

# Thorns in the home: a Case of Gweru District

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## Abstract

The current study sought to determine the nature of domestic violence in Gweru District, how women react to violence and why they remain in abusive homes. A qualitative naturalistic research design was employed in order to allow the researcher to understand the participants' world view as much as possible on the nature of domestic violence, how they reacted and why they continue to live in abusive homes. The women who participated in this research were purposefully selected in order to allow them to provide information needed to answer the research questions raised. Individual in-depth interviews were used to collect data from the women. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data from in-depth individual interviews. This allowed the researcher to organise and describe the data in rich detail and interpret the various aspects of the research question. The study revealed that acts of domestic violence were prevalent among women in Gweru District. These included emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Women reacted to these acts of violence by reporting to the police and relatives, ignoring, praying, using love portions and engaging in extramarital affairs. Women also stayed in abusive relation for different economic and social reasons. The study recommends that children be taught on the importance of peaceful family life from an early age. Furthermore there is need for education to empower victims to speak up. Cultural values which perpetuate domestic violence should be abolished. Finally further research on a wider scale and employing different methods is recommended to come up with generalisable results.

**Keywords:** - *domestic violence, abuse, women, cultural values.*

## 1. Introduction

Domestic violence presents a long standing problem globally regardless of cultural, social, economic, geographic and national boundaries. In a quest for men to control, punish, and dominate their partner's, women are found to be victims of physical, sexual, psychological and socio-economic abuse. Domestic violence is not a rare problem in Zimbabwe although it is hardly ever admitted as one. Juran (2004) reported that, at least a third of all women have experienced violence in their life time. The rate of domestic violence has also been demonstrated in many studies. Koeng et.al (2003) found the rate of domestic violence to be at around 42% in Bangladesh's two separate rural districts. In Zimbabwe the government of Zimbabwe enacted the Domestic Violence Act in 2007 to protect women against gender based violence. Many organisations in Zimbabwe and world over have also advocated against domestic violence against women, but such violence continues to occur. This study seeks to examine the forms of domestic violence, how woman react and why they remain in abusive homes in Gweru District and try to suggest ways of breaking the cycle.

## 2. Literature Review

WHO recognises violence against women as a major public health and human rights concern. Not only is violence against women a public health issue but is a major threat to social and economic development of a country (WHO, 2005). This was recognized in the Millennium Declaration of September, 2000, in which the General Assembly of the United Nations resolved "to combat all forms of violence against women and to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women" (United Nations Millennium Declaration, 2000). It is estimated that one in every five women faces some form of violence during her lifetime, in some cases leading to serious injury or death. Such violence is intimately associated with complex social conditions such as poverty, lack of education, gender inequality, child mortality, maternal ill-health and human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS).

Violence against women involves physical, sexual and emotional violence (WHO, 2005). WHO further gives the definitions of the different forms of violence as;

*Physical violence* means a woman has been slapped, or had something thrown at her; pushed, shoved, or had her hair pulled; hit with a fist or something else that could hurt; choked or burnt; threatened with or had a weapon used against her.

*Sexual violence* means a woman has been: physically forced to have sexual intercourse; had sexual intercourse because she was afraid of what her partner might do; or forced to do something sexual she found degrading or humiliating.

Though recognized as a serious and pervasive problem, *emotional violence* does not yet have a widely accepted definition, but includes, for example, being humiliated or belittled; being scared or intimidated purposefully.

*Intimate-partner violence* (also called "domestic" violence) means a woman has encountered any of the

above types of violence, at the hands of an intimate partner or ex-partner; this is one of the most common and universal forms of violence experienced by women (World Health Organization, 2002)

Violence against women occurs in all social and economic classes, but women living in poverty are more likely to experience violence due to its associated stressors. (Jewkes , (2002). Men in difficult economic circumstances (e.g. unemployment, little job autonomy, low socioeconomic status or blocked advancement due to lack of education) may resort to violence out of frustration, and a sense of hopelessness. At the same time, poor women who experience violence may have fewer resources to escape violence in the home (Heise , Ellsberg & Gottemoeller 1999)

