and psychological. These were mainly caused by infidelity on the part of men, suspected male impotence, children from other marriages, violence as retaliation and alcohol abuse. In terms of consequences, physical injuries, emotional problems, financial difficulties and HIV/AIDS were the negative outcomes of female-induced violence. Therefore, there is need for the government to educate society about the plight of male victims of female violence.

Key Words: Female violence, gender based violence, Lusaka, Zambia

1. Introduction

Female violence against men has always been the most controversial subject in the field of domestic violence (Carney et al., 2006). Literature shows that domestic violence against women is a norm, while violence against men is not only regarded as an exception but considered almost non-existent. This kind of conceptualization of domestic violence has historical underpinnings. From medieval times, within patriarchal societies, it has been considered a "great taboo" for a man to be a victim of violence initiated by a woman. George (2004) argues that this was due to the coalescence of two forbidden ideas: first, that a man can be beaten by a woman, which is an anathema particularly to men; second, that women can be aggressive and violent, which contravenes stereotypical notions of femininity and is an attribute that neither men nor women wish to acknowledge.

The current Zambia Demographic and Health Survey (ZDHS) 2013-14, indicates that nine percent of women induced violence on their husbands. Also, a study conducted by Steinmetz (1977) showed that the number of threats of domestic violence from wives against husbands exceeded the threats from the husbands, 93 per cent of the sample of people interviewed used verbal aggression and 60 per cent used physical aggression, like throwing objects or pushing their spouse to solve marital conflicts. Hence despite the fact that female violence against men remains largely unreported, the number of such cases is higher than the statistics as women have more intentionality of violence than men. One of the reasons for GBV unreported cases against men is due to the notion of masculinity amongst men. Men are customarily viewed as perpetrators of domestic violence as a result many men deny that they are victims of domestic violence in order to still feel masculine while others are too embarrassed to seek help and advice (Hidden Lives, 2006).

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Most of the literature especially those which have feminist overtones suggest that women only engage in violence in self-defense, fear or retribution for real or perceived wrong doing on the part of men (Barnett et al., 1997). On the other hand, Follingstad and Dehart (2000) argue that emotional abuse, initiated by women against men, is the form that is common among male victims of violence. It includes threat, intimidations and behavior that undermines the victim’s self-worth or self-esteem; or controls the victim’s freedom. According to Josolyne (2011) verbal abuse is one of the major methods women use to inflict violence on men as they can easily insult and undress a husband in the presence of the children.

Vitanza et al. (1995) posit that psychological effects of abuse against men are many. There are long term effects on men who have been abused. Some of them are guilt, anger, depression or anxiety, shyness, nightmares, irritability, and problems getting along with others. Men who have suffered abuse are at risk of a lot of negative consequences that can put them on a destructive path for their future as their life is usually shattered. Men who are victims of domestic violence also commonly experience long-term anxiety and panic, and are likely to meet the diagnostic criteria for Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Panic Disorder. There are numerous gaps in understanding the pervasiveness of this act in terms of the nature, the forms and the consequences of female induced violence against men. This study aimed at establishing the nature of female violence against men, exploring the factors that lead to female violence against men and investigating the consequences of female violence against men.

2. Materials and Methods

The study was carried out in two selected districts in Lusaka province, namely Lusaka and Chongwe. The sample population size in this study was thirty-four out of which thirty were married men and four key informants. The sampling techniques employed were convenient and purposive sampling techniques. The study collected both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected using the personal interviews while secondary data was collected through reviewing of available and relevant literature on female violence against men. Data was analysed by grouping similar responses together. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Zambia.

3. Results and Discussion

The study reviewed common forms of domestic violence experienced by men and perpetrated by their female partners. The findings from this research showed that female violence against men was in form of physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual violence and psychological abuse. This analysis profiles these forms one after another beginning with physical assault. Physical assault against the respondents in the research included being burned with hot water, the private parts almost being ripped off, being slapped, punched, scratched, and bitten. The findings further indicated that physical abuse was one of the most common reported forms of abuse directed towards men by their spouses and partners.

