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Absent voices: Help-seeking behaviour among South African male victims of intimate partner violence

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Abstract. It remains a huge challenge for most male victims of intimate partner violence to seek help. Abused men seem to lack courage to seek help due to interpersonal and intrapersonal factors that affect their decision to disclose the abuse experienced. This study was aimed at exploring help seeking behaviour of male victims of partner violence in selected rural areas of South Africa. The objectives of the study were to determine men's views about seeking help and to help improve services for victims of gender-based violence. The study has implemented qualitative approach with exploratory research design. Data was collected through semi structured interviews and was analysed using thematic data analysis. Barriers that prevent men from seeking help include fear of possible ridicule, disbelief, false accusations, and rejection from helping professionals. Feelings of helplessness, perceived lack of confidentiality among professionals and influence of the media hampered help-seeking behaviour of most men in the study. The overall outcome of the study is that most victims appear to lack knowledge of services available for them. It has also been established that male victims are reluctant to seek support from informal networks such as friends, family members, colleagues, and their in-laws. The study recommends that public education, advocacy, and appropriate gender-sensitive intervention programmes be implemented to overcome the effects of violence and to prevent further victimisation.

Keywords. intimate partner violence, male victims, female perpetrators, help seeking

1. Introduction

The victimisation of men by their female partners is a serious social problem. It is underreported (Wright, 2016) and largely ignored by society (Shuler, 2010; Park *et al.*, 2020). This is mainly because male victims of intimate partner violence find it difficult to seek help. Social pressures make it difficult for them to admit that they are victims of violence. Others are reluctant to seek help because of masculinity factors. They believe that being a male victim of partner violence degrades them as men (Wright, 2016). This belief has great influence on how they deal with their victimization.

Violence against men is being regarded as a family problem which does not require legal assistance. Although feminists argue that intimate partner violence (IPV) is committed by men against women, women can certainly abuse their male partners (Adebayo, 2014; Safariolyaei & Amiri, 2017). Zuure (2018) revealed that men do experience sexual violence, stalking and physical violence from their intimate partners. Hines and Douglas (2009) further indicated that women are more likely to perpetrate psychological and emotional forms of abuse towards men.

These men are also subjected to economic violence and controlling behaviour including material violence and sexual harassment from their female partners (Lien & Lorentzen, 2019). From these assertions, it can be deduced that male victims require as much help as female victims of abuse.

2. Review of literature

An Asian study conducted by Cheung *et al.* (2009) found that when men are assaulted by their female partners, psychological and personal barriers coupled with traditional values greatly affect their help-seeking decisions. The challenge facing men when seeking help is that they are treated differently as compared to female victims (Machado *et al.*, 2017). This is to an extent due to the judicial system's treatment of victims of intimate partner violence varies based on gender differences, which in itself can influence how male victims see help from other institutions.

Abused men may have a challenge in locating the few resources that are available for them (Hines & Douglas 2009; Dutton & White, 2013). If they happen to seek help, chances are that they may encounter resistance from those offering services to victims of partner violence. The general concern is that male victims may not even be aware of services that support them when they are abused. Others even assume that the services are for female victims instead (Tsui *et al.*, 2010; Adebayo, 2014; Tsui, 2014) and therefore suffer in silence.

Fear of being disbelieved is another factor that affect help seeking behavior of male victims (Kingsnorth & MacIntosh, 2007; Dempsey, 2013; Walker *et al.*, 2019), since service providers usually see women as victims and as a result, women perpetrators use this to their advantage. The impact of attitudes towards male victims of IPV is serious since society reluctantly believes or does not believe men who describe these experiences, and often perceive them as weak. This is despite the enactment of laws that clearly set out ways of protecting victims of abuse, regardless of their gender.

The South African government is responsible for the management of crime through the development and implementation of relevant policies, strategies and programmes to carry out this responsibility. The post-apartheid South African government has established democratic values and a constitution that enshrines human rights, including the right to freedom and security of persons. These provisions were strengthened by the international human rights jurisprudence (Nel & Van Wyk, 2013).