Women with less education are generally more likely to experience violence than those with higher levels of education. Enrolment in and completion of secondary education is also a critical area of concern as it is clearly associated with employment opportunities and women's empowerment (WHO, 2005). The relationship between educational attainment and its protective effect is complex. Some men may react violently to women's empowerment through education, particularly if educated women then challenge traditional gender roles (WHO, 2002). Thus, in some societies there is actually increased risk of violence for some women until a sufficient number of them reach a high enough educational level and gender norms shift to allow its protective effects to operate (WHO, 2002). Women with no education are more than twice likely to experienced physical violence than women with more than secondary education (ZDHS, 2010-11). However, the relationship between education and intimate-partner violence is complex: in some cases, women who are becoming more educated and empowered face a greater risk of violence as their male partners try to regain control (UNIFEM, 2002)

Violence against women and gender inequality result from a complex array of interwoven factors. According to WHO (2005), harmful gender norms and traditions, and social acceptance of violence as an accepted means of conflict resolution are factors contributing to gender violence. Violence against women is often embedded in social customs that allow it to be perpetrated without being considered as violence. In many parts of the world, women have no social or legal recourse against violence by their husband or partner (WHO, 2005).

Most of the violence experienced by women is perpetrated by someone they know – most often, their husband or partner. Married women report that current or former husbands/partners are the most common perpetrators of physical violence, while single women report that other relatives and mothers or step-mothers are the most common perpetrators of physical violence (ZDHS 2010-2011 report). The report goes on to say that more than 1 in 4 women have experienced sexual violence with the rate three times more in divorced, separated, or widowed women than in single women. In their survey of nearly 50 populations from around the world, Rehn & Johnson Sirleaf, (2002), found that between 10% and 50% of women reported being hit or physically abused by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives In Zimbabwe however, 42% of married women have suffered from spousal or partner abuse (physical and/or sexual) at some point in time. Twenty-seven percent of married women report having experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence committed by their husband or partner in the past year (Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey, 2010-11). Violence against women by an intimate partner has been shown to be associated with mortality in children aged under 5 years (Jejeebhoy, 1998).

Although pregnancy may be a protective factor against violence in some societies, violence during pregnancy is widely prevalent (Campbell, Garcia-Moreno & Sharps, 2004). It is estimated that one in four women worldwide is physically or sexually abused during pregnancy, usually by her partner (Heise et al, 1999). Review of research on the prevalence and consequences of abuse during pregnancy published in 2004 found that prevalence ranged from 4% to 32%, with rates being considerably higher in developing countries (Campbell et al, 2004). Campbell also found that, in at least two industrialized countries with low overall maternal mortality rates, the United Kingdom of Great Britain (UK) and the United States of America (USA), partner violence was a significant cause of maternal death. Violence against pregnant women is also associated with a risk of miscarriage, premature labour, and fetal distress, and may be related to low-birth-weight (Campbell, 2002; Murphy, Schei , Myhr , & Dumont ,2001).

It is therefore paramount to raise the profile of violence against women as a serious obstacle to improving maternal and child health, and as a threat to the health and well-being of all women. In Zimbabwe, about five percent of all women aged 15-49 years who had ever been pregnant, experienced sexual violence during pregnancy (ZDHS, 2010-11). The report goes on to explain that, experiencing violence during pregnancy affects the health of the mother and can have serious consequences on the unborn child.

Abused women and girls have a greater risk of contracting HIV infections and other STIs because they lack autonomy to decide when, with whom and under what circumstances they will have sex (Garcia-Moreno & Watts, 2000). Fear of violence can prevent women suggesting that their male partner use a condom, still less insisting on it (Maman, 2000), thus highlighting the evidence that violence against women undermines HIV prevention and care efforts. Conversely, preventing this violence contributes to the prevention of HIV.

Violent or forced sex, especially among adolescent girls, may be more likely to lead to transmission of

the virus through tears in the vagina or anal canal. Thus, violence against women is a significant factor impeding effective prevention of HIV in women and young girls married or in a other long-term partnerships. These women can be at high risk in countries where HIV transmission is mainly through heterosexual sex ( Xu, 2000).

