

# Influence of emotional dependency on spousal homicide among couples in Ndhiwa Sub-County, Homabay County, Kenya.

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**Abstract:** The prevalence of spousal homicides arising from domestic violence is a devastating public health problem affecting today's families. With an alarming trend of spousal homicides being experienced in Ndhiwa Sub-County in Homa Bay County today, little seems to have been done to bring to light the core factors associated with this problem. The objective of the study was to determine the extent to which emotional dependency predisposes couples to spousal homicide in Ndhiwa Sub-County. Quantitative method and phenomenological research design were applied. Target population encompassed 17,151 married men and 19,205 women, 29 local administrators and 10 religious leaders from the main denominations in the Sub-County. Slovin's formula was used to obtain a sample of 396 respondents. Stratified random sampling was applied to select 174 male and 198 female spouses, while simple random was utilized to proportionately select 18 local administrators, and 6 religious leaders from the Sub-County's six administrative zones. Quantitative data was obtained from married men and women through Partner's Emotional Dependency Scale (SED). Interview guides were used to obtain qualitative data from local administrators and religious leaders. Piloting was carried out in Nyakach Koguta location in the neighboring Kisumu County, involving 40 participants, comprising of 12 men, 22 women, 5 community leaders and 1 religious leader. Analysis for quantitative data was done in descriptive statistics and reported in tables and figures. Hypotheses testing was performed in inferential statistics through simple regression coefficient, using t-test on SPSS version 26. Qualitative data was analyzed in thematic analysis and presented in narrative forms. From the results, a statistically significant relationship was established between emotional dependency and spousal homicide. The study recommended that government agencies needed to develop policies and frameworks aimed at improving mental health of families. There was need for regular workshops and seminars aimed at supporting couples deal with fears related to their dependency and strengthen their sense of identity. Further investigations may be done using different instruments. Further investigation may be required with additional information being obtained from other close family members as key informants.

**Keywords:** Emotional Dependency, Fear of Rejection, Need for Assurance, Spousal Homicide, Intimate Partner Violence

## I. INTRODUCTION

Spousal homicide entails the killing of a wife, husband or an intimate partner, being attributable to various risk factors. These may include witnessing or experiencing past cases of violence in one's family, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual

jealousy, and stalking one's spouse. Others include problems like personality disorders and separation or threats of separation among others (Memiah, Ah-Mu, Prevot, Cook, Mwangi, Owuor & Biadgilign, 2018).

Though not a new phenomenon, the increased coverage by mass media and social media platforms has brought to the fore the rapid intensification of this social issue. As a phenomenon, intimate partner violence that often escalates to spousal homicides is deeply rooted in Psychology and psychological studies. Many factors, most being psychological in nature, can be floated as responsible for or predisposing individuals to the occurrence of intimate partner violence (IPV) and spousal homicide (Rakovec-Felser, 2014).

Among the factors associated with IPV and the resultant killings include depression, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and emotional dependency. Others may include marital infidelity, mental health issues, including distressing obsessions (Witte & Mulla, 2012). Emotional dependency, on the other hand entails a psychological state in which individuals may have intense emotions like grief, sorrow, anxiety, heartbreak and depressive thoughts.

In relationships, such individuals are emotionally dependent upon their partners' attention and approval in order to please them or have them define their worth (Raypole, 2020). Emotional dependency can result in constant abuse and eventual death. This is because a partner who is being victimized may feel emotionally dependent and fail to seek help or terminate an abusive relationship. Caman, Kristiansson, Granath and Sturup (2017), in a comparative study on the rates and trends of spousal and non-spousal homicides over time explain that the ever-increasing frequency of spousal homicides are informed by a number of factors. These may include the prevalence of domestic violence, more so among people in intimate relationships (Benebo, Schumann, & Vaezghasemi, 2018).

According to Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST), upon which the study was founded, negative emotions and resentment among other factors may result in defiant behaviours (Agnew, 2006). Such negative emotions or behaviours may escalate to aggression, space violation, emotional and physical abuse including domestic violence and the potential spousal deaths (Benebo, Schumann, &

Vaezghasemi, 2018). Statistics indicate that homicide rates have increased substantially for the first time in a decade. Nearly 385,000 people were killed by their intimate partners worldwide in 2016 (McEvoy & Hideg, 2017).

