

Hidden trauma: Men's non-disclosure of female perpetrated partner violence in selected communities of Limpopo Province

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Abstract

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Intimate Partner Violence, Heterosexual, Male Victims, Masculinity, Non-disclosure.

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Purpose of the study: The current study was aimed at exploring men's non-disclosure of intimate partner violence at Sekhukhune District in Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Methodology: Qualitative research methodology and exploratory research design were applied to successfully explore heterosexual men's non-disclosure of intimate partner violence. A non-probability sampling of blended convenience sampling and snowball sampling was employed. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions and was analysed through thematic analysis of qualitative data.

Main findings: This study found that male victims of partner violence hide their situations. Determinants of non-disclosure were found to include men's personal feelings of fear to disclose, masculinity factors, societal expectations, and cultural norms, which negatively affect men's decisions to disclose. Avoidance of possible harm and judgement from others appeared to influence non-disclosure.

Novelty/originality of the study: The findings of the study raise concern for lack of knowledge on violence against men. Social services professionals can use the findings to advocate for male victims' rights and use the same resources aimed at helping female victims to provide protection and psychosocial assistance to male victims. The public needs to be made aware that women are not the only victims of IPV and as such be educated about the vulnerability of male victims.

INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is any form of abuse that happens between intimate partners, and include physical, emotional, sexual, psychological, and verbal abuse (Hayden *et al.*, 2014). It has become a global social and health problem (Ongundipe *et al.*, 2018; Walker *et al.*, 2019). Adebayo (2014) noted that intimate partner violence has been perceived as a female issue throughout the world, whereas violence against men is a shocking reality. The problem is that men suffer in silence. The pattern of violence often starts with forms of abuse such as verbal, psychological, and financial abuse, expanding to other forms of abuse which include physical and sexual abuse (Tilbrook *et al.*, 2010) which indicates that men also suffer varied kinds of abuse.

Male victims of partner violence feel that their situations are different since they are men (Morgan & Wells, 2016). They find it difficult to identify themselves as victims of violence since the ideology is that women, and not men, are victims. Being labelled as a male victim of violence comes with diminished masculinity (Walker *et al.*, 2019). Thobejane *et al.* (2018) assert that masculinity expectations of men are that a man should not cry out loud to the public when experiencing violence. The Bapedi people of Limpopo Province usually use the phrase: "Monna ke nku o llela teng" which literally translates to "a man is a sheep, he cries internally". For this reason, most men find it difficult to disclose any form of violence they might be experiencing. **The objectives of this study were to establish men's views about disclosing violence experienced from their intimate partners and to identify determinants of men's non-disclosure of intimate partner violence.**

LITERATURE REVIEW

Information about men's voices regarding violence perpetrated against them seems to be insufficient. Simon and Wallace (2018) have noted that not enough studies have concentrated on issues of men's disclosure of their victimisation. Brown (2008), Kumar (2012) and Tsui (2014) agree that abused men face interpersonal obstacles that prevent them from disclosing violence perpetrated by their female partners. One of these obstacles is that men are afraid of being ridiculed if they reveal the victimisation to anyone close to them (Dempsey, 2013; Thobejane *et al.*, 2018). This is because they are most likely to be ridiculed in societies they live in when they appear as victims of violence; and as a result, they conceal their experiences for fear of being stigmatised (Kgate *et al.*, 2021). This prolongs their suffering and delays the assistance that these victims should be getting.

In patriarchal societies, men are expected to dominate women. In these societies, the concept of abused men is unusual due to societal stereotypes of masculinity that are placed on male victims of female perpetrated violence. Men are

portrayed as strong; this prevents them from disclosing their experiences (Barkhuizen, 2010). Their victimisation remains an invisible occurrence due to the reluctance of society to support them (Simon & Wallace, 2018). Socialisation plays a role in normalising violence. Children can be socialised from a younger age to respond to violence by accepting it, which then leads to viewing violence as normal at an adult age. That is, if adults in a society do not view violence as a serious matter, younger people exposed to such norms will have increased chances of accepting the violence (Madzivhandila, 2015). In consensus, Heilman and Barker (2018) noted that men are typically socially instructed to refrain from showing emotional vulnerability and are monitored to show only a limited range of emotions. Men's display of sadness, loneliness, affection, love, and friendship among other expressions of the heart, is socially interpreted as a sign of weakness. Thus, men's emotional wellbeing is damaged by a learned inability to recognise, communicate and understand their emotions.