The majority of countries have no laws against marital rape (UNIFEM, 2003). A study in South Africa found that women who had violent or controlling partners had an HIV infection rate 50% higher than that of other women, and that abusive men were more likely to be infected than non-abusive men (Dunkle, 2004). Similarly, a study in India found that sexual violence by men against their wives was associated with increased rates of STIs, as well as a greater likelihood of extramarital partners (Martin, Kilgallen & Tsui, 1999). Violence against women in the form of child-hood sexual abuse has been shown to increase the probability of risky sexual behaviour later in life. Such behaviours include consensual sex at an earlier age, multiple partners, transactional sex, and heavy use of alcohol or drugs (Heise et al 1999). These behaviours also increase the risk for HIV, other STIs and unintended pregnancies. Fear of violence is a reason why many women do not seek testing for HIV (WHO, 2004). In some cases, women whose positive status becomes known may be beaten, abandoned or thrown out of the home by their male partner or family. Since testing is a prerequisite for access to antiretroviral treatment, it is essential that women can be tested without fear of violence (UNAIDS, (2001).

García-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise & Watts, (2005) carried out a widespread survey in a number of countries. The results indicated that violence by a male intimate partner (also called "domestic violence") is widespread in all of the countries included in the study. Emotionally abusive acts by a partner included: being insulted or made to feel bad about oneself; being humiliated in front of others; being intimidated or scared on purpose; or being threatened directly, or through a threat to someone the respondent cares about. García-Moreno et al (2000) found that over half of physically abused women had never sought help from formal services (health services, legal advice, shelter) or from people in positions of authority (police, women's nongovernmental organizations, local leaders, and religious leaders).

Domestic violence against women remains a major problem in Zimbabwe despite legislative safeguards adopted six years ago, and concerted efforts by the government and lobby groups to curb the scourge. The 2010-11 ZDHS collected information on domestic violence and reported that about 27% and 29% of married women aged 15-49 years had experienced emotional and physical violence, respectively. Those who experienced sexual violence at some point in their life were 27%, an increase from 25% of the cases reported in the 2005-06 report (ZDHS, 2010-11) ( according to ZimStat, (2014), about 500 women were sexually abused monthly in the first three months of the year, translating to about 16 women being raped daily.

Responding to the high incidence of domestic abuse, the government enacted the Domestic Violence Act in 2006 amid cheers from advocates, but six years down the line, critics say the law has not lived up to expectation. It is for this reason that they researcher is propelled to find out the nature abuse in Gweru District, how women react and why they choose to remain in abusive relationships.

### **3. Research Objectives**

- To explore the forms of domestic violence.
- To examine how women react to different forms of abuse.
- Establish why woman stay in abusive relation.

### **4. Research Questions**

- What forms of domestic violence are Gweru district?
- Why do women stay in abusive marriages?
- How do women react to different forms of abuse?

### **5. Research Methodology**

The qualitative research approach is the backbone of this study which relied on interviews with abused women participants. Qualitative research entails the interpretation of lived experiences of participants (Blaster, etal (2005:65) and provides rich and deep data which describes phenomena in words (Kazdin, 2000). In this study the experiences of abused woman and counselors emerged. Data collected from interviews were thematically analyzed. This involved breaking the data into manageable themes, patterns, trends and relationship (Mouton, 2003). The study's analysis used predetermined thematic categories associated with the questions and then reanalyzed it using themes that emerged. The study described and interpreted the experiences and perceptions of a particular concept (Schumacher, 2010:346) in order to understand participant's meanings ascribed to the concept. 20 women in Gweru District were interviewed until data reached a saturation point. Participants were purposefully sampled. Qualitative researchers generally rely on purposeful selection of participants (Gay and Airasian, 2000:2009). The sampling technique seeks to select information rich cases which can be studied in depth (Patton, 1990).