In Uganda, Gardsbane (2016) established that despite domestic violence being a common phenomenon, women often shied away from reporting the perpetrators due to fear of their own or children's survival. This implied that women went through a state of emotional dependency and feared for their own as well as children's welfare, resorting to remain in abusive relationships, where homicide was likely to occur due to unabated. In Kenya, Brooks, Jolly, Marsh, Velazquez, Padilla and Jaoko (2019) established that unemployed women had greater likelihood of being physically abused by their husbands compared to those who were employed. All women in the study reported to have been subjected to a form of abuse by their husbands, spanning from physical violence, sexual violence and controlling behaviour.

In yet another study conducted by National Crime Research Centre - NCRC (2019), Kenya has seen a sharp rise of spousal homicide cases in recent times. The study reported that in just the first half of 2019, 40 women and 5 men had been killed by their spouses or intimate partners. The study sought to determine the extent to which emotional dependency predisposes couples to spousal homicide in Ndhwa Sub-County.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional dependency (ED) is described as a complex mental condition that causes an individual to feel that they need certain bonds that if broken they would be in a great danger and would not be able to survive. Such individuals believe that they need to be reliant upon someone else to feel complete or happy (Paul, 2020). Being controlled by the need for dependency upon one's partner may lead to feelings of loneliness, fear of loss, or abandonment, which may end up corrupting the relationship to a level of being pathological in psychological perspective (Pietrangelo, 2019). While being emotionally dependent upon one's partner is normal and hardly dysfunctional, excessive levels can be unhealthy for either of the partners and their relationship.

Individuals who are overwhelmed by this state of mind have a problem with validating themselves, thus feeling that they need the assurance and approval of their partners (Pietrangelo, 2019). Some of the characteristics of ED include feelings as if one cannot survive without the emotional support of his or her partner. Others include feelings of meaninglessness without one's spouse or intimate partner, feelings of emptiness, fear of rejection, being constantly in need of reassurance, anxiety, loneliness and emptiness when spending time alone, possessiveness, excessive feelings of jealousy and being unable to put trust in what their partners feel about them (Raypole, 2020).

Research indicates that persons with dependent characteristics are likely to become both mentally and

physically abusive to their partners as well as become victims of abuse (Leemans & Loas, 2016). Some studies have also established correlation of intimate partner violence and emotional dependence with some severe cases leading to death (Ponce-Díaz, Aiquipa & Arboccó, 2019). According to Estévez (2017) emotional dependency in men and economic dependency in women contribute towards risks of partner abuse. The study established that based on the level of dependency the victimized partner may be unwilling to terminate the relationship, citing reasons such as financial dependency or being still in love with their abusers. The outcome of remaining in such abusive relationships is high likelihood of life-threatening injuries or death of the victimized partner.

Studies in Europe indicate that emotional dependency can contribute to IPH. According to Liem (2010), in the Netherlands, it was established that among the most outstanding characteristics in perpetrators of spousal homicide followed by suicide was overdependence on the female spouse victim. This is consistent with APA (2020) that excessive dependency upon others and the related clinging and submissive tendency are more common in female than male partners, and that dependence on the male spouse's economic support causes the victimized female partners to remain in abusive relationships. However, the study by Liem (2010) focused on homicide followed by suicide and only targeted female partners. The current study aimed at addressing this gap by establishing the relationship between emotional dependency and spousal homicide in couples.

Studies in the African continent, just as in other countries and societies indicate that intimate partner violence and resultant deaths with dependence upon either of the partners playing a central role. According to UNODC (2018), Africa was tied with Asia in total cases of spousal homicide. While the study found that female spouses suffered the greater brunt of intimate partner violence, it also revealed that spousal homicide arising from partner violence did not just occur spontaneously but rather as a result of elongated period of abuse and victimization, with fear of abandonment and jealousy being the topmost motives.