Non-disclosure of violence by male victims may be closely linked to a high probability of substance abuse to cope with their experiences (Hines & Douglas, 2009; Perryman & Appleton, 2016). Apart from substance use and abuse, most men suffer from psychological and emotional distress due to violence (Njuguna, 2014), including depression which could also contribute to loss of employment due to absenteeism at work (Davis, 2010; Tilbrook et al., 2010; Kumar, 2012). This indicates that violence experienced by men has negative implications on their daily functioning. Lien and Lorenzen (2019) corroborated by Brooks et al. (2020) revealed that those who suffered violence from their partners may fear developing new relationships and/or have greater chances of developing feelings of fear towards their partners within a new relationship.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The target population of this study was heterosexual male victims aged 18 years and above who experienced violence at the hands of their current or former intimate partners. This study was qualitative in nature. The exploratory research design was applied to successfully explore the context of men's non-disclosure of IPV. Convenience and snowball sampling methods were implemented to access abused men. Available participants made referrals to other participants through snowball sampling. Before data collection, the authors requested permission to conduct the study from the gatekeepers (who in this case were village chiefs), all participants gave consent to be interviewed and participation was entirely voluntary. Participants understood their right to withdraw from the study at any time they wished to do so (Padgett, 2017). Data was collected through one on one, face-to-face interviews. The semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data. Interviews took a duration of about 45 minutes to an hour to conclude. Thematic analysis of qualitative data as portrayed in Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse data collected in the study.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study are presented in this section through themes and subthemes resulting from the study.

Table 1: This table illustrates themes and subthemes that emerged from the study

THEME	SUBTHEME
1.1 Men's views about disclosing violence	Decision to conceal
	Lack of trust
4.2 Factors influencing non-disclosure	Costs and benefits
	Masculinity factors
	Personal feelings
	Societal expectations

MEN'S VIEWS ABOUT DISCLOSING VIOLENCE

Decision to conceal

This theme describes men's response to the violence perpetrated against them by their female partners and how they feel about disclosing their victimisation. Participants' responses indicated that they do not disclose their experience. They prefer to conceal it. Some of the participants' voices have been captured as follows:

"Concealing is the better option, if I disclose this woman might think I am afraid of her. It is just that if I retaliate people will think I am the perpetrator. I prefer to keep it to myself until I figure out the best solution".

Lack of trust

When asked to expound on how they feel about disclosing the victimisation to friends, family members, colleagues, or someone close, one of the participants had the following to say:

"I usually feel comfortable sharing my problems with my friend (Mr x), but I really cannot tell him that I am abused, especially by a woman. I cannot bring this to his attention..... he can never know that I am not able to control my wife. I will look stupid and he will no longer take me seriously or ask for my advice".

Another participant had this to say:

"I think matters between my wife and I are secrets. I cannot trust other people by telling them my affairs.

Telling them will be the same as permitting them to talk behind my back. Then, life becomes difficult and I will be even ashamed to walk on the streets”.

[Shuler \(2010\)](#) proved that male victims of intimate partner violence are silent about their victimisation. It becomes difficult for them to come forward to disclose their experiences. This is mainly because they do not want to be considered weak.

DETERMINANTS OF NON-DISCLOSURE OF VIOLENCE

This theme involves factors that arose from the study that influence men’s decisions to disclose violence at the hands of their female partners. The following subthemes present factors leading to non-disclosure of violence.

Costs versus benefits after disclosure

This subtheme focuses on what male victims of violence compare as costs or benefits that may come after disclosure if they decide to disclose their experiences to people around them. In other words, this refers to how much they are to gain and/or lose after disclosure. [Kumar \(2012\)](#) and [Thobejane et al. \(2018\)](#) extrapolated that some of the reasons that hinder men’s disclosure include financial dependence on their abusive partners. They also fear abandoning their children, including being able to care for them if the relationship comes to an end. In this study, one of the participants decided to conceal violence experienced to maintain a good parental relationship towards children in an abusive relationship. His response to factors that affect their decision to disclose was as follows:

“I keep quiet and let pain go through my heart. If I respond I am afraid that the problem will escalate to such a point where children may notice that parents are fighting and may begin to choose sides. What if they chose her over me? I mean she is the mother after all. Women always win”.

A study by [Thobejane et al. \(2018\)](#) found that men who are dependent on their more financially stable women for a daily living may fear the effects of divorce should the couple divorce as a result of the reported abuse. When asked about reasons that influence men not to disclose their experiences, participants said the following:

“I do not want this to affect the children, my wife is providing for us and it may take me a lot of time to find a decent job to cater for my children’s needs. I know her words hurt, she is bitter and sometimes violent, but she has been there for me ever since my family disowned me. I will fight to keep this family together, what she is doing is wrong, but she is a good mother and she loves me. Therefore, I think it is better to keep the problem to myself”.