## 6. Statement of the problem

Domestic violence is a pervasive problem for many nations including Zimbabwe. Like most of the countries, Zimbabwe has made great strides to try and curb domestic violence through enacting the domestic violence act and advocating against gender based violence. However, despite the growing interest in this issue such violence continues to occur in Gweru District.

## 7. Findings

As stated earlier, the study sought to examine factors influencing violence in Gweru District and try to suggest ways of breaking the cycle. The findings are grouped under the headings; forms of abuse, coping strategies and barriers to leaving an abusive relationship. The study revealed that women abuse was rampant in Gweru District. In-depth interviews with woman revealed that women had experienced different acts of violence to which they reacted differently. The various forms of abuse included emotional/verbal which was ranked number one, physical abuse, sexual abuse, economic abuse and other forms of abuse.

### 7.1 Forms of abuse

#### 7.1.1 Sexual abuse

It came out of the study that some women were sexually abused by their husbands. Some men forced their wives to have unprotected sex with them even if they were promiscuous or HIV positive. If the woman denies, she was beaten and accused of infidelity.

It also emerged that some men had two wives whom he shared a single bedroom with because of accommodation crises. One of the wives would watch the other wife and the husband having sex. Asked why they complied with such an arrangement some women revealed that they are left with no choice but to comply. One woman concurred and lamented “My husband brought a prostitute home and I was asked to watch them having sex” On other hand the other woman said, “I am forced to have sex even if I am tired or sick”.

It would appear some women do not have negotiating strength for safe sex and some may end up contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases from their husbands. Furthermore besides fear of physical abuse and other forms of abuse might be attached to sexual abuse, women felt that they are sexually abused because men paid their (lobola) bride prize. After paying bride prize some men considered women to be their property. One woman concurred and commented, “No one will understand husband sexual abuse to a woman. My people would tell you, the reason for marriage is sex” As a result women are likely to suffer in silence. Changachirere (2013) claimed that cultural practices which included (lobola) bride price resulted in men feeling entitled to his wife, perceiving women as minors and they want to make decisions and to be listened to by women.

The findings also revealed that some women were sexually starved. “I can go for a month with ought sex and when I demand for sex my husband insults me and calls me a prostitute who is always thinking about sex.” “You have an uncontrollable edge for sex”, concurred one woman who was sexually starved and received similar insults.

#### 7.1.2 Emotional and verbal abuse

The participants ranked this form of abuse first. The women believe that the situation is like this because it leaves no evidence of abuse in the face of human rights activism in Zimbabwe in today’s society. 100 % of the interviewed concurred that they were emotionally abused in their marriages. The following responses show how woman were emotionally abused;

*“I am scalded in front of neighbors, work mates and children. If I ask my children to go to their bed room, they are invited back to come and listen.”*

*“I was forced to perform some rituals because I do not have children. I was forced to drink chicken blood as way of appeasing sprits which he said, were from my lineage”.*

*“My modules were torn, computer and cell phone crushed in order to stop me from furthering my education.”*

*“I am not allowed to talk to men. Talking to men led to accusations of promiscuity.”*

*“My husband is always monitoring my cell phone .Who I communicate with and how much air time used per day.”*

The above statements revealed that verbal abuses were experienced by the interviewed woman.

#### 7.1.3 Economic abuse

It came out of this study that women also faced economic abuse. The economic abuse was revealed by the following responses such as

*“My husband does not allow me to work”.*

*“My husband does not give me the autonomy to use my money. All my salary goes into my husband’s account and I am left with no income”.*

*“My husband does not allow me to start any business ventures”.*  
*“I am burdened with all family responsibilities which include paying rentals,  
children’s fees and buying groceries”.*

Many such views that were advanced by women and this tend to suggest that woman were also economically abused.

#### *7.1.4 Physical abuse*

In general physical abuse follows the other forms of abuse. One woman was beaten after the husband had stalked her and saw her talking to men. However according to perceptions of women physical abuse is the least to all the other forms of abuse .This was attributed to the laws that protect women against any form of violence.

#### *7.1.5 Other forms of abuse.*

Other forms of abuse which emanated from this study include jealousy, miscommunication, restrictions from participating in community activities, threats and denial to access to needs and requirements.