McCloskey, et al. (2016) observed that gender role beliefs in African traditions such as dependence upon one's partner were the greatest catalysts of intimate partner violence. The study however concentrated on risk factors for IPV and fell short of revealing the direct relationship between emotional dependency and spousal homicide among couples. Similarly, in Ghana Adjei (2015) observed that dependency of female partners on their husbands is prevalent among the Ghanaian communities.

Adjei (2015) argued that while partner dependency has been categorized as a psychopathology mirroring dependence personality disorder, in Ghanaian context, women's dependency upon their husbands and the clinging tendency are more of traditional and sociocultural ethos. This view is consistent with Adinkrah (2012), in a study that

assessed male suicide tendencies in Ghana, which found that the society measures masculinity success in terms of the man's ability to satisfy the emotional and economic needs of his wife and family. This therefore implies that the form of dependency that women have in their husband may not be construed as a psychological problem or an irrational behaviour but an adaptive behaviour embedded in the community.

In South Africa, research indicates that a woman dies in the hands of an intimate partner every six hours (Chitale, 2021). According to Jewkes and Morrell (2010), some of the contributing factors of violence against women include economic asymmetries inequity and the related dependency on male partners for survival. In Tanzania, Halim, Steven, Reich, and Messersmith (2018) in a survey of 450 couples found that there was discordant reporting of IPV between male and female spouses.

The study established that some of the factors contributing to discordant reporting, where men would report perpetration to violence while women would report victimization and vice versa were that women feared their husbands would abandon or divorce them, they would be ashamed, or end up losing children's custody. While the study supported the notion that emotional dependency as reflected in fear of abandonment, divorce, shame and loss of children's custody, the focus was only on women and the impact of this variable on male spouses required further exploration.

In Kenya, Mahmud, Riley and Orkin (2018) in a study targeting married women in the counties of Siaya and Homa Bay, found that 61% of women in the control group had severally suffered physical violence in the hands of their partner. The study found that women condoned violence economic and psychological constraints, such as the fear of losing a household's economic status or being divorced. The findings lend credence to United Nations (2015) study that found nearly half of both men and women between the ages of 15 to 50 concurred that it was justifiable for a man to beat his wife. The researchers attributed the high rates of IPV to the unfavorable beliefs and attitudes that portrayed violence and victimization as acceptable. However, Mahmud et al. (2018) only sampled women in 415 villages in Homa Bay and Siaya counties and further investigation is necessary to measure the influence of emotional dependency on predisposing both male and female partners to spousal homicide.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was based on the General Strain Theory (GST). Being that the study hereafter was expected to delve into the psychological aspects that predispose individuals to domestic violence, and subsequently to spousal homicide, it was necessary to consult the General Strain Theory of crime and delinquency.

As a theory of criminology, GST is founded upon proposals made by Agnew (2006) and is the latest and the most comprehensive version of strain theory. Agnew (2015) developed the theory in response to the criticisms leveled

against Merton's classic strain theory which would later be revised by Cohen (1955) and later by Cloward and Ohlin (1960).

Agnew (2006) advances the explanation that previous theories of crime, including Merton's, had failed to make any full or unique contribution to the explanation of crime. To the scholar, the general strain theory provides a broad definition of strain as it explicitly emphasizes the mediating role that negative emotions play in crime and deviance. The theory also identifies a range of strains that may influence criminal coping, many of which had been absent from previous classic theories.

Goal blockage, the first strain identified by Agnew's theory, is a result of the failure of an individual to achieve not only the expected outcomes, but also fair and just outcomes. The theory basically posits that individuals are likely to experience great strain in instances where they are unable to achieve their goals, and to meet their expectations. From the failures to achieve expected outcomes arises the experience of disappointment and dissatisfaction.

By comparison, the failure to achieve just and fair outcomes leads to the presentation of noxious (or negatively valued) stimuli. From the latter stimuli arises in individuals the experience and exposure to negative treatment by others, including harassment and bullying from peers, negative relations with parents and teachers, or criminal victimization. Some other examples of negative stimuli may include both physical and sexual abuse, and even domestic violence.

The third major type of stimuli incorporates the loss of stimuli that is positively valued. Essentially, this strain involves the loss of things that an individual values, and may include undesirable events that range from the theft of valuables, the termination of a romantic relationship, and even the withdrawal of parental love (Agnew, 2015).