Congruent to this point, another participant has said:

“She once threatened to take children and leave with them. Since she is the breadwinner, she can do that. I just cannot allow that to happen, because I may never be able to see my kids. The best way for a man to keep the family together is to stay strong on matters like these”.

Masculinity factors

This subtheme has shown that factors that are associated with masculinity prevent men from disclosing their victimisation. This includes factors that view men as strong and masculine. One of the participants revealed the following:

“There is no way I am going to sacrifice my manhood by telling people my problems. Ke hlabirwa a Mokone (praising in clan names), men are born strong, and it should stay like that”.

[Kgatle et al. \(2021\)](#) found that men who are physically abused may not see the abuse for what it is and instead find different explanations for it. This behaviour is reinforced by the victims’ masculinity prescripts.

Personal feelings

This subtheme is about men’s own feelings that prevent disclosure of violence that they experienced. One of obstacles that discourages men from disclosing violence is that they are afraid of being ridiculed if they reveal the victimisation to people around them ([Dempsey, 2013](#); [Thobejane et al., 2018](#)). One of the participants was quoted as saying:

“I just feel intimidated by the whole thing..... if people find out that I am abused, especially by a woman I do not know how I will cope with being a joke. People don’t respect weak men and I do not want to carry that label. This will just ruin my name”.

According to [Kumar \(2012\)](#) and [Adebayo \(2014\)](#), male victims of intimate partner violence do not share their experiences because they are ashamed of these experiences. Some participants of this study said:

“I feel ashamed because I do not know how my family will digest the issue of me being abused by my wife. It may seem as if she cast some sort of spell to control me”.

Societal expectations

Societal expectations that men ought to be strong and suppress emotions limit them from disclosing their experiences (Kgatle *et al.* 2021). This subtheme talks about expectations in society that prohibit men from disclosing violence perpetrated against them. Some participants said the following:

“In this place of residence, a man should be the head in the family. When you are a man and cannot handle your wife while you are the head of the family, people will undermine you and wonder what kind of a man is defeated by a woman. Well, I want to remain respected”.

Other said:

“It is highly unlikely for institutions offering support to victims of violence to recognise and acknowledge our victimisation since the society we live in, view men as perpetrators of violence towards their female partners. I feel discouraged to disclose, we men are not taken seriously, and we undergo violence just the same way women do”.

Disclosure of violence by male victims can be affected by cultural pressures of masculinity that require men to avoid vulnerabilities (Kia-Keating *et al.*, 2005; Victor & Olive, 2019). To see a man crying is viewed as a disgrace in most African communities. Cultural barriers attached to crying men pose a risk for abused men to lose prestige in communities in which they live (Thobejane *et al.*, 2018).

When asked about factors that lead to non-disclosure of violence, a response by a research participant was as follows:

“As an African man, I am forced to keep quiet. I am talking about a Sepedi proverb that says “monna ke nku o llela teng”. Yes, I acknowledge that I am in pain, but I cannot risk my manhood just to say my wife is the man in this house. A man who initiated through African processes cannot do that. I am telling you even my ancestors could turn their backs on me. A man releasing tears in public is not a real man in our culture”.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Men prefer to hide their situations than to disclose them to their significant others. Huntley *et al.* (2019) purport that men are most likely afraid of disclosing their victimisation. This may be due to myths placed on them. Men do not want to be considered weak (Thobejane & Luthada, 2019). Domestic violence remains a private matter for as long the society deems it normal or private (Srivastava, 2016). According to Strong *et al.* (2010), victims of violence may not disclose their experiences if the costs will be greater than benefits and rewards after disclosure. This study has revealed that socioeconomic status and relationship dynamics between the victim and the perpetrator inform decisions by the victim to disclose the violence. The findings of this study generally confirm other IPV studies that men experiencing partner violence prefer to prioritise care, support, and protection for their children (Kumar, 2012; Thobejane *et al.*, 2018; Deshpande, 2019; Lysova *et al.*, 2020). The preservation of the family unit was one of the important factors that led to the participants' non-disclosure of violence.