Since the emergence of family violence, the South African government has established and implemented legislations appropriate to address violence. These legislations included the Prevention of Family Violence Act 133 of 1993, which was further developed and strengthened through the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998. Vetten (2005) argued that this Act was amended because the PFVA did not regard men's right to a fair hearing. The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC, 2018) has also highlighted that the first sexual offences court was introduced in South Africa in the year 1993 to specifically improve the adjudication of sexual offences. The supreme law of the land, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 affords victims of crime specific rights as enshrined in chapter two of the Act. Van Niekerk *et al.* (2015) assert that the legislative documentation acknowledged high levels of violence with the prioritisation of certain vulnerable groups which placed focus on children, women, the elderly, persons with disabilities and the rural population. The tragedy is that there is less recognition of male victims of violence.

Kimberg (2008) has noted that interventions for victims of intimate partner violence focus on the empowerment of the victim through the direct provision of shelters, restraining orders, police assistance, the arrest of perpetrators and counseling offering. As stipulated by the

Domestic Violence Act, Act No. (116 of 1998), victims of domestic violence may be assisted to locate shelters with the assistance of a police official after the occurrence of violence.

Male victims of domestic violence have been seriously neglected when implementing these various policies and as a result, abused men are not reporting their victimisation. The study of intimate partner violence against men is important to better understand the prevalence of IPV against men to create public awareness to prevent further abuse (Safariolyaei & Amiri, 2017). Objectives of this current study were to determine men's views about seeking help as victims of intimate partner violence and to help improve services for male victims of gender-based violence.

3. Research methodology

This study consisted of nine (09) heterosexual male participants who have been abused by former or current intimate partners. Their ages ranged between twenty-four (24) and fifty (50) years. Biographical information of participants is illustrated as follows:

NAME	AGE	OCCUPATION	HIGHEST QUALIFICATION	RELATIONSHIP STATUS
Participant 1	25	Student	Grade 12	Lifetime-partnership
Participant 2	42	Self-employed	Diploma	Married
Participant 3	50	Unemployed	No formal education	Divorced
Participant 4	33	Employed	Grade 12	Married
Participant 5	37	Employed	Diploma	Married
Participant 6	24	Unemployed	Degree	Lifetime-partnership
Participant 7	46	Unemployed	Grade 12	Divorced
Participant 8	38	Unemployed	Grade 12	Lifetime-partnership
Participant 9	40	Self-employed	Grade 10	Separated

Qualitative research approach and exploratory research design were chosen for the study. This design helped in establishing new concepts from the participants about the phenomenon (Royse, 2011; Bless *et al.*, 2013). Non-probability sampling of blended convenience sampling and snowball sampling was used. In convenience sampling, participants were chosen based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. Existing participants then made referrals to other male victims through snowball sampling method. Interviews were conducted in separate rooms and spaces at Ga-Masemola village, Sekhukhune district and took a duration of approximately forty-five minutes to an hour each. Semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was used as a method of data collection. The interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis with participants. Thematic analysis of qualitative data was used to analyse data. This type of analysis as Maguire and Delahunt (2017) put it, helped the researchers to identify themes that seek to describe how the participants were experiencing the phenomenon under study

4. Ethical considerations

It is considered ethical for the researcher to acquire permission to access research participants, especially for research that is conducted in South African areas that are governed by traditional rulers. This is done by approaching a gatekeeper to request for a letter of permission from a designated traditional leader (Singh & Wassenaar, 2016). Permission to conduct this study was granted by gatekeepers of the designated area of study. The authors also obtained ethical clearance certificate from the University of Limpopo Research Ethics Committee before conducting the study. The study consisted of nine consenting adults who gave

written consent to participate in the study. According to Munro (2011), favourable risk-benefit ratio implies that risks involved and benefits that might accrue in the research must be considered. Thus, participants were informed about risks and benefits involved in the study before signing consent forms.

5. Findings

THEME	SUBTHEME
5.1 Views about seeking professional help	Awareness of services
	Inaccessibility of services
	Fear of ridicule
	Helplessness
	Confidentiality
	Influence from media
5.2 Views about seeking help from informal networks	Prestige
	Religious norms
5.3 Suggestions to improve services	Recognition of vulnerability of men
	Confidentiality principle

5.1 Views about seeking professional help

This theme highlights men's views about seeking help from helping professionals through subthemes presented below:

Awareness of services

When participants were asked to give their views about help-seeking from professionals, one of them noted the following:

“What discourages me from seeking help is that services for male victims of violence may not even exist. I even wonder if men can be protected from female perpetrated violence. I am so convinced that services that are available are for women, children and other people who can be trusted when lodging complaints, not us men”.