“My wife doesn’t take long to lash out and hit me. She lashes out very quickly and she’s hit me a number of times and I’ve struck her back a couple of times also because I can’t just allow her to continuously abuse me without retaliation. She uses anything she finds to do that. She has used a saucepan, hot water and cooking stick to attack me. This is becoming too much I don’t even know how long I will withstand it” (39 years old man).

Battary was also administered on a 29-year old man of Lusaka by his wife and he gave the following narration: My wife is the strangest person I have ever met. Sometimes she makes me wonder if she ever loves me because I can’t just imagine she can do what she does to me if she really loved me. Whenever she becomes angry with me she bites, kicks and slaps me.

Other respondents revealed several different modes of physical assaults in different situations and contexts as a respondent lamented saying: My wife has a tendency of abusing me in many different ways, but
mostly she uses hot water to do that. She has done this on various occasions. She waits until I go to sleep that’s when she would come and pour water on the beddings [28-year male nurse in Chongwe].

The findings also revealed some extreme cases like one whereby the victim had part of his penis cut-off by his wife. A 32-year victim of Chongwe area reported that: My wife, through peer pressure took a sex booster. Because I was tired, I denied us having sex. She however retaliated by embracing me for a kiss which in the process led to her biting my lower lips to a point of ripping them off the mouth. When I tried to touch the bitten lips, she then pulled the penis along with the trousers and sliced part of the penis. My private parts were almost ripped off and I had to be rushed to UTH where I was treated for wounds.

Steinmetz (1977) affirmed that female physical aggression was high and was in the form of pushing and throwing objects at the spouse. This is similar with the findings from this study which indicates that physical violence included hitting, slapping, punching, throwing objects and hot water, burning and attempts to cut-off penises which resulted in physical injury to the victim. Additionally, the narration by the male respondents was complemented by an account from the Director of Women of Substance which indicated that the most common reports on physical abuse were husbands being kicked, punched, pouring of hot water, throwing or making direct contact with weapons such as knives and hot water, causing the man serious injury, often requiring medical attention.

Moreover, the research findings showed that physical violence against men mostly occurred within homes with and sometimes without children looking. Those men who indicated that violence against them occurred in the presence of their children expressed fear that it would negatively affect their children. During an interview with a 41-year old married man he revealed that he was verbally abused by his wife of ten years of marriage. His wife would abuse him when they had a poor harvest which led to financial problems in the house. He said: My wife used to talk too much especially under financial pressure. She could tell me that I am not man enough as I have failed to find food for the family. The presence of my children during such fronts worried me as to how badly they would be affected.

Furthermore, men’s failure to support their families in terms of food and other home requirements were a typical point of reference. Issues of men’s inadequacies in fulfilling their sexual roles were also not uncommon as sources of women’s verbal abuse directed towards men. As such, most men interviewed loathed going home after work as narrated by a 48 year old man of Lusaka. The research findings discovered that the use of demeaning language, which involved threats, name calling, blaming, disrespect, and criticism that leads to the loss of self-confidence among men were mostly used in this form of female violence against men. Other forms included attempts to humiliate, make them feel unwanted and unloved.

The research findings further brought out that verbal abuse was conducted often when men were undergoing financial difficulties. This is when the man had either lost his job or the business was not doing fine. In this research, abusive wives were reported to target the husband’s feelings and emotions and the soft spots that affected mood, self-esteem and confidence. An example of this is the man’s feelings as a father, where wives would accuse their husbands for being inadequate or that the kids were not his but for another man. These cases show how much men are exposed to emotional abuse. For instance, a 30 year old man of Lusaka explained; I was emotionally abused by my wife of five years marriage. After three years of our marriage, my wife started seeing her old boyfriend each time she visited her parents. This secret affair continued until this man impregnated her. But after the parents mediated, I forgave my wife but the problem was that she continued seeing this man. When I tried to reason with my wife to stop the secret affair she always told me that I am not man enough and that it was the reason why she was seeing another man.