GST offers a unique point of view on crime and delinquency by focusing on the negative treatment of an individual by other people. As a theory, the GST is therefore the only one that explicitly illuminates the role that negative emotions play in predisposing individuals to crime and deviance (which may even include domestic violence and spousal homicide).

From the perspective of the general strain theory, the experience in individuals - of strain or stress increases the predisposition to negative emotions and reactions that may include anger, frustrations and despair. In some cases, such experiences may even lead to depression. These tend to create the pressure for individuals to pursue corrective action that may include (but not necessarily be limited to) crime and delinquency - among which could be domestic violence and spousal homicide.

### IV. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study used quantitative method and phenomenological research design. The target population was 17,151 married men and 19,205 women, 29 local

administrators and 10 religious leaders from the main denominations in the Sub-County. Slovin’s formula was used to obtain a sample of 396 respondents.

Stratified random sampling was applied to select 174 male and 198 female spouses. Simple random was used to proportionately select 18 local administrators, and 6 religious leaders from the six administrative zones in the sub-county. Partner’s Emotional Dependency Scale (SED) by Camarilloto et al. (2020) was used to collect quantitative data on ED from married men and women. An interview guide was used to obtain qualitative data from local administrators and religious leaders.

Analysis for quantitative data was done in descriptive statistics and reported in tables and figures. Hypotheses testing was performed in inferential statistics through simple regression coefficient, using t-test on SPSS version 26. Qualitative data was analyzed in thematic analysis and presented in a narrative form.

V. RESULTS

The questionnaires were distributed to 372 male and female spouses. Following the data collection phase, 348 questionnaires were found to have met the criteria for inclusion in data analysis. This indicates that the return rate of all male and female spouses who had received the questionnaires was 94%.

Regarding the interview schedules, the researcher administered questions to all the 24 respondents, whose records were successfully retrieved and included in the analysis, translating to 100 percent response rate. This indicates that the instruments generated a high and acceptable response rate, implying that the results were representative and would be generalizable to the population.

According to Fincham (2008), researchers should strive to achieve a rate of 80 percent or higher for the results to be representative to the population. Having a high response rate acts as a measure of quality of the results while low response rates can lead to error and bias in the results (Saldivar, 2012).

The results indicated that out of the couples taking part in the study, 47.1% were male while 52.9% were female. From the results, it is observed that women were slightly more than men. While these figures point to unequal distribution of population between male and female spouses, the gender disparity may be explained by the fact that the study was

conducted in an area with many polygamous marriages. The disparity was however relatively small and may not have had any significant effects on the results. The findings were also consistent with statistics on gender distribution as per the Kenyan general population (KNBS, 2020).

Most (45.4%) of couples were in the age category of 26 to 30 years, followed by 30.5% of those aged between 31 and 35 years. This was followed by 6.6% of those in the age category of 41 to 50 years and 36 to 40, and 6.3% of those who were between 22-25, and lastly 4.6% of those aged above 50 years. The results indicate that generally, majority of the couples in the study were of mature age and would be well versed with the topic of the study. The information also indicates that out of the couples sampled, most (48.3%) had attained post-secondary school education, implying that they would be knowledgeable and resourceful in responding to the questions of the study.

Most (43.7%) of the couples sampled had been married for at least 1 to 5 years. This was followed by 26% of those who had been married for 6 to 10 years, 18.1% of those with 11 to 20 years, and lastly 11.5% of those with more than 20 years in marriage. The results demonstrate that majority of the participants had stayed in marriage for a period of 1 and 10 years. This is a duration that research has found to be the hardest and most defining in marriage (Dew, 2020).

Description of Emotional Dependency and Spousal Homicide

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Couples Emotional Dependency

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotional Dependency	348	25.00	87.00	50.90	8.10
Valid N (listwise)	348				

Note. N = 348.