It has been noted by Hines and Douglas (2009) that male victims of IPV have a challenge of locating resources available to them.

Inaccessibility of services

There is some level of reluctancy from professionals with regards to assisting male victims. A response from one of the participants who was asked how services affect their decision to disclose was as follows:

“Male victims of violence do not have the same access to services as compared to women. It is difficult for me as a man to approach helping professionals for help while I know that the possibility is that I may be turned away. The sad part is that helping professionals may even take a woman's side. How often does it happen that a woman gets arrested for fighting a man? It is very rare and discouraging. But should there be a case whereby she approaches them playing a victim, they will be running around looking for me. I may even get arrested for something I did not do”.

Some of the participants have highlighted that they fear possible rejection from helping professionals, and that this could limit their chances of accessing services. Simon and Wallace (2018) proved that help-seeking is affected by accessibility to professional services, possible rejection from service providers and professionals' reaction towards men who disclose their experiences.

Fear of ridicule from helping professionals

This study has revealed that men do not consider informing helping professionals about their victimisation. All the men in the current study reported that they do not disclose to helping professionals to avoid mockery. Some of these participants were quoted as saying:

"Though I consider trying to seek help from helping professionals, my biggest fear is that they may laugh at me".

This view indicates that some men are not comfortable sharing their problems with other men. A study by Huntley *et al.* (2019) argued that men prefer to disclose and discuss their victimisation with female professionals instead.

Helplessness

Responses from study participants indicated that some of the men feel that support service agents or helping professionals cannot help male victims of IPV. The following denotes what was said by some of the participants.

"I do not feel free to consult them about this kind of a problem. I see professionals as people who fight for women rights. There is no help I am going to get from them even if I try to speak out".

This assertion by the participant indicates that male victims may continue to suffer in isolation and deny themselves an opportunity to be assisted with their issues. Kgatle *et al.* (2021) also noted that victims may resort to suffering in silence and not seek help as they may be assumed to be aggressors instead of victims.

Confidentiality

Some of the participants have been found to have perceptions that differ from those of others. The issue of maintaining confidentiality among helping professionals was mentioned by several participants in the study. Some of the participants said:

"I have no problem in seeking help. What pains me is if I seek help and later my problem is known in the community. I plead for assurance that my issues will be kept a secret before I go out to seek help".

This resonates with what Kgatle *et al.* (2021) found that male victims have a general reservation of talking about their abuse experiences for fear of having their issues known and being stigmatised.

Media influence

Some of the participants of this study have shown that media influence their decisions to seek professional help.

Another participant said:

"I have seen on television how they always make us look horrible by punching women. Most stories view men using physical strength to abuse their weak and helpless women. If you check even TV adverts that warn against violence.... It is always about the woman as a victim of domestic violence. I have never seen an organisation supporting male victims advertised on TV, ... why is that? I honestly cannot expect the helping organisations to believe me".

A study by O'Connor (2020) found that the media portrays violence as something that is inflicted by males over women. In most cases, women are viewed as victims of men abuse.

5.2 Views about seeking help from informal networks

Prestige

During the interview, participants were asked: other than seeking help from helping professionals, please share your views about seeking help from friends, family members, relatives, elders from the in-laws and colleagues. One of the participants said:

“There is no one I trust with problems I have with my partner; it can do more harm than good. Her family could get furious and make me look less of a man. A man who could not provide but only make their daughter look bad. As for my family members, I can lose respect and I do not want to disappoint my father”.

Religious norms

Results of a study conducted by Thobejane and Luthada (2019) show that when men are battered by women, they follow advice from religious leaders, which encourages them to focus on God’s intervention rather than disclosing to the general public. One of the participants said the following with regard to perceptions about seeking help from informal networks.