Male victims may not disclose their abusive experiences because of fear of losing custody of their children if the couple separates as a result of the reported abuse (Dim & Lysova, 2021). This is because women seem to have greater chances of obtaining custody (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001). This study also proved that men prefer to save their relationship with the perpetrator to keep up with daily living (in cases where the perpetrator is the breadwinner in the family) and if the victim relies on the perpetrator for other support other than financial support (McClennen, 2010). Victims relayed that they did not wish to lose the financial assistance received from their perpetrators. This has the potential to worsen and prolong the ordeal suffered by the victim.

Abused men are reluctant to disclose their experiences because of masculinity factors that view men as strong (Thobejane *et al.*, 2018). These factors come with expectations and implications on gender roles, which then makes it difficult for society to recognise men as victims of violence. This prevents men from attaining the victim status (Munirkazmi & Mohyuddin, 2012; Roebuck *et al.*, 2020). Madzivhandila (2015) maintains that men are groomed to act like men and not express their sufferings through crying.

Gender roles and expectations had an impact on men's non-disclosure of violence. Their agony remains invisible because men are culturally perceived to be masculine and strong. This is viewed as an expectation for them to suppress the pain endured (Simon & Wallace, 2018). It is through masculinity factors that men are assumed to have enough power to protect themselves from violence perpetrated by women (Pagelow, 1985) as quoted by Allen-Collinson, (2009). Abused men thus find it difficult to openly talk about their experiences.

Participants of this study have indicated that they fear being ridiculed and shame that may come after disclosure of violence. Feelings of embarrassment seem to cloud the judgement of their situations. They believe that people will make fun of their situations, and in return, they will feel ashamed. Roebuck *et al.* (2020) found that men had difficulty in disclosing their experiences to peers. They avoid being teased as violence is viewed as something that does not happen to men. Men are not expected to appear weak, instead, they are assumed to be strong and are expected to lead their families.

Research findings from various sources indicate that men are exposed to ridicule in societies when they appear as victims of violence. As a result, they opt to conceal their experiences (Adebayo, 2014; Brooks *et al.*, 2020). Lysova *et al.*

(2020) maintain that men experience feelings of embarrassment and shame when victimised by women. These feelings promote silence as they prevent men from disclosing their suffering to anyone (Lysova & Dim, 2020), compounded by fear of being shunned by community members.

Results of this study indicate that societal perceptions about men abuse impact the disclosure of violence by male victims. O'Connor (2020) found that most men feel that they are faced with negative perceptions by society. In general, society can hardly recognise female perpetrated violence towards men because much attention is placed on men's physical strength (McCarrick *et al.*, 2016). In addition, Philpott and O'Connor (2020) posit that abused men expressed feelings of anger and frustration about gender inequalities that they experience from communities through experiences of the legal system and support services.

Male victims are unable to raise their problems due to society's lack of interest in their voices because these voices are raised by men. It is believed that since women's violence is unlikely to cause severe injuries, the violence they perpetrate towards their partners becomes accepted in a patriarchal society than violence perpetrated by men (Carmo *et al.*, 2011). Consequently, this prevents male victims from disclosing their victimisation.

This study has found that cultural norms make it difficult for men to cry for help. There are cultural patriarchal beliefs that view women as weak, submissive, and obedient. Consequently, women are mostly viewed as victims compared to men. Therefore, men are not able to admit that they are abused by their female partners (Thobejane & Luthada, 2019). Victor and Olive (2019) found that the belief that men are not supposed to show emotional pain publicly had an impact on men who live in the closet. The adage "monna ke nku o llela teng" forbids men from crying. In this sense, it becomes hard to identify and reach abused men.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has confirmed that male victims of partner violence generally fear disclosing their experiences to friends, families, colleagues, and other persons. The core reason behind this is that they do not trust other people with their problems, they prefer to keep the violence to themselves as they view it as a private issue. The general idea put forward was that disclosure may negatively affect men's social status or prestige. Fear of ridicule and shame for being victims of partner violence, costs and benefits following disclosure, masculinity factors, societal expectations, cultural norms, and comparison of cost and benefits after disclosure is found to be factors that make men suffer in silence.

It could be essential to have greater advocacy for male victims of violence by educating the public about the existence of violence against men through integrated efforts from stakeholders in government and non-government agencies that offer support services to victims of violence. The same effort, amount of resources and publicity used by governmental and non-governmental organisations to educate society and create awareness about victims of domestic violence should be used to educate society and to create awareness of domestic violence with men as victims.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

Based on the methods used in the study, the findings can therefore not be generalised to all male victims of IPV.

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M.O Kgatle: Findings of this article were extracted from her Master's dissertation.

P. Mafa: This was the co-supervisor of the study and reviewed the manuscript as well.

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