Table 1 demonstrates that the total scores for couples’ emotional dependency had a minimum value of 25 and a maximum of 87. It is further observed that the results had a mean score of 50.9 (*SD*=8.10). The results were further analyzed in order to categorize the participants into different levels, putting into consideration those who reported high and low emotional dependency levels. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Couples Emotional Dependency Levels and Spousal Homicide

		Predisposition to Spousal Homicide		Total	
		Low	High		
Emotional Dependency Levels	Low	Count	107	57	164
		% within Emotional Dependency Levels	65.2%	34.8%	100.0%
	High	Count	117	67	184
		% within Emotional Dependency Levels	63.6%	36.4%	100.0%
Total		Count	224	124	348
		% within Emotional Dependency Levels	64.4%	35.6%	100.0%

Note. N = 348.

Table 2 indicates that 107(65.2%) of the participants within low levels of emotional dependency had low risk of predisposition to spousal homicide, while 57(34.8%) had high risk of predisposition to spousal homicide. Conversely, 117(63.6%) of the participants with high levels of emotional dependency had low risk of predisposition to spousal homicide while 67(36.4%) of them had high risk of predisposition to spousal homicide. Collectively, the results indicate that majority of the participants had high levels of partners' emotional dependency.

The results further indicate that majority of couples had low probability of predisposition to spousal homicide. This implies that despite intensive cases of emotional dependency

among the partner, such intensity had minimal effect of predisposing couples to spousal homicide. This situation supports that of Adinkrah (2012) in Ghana, that partner dependency among many African couples is not entirely a psychological problem but also an adaptive cultural behaviour.

*Hypothesis Testing*

The data on couples' emotional dependency was analyzed further in linear regression coefficients to determine whether there was significant relationship between emotional dependency and spousal homicide. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Regression Coefficient for Emotional Dependency and Spousal Homicide

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
1	(Constant)	57.86	2.70		21.37	.00	52.54	63.19
	Emotional Dependency	-.16	.053		-2.964	.003	-.26	-.05

Note. N = 348 a. Dependent Variable: Spousal Homicide

Table 3 shows that a minimal increase in emotional dependency among the participants led to an increase of -.16 on possibility of predisposition to spousal homicide with all factors held constant. The results indicate that couples' emotional dependency scores had a *p*-value of (*p*=.003), which was less than the significant level (*p*=.05).

The results imply that there was a statistically significant relationship between couples' emotional dependency and predisposition to spousal homicide. In this regard, the null hypothesis advanced that there is no statistically significant relationship between emotional dependency and spousal homicide among married couples in Ndhiwa sub-county, Homa Bay County, Kenya is rejected.

The results therefore imply that there was sufficient evidence that emotional dependency among the couples in the study area was associated with the risk of being predisposed to spousal homicide. The results support those of Leemans (2016) in Belgium that individuals with characteristics of emotional dependency are likely to emotionally or physically abuse their partners.

More information was obtained from religious and local leaders in order to gain understanding of the relationship between emotional dependency and spousal homicide among the couples, based on the informants' first-hand experiences. The raw data from interview responses was organized into patterns and phrases expressing specific thoughts regarding the relationship between the two variables.

Emotional dependency in this study is outlined as a mental health disorder causing individuals to have deep feelings of dependency on their spouses. They imagine that they cannot survive without the persons they depend on (Paul, 2020). Such dependent tendencies are likely to result in

loneliness and fear of abandonment since the affected individuals feel that they cannot be complete without the person they depend on (Pietrangelo, 2019). Spouses who feel overwhelmed by emotional dependency can become victims of abuse or end up physically or emotionally abusing their partners (Leemans & Loas, 2016).

*Qualitative Findings*

Some of the common themes that emerged from interview responses included fear of rejection, control mechanisms, violence, anger management problems, and abuse. From the obtained information, one of the interviewees, RELOL13 reasoned:

*“There is no doubt that persons who are controlled by some of the characteristics of emotional dependency like irrational behaviours will always have distorted thoughts that are likely to maintain unreasonable arguments, violence and resultant abuse. I have witnessed couples whose constant fights often escalate from very outrageous and unsubstantiated claims”*

These views indicate that characteristics of emotional dependency such as fear of rejection are likely to foment strife in situations where an individual continues to cling to an already abusive relationship in an attempt to gain reassurance, love and safety from their partners. The findings lend credence to a study by to Estévez (2017) as discussed in the literature that victims of intimate partner violence are likely to stick to their abusers in search of love, reassurance and financial or emotional security.