“I am a Christian and I obey to religious norms. As a true believer I believe God hears and answers our prayers. I view marriage as a sacred union.....religious teachings always teach us to give God any kind of problems and challenges we encounter in our lives. I cannot go around the community and preach about my problems whereas my God is always there, that will just look like I have little faith in Him”.

5.3 Suggestions to improve gender-based violence services

This theme involves ways suggested to improve existing gender-based violence services by participants of the study, with the following concepts as salient subthemes.

Recognition of vulnerability of men

When participants were asked to give opinions on how services for victims of gender-based violence could be improved to promote disclosure among male victims, some said:

“Professionals from organisations that offer help to victims of violence should know that men can also be victims of violence. How can we disclose when they are against us? They should also believe us when we bring our problems to their attention”.

And another said:

“The South African government has made a mark in the fight against violence perpetrated towards women, why not try to balance between the genders as the South African government policies strives for gender equality. The gender equity paradigm must be enforced; we want to see it so that us men can feel protected too”.

These views correspond with findings by Tsui (2014), who noted that services can be improved through increased awareness of IPV against men and through advocacy tailored at gender inclusive practice. Laws and policies must be reviewed, and there should be increased availability of resources. McCarrick *et al.* (2016) further add that the development of more services that are accessible to men to increase support and tailored to respond to their needs is important.

Application of confidentiality principle by professionals

This subtheme talks about confidentiality among helping professionals. Suggestions to improve services were as follows:

“What I plead for, is that professionals should keep our issues a secret, I do not really trust them with my problems ... especially this one, unless if consulting from an office that is far from home could help”.

“I think it will be better if I disclose to people who do not know me so that they will not find any reason to discuss my problems with other people.....people who help us should not know us personally”.

In line with this content, Tsui (2014) posits that there should be clear emphasis on anonymity in service provision.

6. Discussion

Responses from this study indicated that men are reluctant to seek professional help since they are not aware of support services that are available and accessible. Similar studies have revealed that male victims are not aware of services that support them when they need such support or do not know where to look for support. Some of these victims assume that services are tailored to meet the needs of female victims instead (Tsui *et al.*, 2010; Adebayo, 2014; Tsui, 2014; O'Connor, 2020; Roebuck *et al.*, 2020). Roebuck *et al.* (2020) proved that most services for victims of IPV are accessed by women, and that there are not enough resources that are geared to respond to the needs of male victims. A study by Lysova and Dim (2020) has found that lack of supportive services for male victims of IPV from formal support system could have an effect on help-seeking behaviour of abused men. When men could not access resources, it becomes an overwhelming situation to them as it increases psychological distress (Campbell-Hawkins, 2019) which has potential to affect their overall social functioning.

Participants have reported being reluctant to seek professional help on the belief that they may not be believed and will be assumed to be perpetrators rather than victims. According to Roebuck *et al.* (2020), abused men are discriminated against or met with resistance when they require services; they are not believed (Bates, 2019; O'Connor, 2020) and mostly assumed to be aggressors (Park *et al.*, 2020; Dim & Lysova, 2021). In consensus, Lysova *et al.* (2020a) has found that most men avoid seeking help since they personally fear being arrested, and consequently falsely prosecuted. This fear has been rooted in the belief that professionals offering services to victims of partner violence are biased about the likelihood of men being victims in a heterosexual intimate relationship. Gender expectations are identified as barriers to recognition and acceptance of male victimisation (Wallace *et al.*, 2019).

Most of the participants have indicated, through their responses, that they do not disclose their victimisation to helping professionals in order to avoid mockery. Numerous studies (Adebayo, 2014; Tsui, 2014; Thobejane *et al.*, 2018; Thobejane & Luthada, 2019; Deshpande, 2019) revealed that men do not want to be ridiculed and therefore conceal violence that they experience in order to protect their ego. Lysova *et al.* (2020b) and Scotts-Bahle (2020) allude that abused men's adherence to hegemonic masculine stereotypes and embarrassment associated with being abused by a woman can hamper help-seeking behaviour of male victims.