### **7.2 How women reacted to sexual abuse**

The abused women reacted to the abuse differently as indicated by this study. The study revealed that while legal action could be resorted to in times of domestic violence 90% of the interviewed women dreaded taking that route. The following were some of the actions that women took;

#### *7.2.1 Reporting to family members.*

These included parents, aunts, uncles and pastors who sometimes took pains to council the couple. The findings revealed that at times counseling led to improvement of the situation but at times the situation got worse. One woman lamented, *“My husband said you are going to marry all those people you go about reporting me .Never dream I will listen to them”.*

#### *7.2.3 Reporting to the police.*

30% of the participants indicated that they reported the abuse to the police and withdrew the charges .Asked why they withdrew the charges the women gave the following views:

*“My husband is the bread winner, if he is arrested. I will have nowhere to get income”.*

*“I fear ridicule from family members and friends”.*

*“I fear blame from his parents and children for causing the arrest and pressing criminal charges”.*

It would appear most men end up getting away with abuse. One woman had this to say, *“ I reported my husband to the police and his mother threatened me of unspecified action if his son was imprisoned”.* Only 20% of the interviewed woman reported their husbands and were charged and asked by the courts to pay maintenance.

#### *7.2.4 Ignoring and hoping for an improvement.*

Some women resorted to ignoring and pretending that nothing was happening. They seemed to be normalizing the abuse. Some gained solace from church activities and prayed profusely with the hope that the abuser would change. 5% agreed that their husbands changed through prayers .However there is need to investigate the validity of the claims since several variables can come into play for one to change.

#### *7.2.5 Other coping strategies.*

The research revealed that some women used love portions in an attempt to win or fix the men. Some resorted to drinking beer excessively. While some resorted to doing whatever the men wants. One woman revealed that, *“My husband expects me to kneel down when greeting him and I do exactly that.”*

Other women deserted their homes to go back to their father’s homes, but some were asked by their parents to go back to the husbands. One woman said, *“I went to my father’s house, but I was asked to go back to my husband. My father said he did not have money to reimburse the lobola”* One woman echoed that she was forced by her husband’s abusive tendencies to engage in extramarital affairs.

The findings suggest that women resorted to some coping strategies which are more of tolerating abuse than getting rid of abuse. Some measures resulted in further abuse.

### **7.3 Barriers to leaving an abusive relationship.**

The study revealed that most women remained trapped in abusive relationships. The following reasons emanated from the study;

- Fear of disturbing children.
- Fear of ridicule from friends, family members and the society at large.
- Dependency on the man for income, shelter and other needs.
- The husband’s family members may be respecting the woman a lot and divorcing the husband meant cutting ties with the good people from the husband’s side.
- Some women have nowhere to go.
- Continuing with the prestige associated with being a married woman keeps some women in abusive

relationships.

- Difficulties of leaving the amassed wealth which could have been accumulated over years.
- Fear of paying maintenance for women with higher income than the men.

## 8. Conclusions.

Women continued to meet different forms of violence in the face of the laws that protect women from domestic violence. Most women opted to remain in abusive relations for various reasons and they were stifling efforts made by the government to protect them against abuse. Some women perpetuated the abuse of other women which does not help the situation at all. Women have engaged in coping strategies which tend to tolerate abuse. Some coping strategies lead to a vicious circle where the man is abused as well. The study concludes that they are indeed thorns in the home in Gweru District.

## 9. Recommendations

Basing on the findings of the study it is recommended that;

- Children from infant level should be educated on the importance of peaceful homes so that they grow up respecting the marriage institution.
- Gender empowerment through education is needed for both men and women.
- Victims should be encouraged to speak up.
- Cultural behaviors which promote women abuse should be abolished. Changachirere (2013) claims that cultural practices are exacerbating the problem, urging government to plug traditional loopholes that expose women to abuse.
- Further researches on a wider scale are needed in order to come up with generalisable results. Furthermore the triangulation of methods would result in more valid and reliable data. This study serves exploratory purposes which sheds light into further research.

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