Further responses from the interviewees indicated that emotional dependency could stir up fear of rejection and related negative emotions in an individual, which may result in

problems with anger management. In support of this view, one of the respondents, RELOL14 indicated:

*“Fear of rejection and other negative emotions can lead to irrational behaviours and problem with anger management. Individuals with such problems often apply control mechanisms as a way of trying to keep the relationship at all costs. Such tendencies can result in physical and emotional abuse and the aggressor may become violent if the irrational demands are not obliged to.”*

This implies that emotional dependency can lead to abuse and intimate partner violence and possible predisposition to spousal killings. The finding is consistent with that of Ponce-Díaz et al. (2019) that there is evidence or association between emotional dependency and intimate partner violence with some situations leading to death of one spouse or both.

## VI. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The descriptive statistics indicated that most of the participants had high levels of emotional dependency. The results however showed that most of the participants were within low risk of being predisposed to spousal homicide. This implied that although there was high intensity of emotional dependency among the couples, the psychological factors arising from this risk factor did not have strong effects to predispose most of the married couples to spousal homicide.

The results of the present study conform to those of Adinkrah (2012), in a Ghanaian based study that ED in African families was not entirely a mental health disorder but also an adaptive cultural behaviour. This implies that some of the characteristics of emotional dependency in African cultural context are as a result of human behaviours and not necessarily as states of mind.

The inferential statistics however indicated that there was a statistically significant relationship between ED and spousal homicide. The results implied that an increase in factors of emotional dependency among the couples resulted in increased risk factor of spousal homicide. The results are consistent with those of Leemans and Loas (2016) in Belgium that spouses with ED are likely to emotionally abuse their partners or equally become victims of abuse. The results imply that individuals with feelings of emptiness, heartbreak, need for reassurance, low confidence, low self-esteem and lack of self-worth associated with ED are likely to be irritable and resort to violent behaviours or want to cling to abusive relationships.

The findings of the present study agree with those of Mahmud et al. (2018) in Kisumu, Kenya that most women condoned being physically abused by their husbands for fear of losing economic support. The qualitative findings also indicated that factors of emotional dependency were common in many families in the area of the study. The results implied that factors of ED like fear of rejection and need for reassurance may result in strife particularly in situations where a husband or wife clings to an abusive marriage as a way of seeking love, emotional safety and reassurance. These findings are consistent with those of Estévez (2017) that individuals with ED are likely

to cling to abusive relationships in pursuit of reassurance and emotional security.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that there were high levels of emotional dependency among majority of the couples, even though the risk factor of predisposition to spousal homicide was relatively low. From the study's qualitative findings, it was concluded that fear of rejection, fear of losing relationships, need for reassurance and fear of loss of economic and emotional security were some of the common characteristics of ED among the couples.

From the inferential statistics, the study concluded that there was statistically significant relationship between emotional dependency and spousal homicide. It was therefore concluded that increased factors of ED among the couples significantly influenced the possibility of predisposition of such couples to spousal homicide.

The study established that a statistically significant relationship existed between emotional dependency and spousal homicide among the couples. These findings relate to the General Strain Theory, which recognizes that negative emotions play a substantial role in influencing individuals to commit crime.

Domestic violence and potential death of one or even both spouses may be influenced by negative thoughts, from which psychological factors like emotional dependency among others are derived. The theory further explains that negative experiences of stress or strain in an individual may intensify the susceptibility to negative emotions, such as anger, hate, sadness, ensuing to possibility of domestic violence and spousal homicide.

Given that couples are likely to cling to abusive relationship for fear of losing identity, emotional and economic security, there is need for government authorities to devise policies aimed at socio-economic development of the local communities.

There is need for local administration in conjunction with mental health professionals to organize regular workshops and seminars aimed at supporting couples deal with fears related to their dependency and strengthen their sense of identity. Further investigations may be conducted in other sub-counties apart from Ndiwa in order to determine whether similar results would be achieved.

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