Similarly, a 43-year old Lusaka man was also psychologically abused by his wife. After six years of their nine-year marriage, the husband got sick and ended up being impotent. For the past three years his wife had been involved in more than two extra marital affairs. This traumatized the husband as he could not stand seeing his wife changing men and reaching an extent of bringing the men home: My wife has been involved in extra-marital affairs ever since I got sick. All the efforts aimed at resolving my marriage had since failed. Whenever I or both my and her relatives tried to advise her, she would answer rudely that she was young and had feelings. She also told those who were concerned about her extra marital affairs if they could stay for
three years without sex and she further threatened that the marriage would end if she was stopped from seeing other men. So I prefer to stay with her and the only reason I am doing that is so that she could take care of me.

A 52-year old teacher also narrated that he was told by his wife that she was shy moving with him because he was an old man: I am twelve years older than my wife and she tells me that I looked like an uncle to her and that her friends had been making negative comments about our marriage. I complain because I am the one who helped her rewrite her grade twelve examinations and subsequently sponsored her to a college, all she could pay me with is ridicule. She claims that she is not free to go to church or shopping with me because I am too old.

A 42 year old man too was psychologically abused as he was unable to provide for the family. He narrates; my wife of twelve years marriage divorced me because I lost my employment as an accountant at Chongwe district hospital. In 2011 I was involved in a road accident and sustained a broken leg. When I was taken to the hospital it was discovered that I had taken some alcohol and this was reported to the police and my work place. This resulted into my dismissal at work and I lost all my benefits. At this point life became hard for me as my wife continuously told me that she could not continue spoon-feeding me. Families for both sides tried to resolve the problem but failed. The psychological torture became worse as my wife started having meals with our three kids at the restaurant while I started at home. I had no choice but to seek for the court’s intervention but my wife openly told the magistrate that she had lost interest in me because I was not productive in the family.

Other than psychological and emotional abuse, sexual violence is another form of GBV initiated by women in relationships. Sexual violence is any sexual act or attempt to obtain a sexual act by violence or coercion, unwanted sexual comments or advances; regardless of the relationship to the victim. It occurs in many homes and is considered to be one of the most traumatic, pervasive and most common human rights violations. Sexual violence is not only directed to women but men are also victims of the scourge. Although these incidences were rare from the findings of the study, they are however, worth noting. One respondent narrated that: I am a victim of sexual abuse from my second wife. I was married to two women and I used to spend a week with each of the wives. When it was the turn for the second wife, she demanded for sex every night and she also demanded to have it five times in the night. When I tried to reason with her she responded by saying that I married her because the first wife could not satisfy me sexually. Furthermore, she argued that she had everything at her parents’ home except sex and as such me, as a husband, I was obliged to give her sex the way she wanted. When I gave her sex less than five times, she complained and threatened to divorce me so that she could go and find a man who would be satisfying her sexual appetite (a 40 year old man).

Another incident is of a 30-year old Lusaka man who was sexually abused by his wife on a number of occasions. His wife demanded to have sex with him four to five times in a single night. The sexual appetite of his wife was as a result of her believing in traditional medicine. She always brought traditional medicine in the house claiming that it was for abdominal pain. But when the husband inquired from the wife’s cousin he was told that the medicine she always brought home was for sexual appetite: My wife seems to have abnormal sexual appetite; she literally wants me to be having sex with her all the times we were together. I discovered recently that she took traditional sexual boosters and that was becoming too much on me. I really don’t know what to do. I have tried seeking advice from her relations but I think it’s not working out.

According to the research, sexual violence is rarely discussed as a form of violence in Africa due to cultural taboos associated with sexuality. This is particularly the case when the subjects of sexual abuse are men. However, the research findings indicate that sexual violence against men is in existence and mostly involves over-demanding of sexual encounters, using sex as a means of manipulation, issuing demeaning comments of a sexual nature and threatening to sleep with other men on occasions of sexual dissatisfaction.