Apart from fear of being ridiculed, other participants reported to have felt helpless in their situations. A study by Hines *et al.*, (2007) revealed that one of the male victims of partner violence felt helpless when he tried to access temporary shelter or resources for victims of domestic violence. The help that he got was a referral to a programme for batterers. Furthermore, participants reported that they do not believe that professionals can help them. It is therefore pointless for them to seek help (Lysova *et al.*, 2020a), especially when the violence

happened between them and a female perpetrator. Some participants' responses indicated that they cannot seek help because they are concerned about confidentiality amongst helping professionals. They doubt professionals' ability to keep their information safe.

This study further revealed that men do not prefer support services from service providers, public servants, and law enforcement agencies due to media influence on disclosure. Bates (2019) found that the media plays a role in constructing violence as a men thing; most stories that are in the media view men as abusive. Television shows that focus on issues of domestic violence are likely to view men as aggressors. This in turn affects disclosure of female perpetrated violence against men.

Responses from participants indicated that they do not consider asking for help from informal networks such as friends, family members, neighbours, and in-laws. Men fear that they may experience negative feedback from friends and families (Huntley *et al.* 2019). Thobejane and Luthada (2019) further allude that relatives and friends who possibly expect the couple to work out their problems or to make the relationship work are part of the reason that promote reluctance by men to seek informal help. Additionally, a study by Lysova *et al.* (2020a) indicates that men in other instances may not seek help because of their own personal wish to fix their relationships.

Religion-based norms seem to have an influence on men's silence when they are abused by their intimate partners. Victims of IPV may feel pressure from religious organisations to maintain their family relationships no matter the circumstances of those relationships. Religion-based prohibitions may discourage those who believe and conform to religious norms to speak about their experiences (Murray & Graves, 2013). Dim and Lysova (2021) avow that male victims may avoid sharing their experiences with others hoping that they will find personal ways to address their victimisation without attracting public attention.

Most of the participants from this current study indicated that it must be acknowledged that men are also victims of violence perpetrated by women. This is to say that men are unable to disclose the problems because professionals and the general public do not see them as vulnerable to violence. Park *et al.* (2020) extrapolated that there is a need to make the public aware that men are also victims of IPV.

In Njuguna (2014), research participants believed that the government turns a blind eye when it comes to male victims of violence as it does not recognise their victimisation. Similarly, Park *et al.* (2020) posit that several societies tend to associate the term of partner violence with women as victims, which then influences the side-lining of male victims. Legislative frameworks and policy adjustments that promote gender equality for both male and female victims of violence are, among others, suggested ways of improving services for male victims.

This study has also revealed that men do not consider seeking help with a view that confidentiality may be lacking from helping professionals. Most participants have showed to lack trust from helping professionals regarding anonymity of their shared problems. Huntley *et al.* (2019) noted that it is important that service provision ensures confidentiality and trust for male victims of violence.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

Inaccessibility of services, shortage of resources, fear of being rejected, disbelieved, and accused by helping professionals and law enforcements added to reasons that discourage men from seeking professional help. Male victims seem not interested in seeking help from informal networks as well (i.e. friends, family members, colleagues and the in laws). The study managed to procure participants' suggestions on how services can be improved to promote disclosure among male victims.

To promote accessibility of services, it is essential that people are well informed about services and resources available. They should be equipped with information on how to access them and about who can benefit, so that everyone, including male victims of domestic violence, can easily access them. To improve the quality of services offered by public servants, men should be included as part of vulnerable groups in policies and aspects of service delivery for gender-based violence. All relevant stakeholders and helping professionals offering support to victims of violence should strive to implement policies on gender neutrality.

There should also be specialised services that are tailored to support the needs of males when it comes to issues of domestic violence. Continuous workshops to help public servants and general helping professionals should be conducted to help improve current services offered to victims of violence.

Confidentiality of helping professionals was, amongst others, the main concern to male victims; therefore, it is recommended that all professional bodies involved in addressing violence problems ensure that helping professionals prioritise the implementation of the confidentiality principle, value of acceptance and non-judgemental attitude. This study revealed that most men are not aware of services intended for victims of violence. To address this problem, services for victims of violence need to be advertised to the general public using relevant marketing strategies. More research on experiences, needs and effective intervention processes of male victims of partner violence should be conducted to add more literature and knowledge about abuse of men.

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