There are various factors leading to female violence against men. The findings from this study indicate that reasons for female violence against men vary but mostly it is because of perceived infidelity, infertility, failure to provide for the family, children from other marriages and as a way of retaliating male dominance. Perceived infidelity seems to be a major cause of problems in marriages and relationships. The study shows
that some of the men who mentioned they suspected infidelity as a cause of violence against them admitted that they were involved in extra-marital affairs but they still blamed their spouses for instituting unconventional ways of handling the situations. For instance, after discovering a photo where a husband was being embraced by another woman as well as messages on her husband’s phone from the supposed woman, one wife after confronting her husband, burnt him with hot water. He sustained blisters on his body and had to be rushed to the hospital for medical attention (28 year old man).

On the other hand, others denied their involvement in extra marital affairs and accused their spouses of jealousy: My wife suspected me of going out with other women but I always told her that she is just jealous and that I am not going out with anyone. She does not believe me which always leads to fighting. I always get beaten by her whenever I come home late either from work or from drinking. At times she would tell me that I should go back and eat where I had gone to drink alcohol. Whenever I tried to reason with her she would become violent and would hit me with any object near her. At one time she hit me with a pot in the head and I sustained a deep cut and I had to be sutured. This trend is still going on up to now [49-year old man in Lusaka].

Infertility is another factor leading to female violence against men. The findings indicate that women who did not have children tended to blame it on their husbands thus making them become antagonistic of the husbands. The other point in this regard is that some men would seek sexual relationships elsewhere when they realize that they haven’t got children with their wives for a number of years. This also causes a lot of conflicts in homes which may result into the wife being violent. Some actually ask their wives for permission to bring in another wife and this behavior fuels problems in marriage. For instance, a 29 year old man narrates; “she battered me because of mere accusations. She accused me that I had failed to give her a child and that I had infected her with HIV as she suspects me of having multiple girlfriends. Once when I was sleeping, she hit me with an iron bar which resulted in a broken arm and a permanent scar on the face. However, I still love my wife and I don’t want to divorce her.

Another narrates; “I was battered by my wife after I asked her to permit me to marry another wife because we had stayed for eight years without a child. This angered my wife to an extent of pouring hot water on my back and insulting me that I was not man enough as I had failed to impregnate her for eight years [31-year old man in Chongwe].

Lack of employment or failure to provide for the family was another reason that the study brought out. Some men who claimed to have been abused by their wives claimed that the reasons were because they could not provide for their families. Men who said this, claimed to have either lost their jobs or their businesses went under and their wives were using this to abuse them. Mainly the kind of abuse associated with job losses was psychological which was seen as an attack on their ego whereby they were continuously reminded of how useless they were.

Moreover, the study also revealed that children from previous marriages or from another woman were a factor which caused female violence against men. The moment the husband started rendering support to the children from another marriage, wives became insecure, by thinking that their husbands were doing that just to get closer to the other woman. One respondent explained his ordeal: I sustained a broken arm after my wife attacked me. The fight started as a result of me wanting to support the children from my previous marriage. My wife is opposed to this. The argument was that the children were not working at my investment and as such they were reaping where they did not sow. Another argument my wife gave was that while I was supporting the children, the support was extended to the children’s mother. One day whilst arguing over the support of the children, she hit me with a pounding stick leading to me sustaining a broken arm. This physical attack led me to sue for divorce which the court of law granted.

Of relevance to the study are the views of Robertson and Murachver (2009) who say that perpetrators of both sexes often have emotional control problems and a related inability to communicate while talking through issues in homes. Emotional control problems could be used to explain how children from other marriages caused violence and also suspected infidelity. Issues of jealousy for instance can be explained by
this orientation of affected individuals failing to control their emotions making them become violent towards
their partners.

The findings from this study revealed that some of the women who were exhibiting violence against
their husbands were doing so as a way of revenging the violence perpetrated against them by their partners
and husbands. Some men revealed that the violence they were experiencing from their wives could have been
caused by them either intentionally or otherwise as explained below: My wife keeps saying that I abuse her
too much when I am drunk. I don’t know how I have been doing that. She says that’s why she doesn’t cook
for me. She beats me and talks bad about me. I don’t think it is true, I think it is her personality which is
makes her do all those things [42-year old man in Lusaka].

It’s true that I used to beat my wife just when we were new in marriage especially that when I used
to drink beer but I have stopped now. This is the reason why she has started abusing me now. She says it’s
now her turn to deal with me because I had maltreated her for a long time [36-year old teacher in Lusaka].
The findings from this study are similar to those of Robertson and Murachver (2009) in their explanation of
retaliatory violence. They argue that many perpetrators were victims of domestic violence themselves
previously, this could be when they were growing up as children or being abused by their partners. The
construction of the “victimized woman” drew attention to women’s experiences in violent intimate
relationships thereby highlighting intimate partner violence as a major social problem. Hence, women’s
victimization by their partners has been shown to be one of reason of their perpetration of violence.

Alcohol abuse seems to be a factor in conflict relationships where women to exhibit violence against
their spouses. The study reveals that some women who abused their partners are engaged in alcohol abuse
and that these women were peaceful when in their sober moods. It may not be known for sure that it was
alcohol that caused violent behavior in women but the findings exhibited a close association between the
two.

A respondent revealed that: My wife is a drunkard that’s the reason she abuses me. What makes the
situation worse is that I don’t drink myself and she keeps troubling me every time she goes drinking. She
doesn’t cook at home, my children are the ones who have taken the responsibility of cooking for me [48-year
old man in Lusaka]. What makes my wife rude and abusive to me is beer. She drinks beer too much. Quite
alright I also drink but it is expected for a man to drink and not a woman. When we go drinking she
misbehaves a lot and when we come back it’s a fight in the house [36-year old man].

Low self-esteem is another problem caused by female-induced violence especially through verbal and
emotional abuse. The study indicates that victims of female-induced violence have low self-esteem and lack
self-confidence. It was not uncommon in the interviews for men to indicate that they did not know if any
women would ever accept their proposal because of the damage caused by previous marriages. This
indicated lost self-esteem and confidence which are very important in a man’s life. Violence affects men’s
involvement in social life in totality as the narration confirmst: That woman messed up my life. I am not sure
now if any women can accept or even just having the courage to approach one will be very difficult for me. I
may just stay for a number of years now without getting married as I have a negative perception of women
[33-year old].

4. Conclusions

Zambia like most African societies is promotes patriarchal superstructure and socializing men to
exercise power over women. But this study indicates the resistance to these embedded social expectations.
The study discovered that female-induced violence was in existence in Lusaka and Chongwe districts of
Zambia. The common forms of violence were physical, verbal, sexual and psychological and they were
mainly caused by infidelity on the part of men, suspected male impotence, children from other marriages,
violence as retaliation and alcohol abuse. In terms of consequences, physical injuries, emotional problems
and financial difficulties were the negative outcomes of female-induced violence. The study also confirmed
on the lack of disclosure regarding male victims of violence. Men were still reluctant to report their
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victimization to the police, family members or victim support services. This was because doing so would challenge their masculine identities which were embedded within the fabric of the Zambian society. These masculine sentiments also extended to the justice systems, the police, the family and victim support services who have continuously ridiculed male victims of female-induced violence. This study does not offer evidence of gender symmetry in gender-based violence, a claim that both men and women are equal victims of violence. However, it highlights the existence of female violence against men whose effects on men are as undesirable as they are on women. It concludes that concerted efforts should be expended in order to address the problem alongside the gender-based violence against women strategies. Based on the findings on the study, it is recommended that sensitization programmes on GBV issues and those related to them should be conducted to address the issues.

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