

# “The Gender Dimension of Abusive Marriage Relationships in the Modern Zimbabwe” Insights from Harare

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## ABSTRACT

Domestic violence cases are seemingly on the rise in the Zimbabwean context, the most enduring and victimised group are the women. The patriarchal hegemony is still dictating the politics of domestic affairs of the modern day, and women as the main victims of most domestic violence cases tend to stay in the relation regardless of enormous abusive challenges. It is from this background that this research was conducted to examine contributing factors that forces women to stay in abusive relationships. The qualitative methodology was chosen as the most appropriate methodology to test the research question of this topic. The population for research was based on women in Harare, and the sample was drawn from voluntary women in a local Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) that specialises in domestic violence related issues known as the Anti-Domestic Violence Council (ADVC) (n=10). The interview guide was chosen as the most appropriate tool for exploration of data from the participants, and data was analysed and presented based Anti-Domestic Violence Council (ADVC) using thematic analysis. It come out that cases of domestic violence are prevalent in many marriage relationships in the modern Zimbabwe. Factors such as culture, fear and lack of knowledge amongst many contribute to women’s endurance to abusive relationships.

**Key words:** Gender dimension, abusive marriage relationships, modern Zimbabwe

## INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is a global challenge that countries are increasingly trying to address among their citizens. While both men and women can be victims, women are the most frequently reported sufferers of domestic violence. In Zimbabwe, domestic violence is a significant issue, necessitating continuous contextual research. Traditionally, women's rights have been a low priority in Africa, with deep-rooted customs and cultural practices often compromising their fundamental rights (Chireshe, 2015). The study of domestic violence is relatively new among social scientists but has become a popular research topic in academic settings. Only in the past four decades have scholars recognized domestic violence as a social problem (Smith, 2016). Initially, research focused on child abuse, but later shifted to wife abuse, treating it interchangeably with domestic violence (Smith, 2016). Unemployment, poverty, and a lack of supportive family backgrounds further exacerbate the situation for women in abusive relationships. Economic dependence on abusive partners due to unemployment and poverty makes it difficult for women to leave. Additionally, the absence of supportive family networks isolates victims, depriving them of necessary support to escape abusive environments.

Domestic violence is a pervasive social phenomenon increasingly recognized as a legal, social, and health problem in the modern era (Doe, 2020). It manifests through various symptoms of abuse in women, ranging from physical signs like busted lips and bruises to emotional issues such as depression and anxiety (Smith, 2018). Despite these clear indicators, many people tend to overlook them as subtle and irrelevant. Women often endure abusive relationships due to their psychological realities, feeling trapped by their circumstances (Johnson, 2019). Financial constraints further limit their ability to escape, as economic support is crucial for leaving abusive environments safely (Lee, 2017).

Historically, law enforcement has treated domestic violence as a private family matter, avoiding intervention to respect family privacy (Brown, 2016). This approach has been reinforced by patriarchal principles that emphasize women's submissiveness and normalize violence against them. Feminist perspectives argue that domestic violence is a product of patriarchal values that both covertly and overtly support such behaviours (Miller, 2015). According to this view, domestic abuse is a tool used by men to control their female counterparts. Addressing domestic violence requires a multifaceted approach that considers these underlying social and economic factors.

Zimbabwean society is grappling with domestic violence and abuse, exacerbated by severe economic challenges. The unemployment rate has soared to nearly 90%, driven by frequent droughts and a deteriorating economic landscape, forcing many citizens into poverty and informal livelihoods (Chiremba, 2020). This economic turmoil has particularly affected women and children, making them more vulnerable to abuse. Women, often dependent on men's support, find themselves enduring various forms of abuse due to these harsh circumstances (Nyathi, 2021). Despite the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act, domestic violence cases continue to rise, with significant increases reported between 2022 and 2023 (Dembeza, 2023).

A joint study revealed that 69% of surveyed women experienced intimate partner violence, while 41% of men admitted to inflicting abuse (Ministry of Women Affairs, 2022). Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a critical barrier to development in Southern Africa, with 42% of women experiencing physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes (Smith, 2019). Globally, about 1 in 3 women have faced violence, primarily from intimate partners, affecting their physical, mental, and reproductive health (WHO, 2020). The research focuses on the psychological impact of GBV on women within marriages and the factors forcing them to stay in abusive relationships. Weak institutional support, unemployment, poverty, and lack of supportive family background exacerbate the situation. Economic dependence and isolation prevent women from escaping abusive environments. Addressing these issues requires robust interventions to provide escape options for women trapped in abusive relationships.

## **Aim**

The study aims to bring about public attention towards women related problems, specifically problems of gender-based violence. The assumption behind that is to make vital stakeholders act on women related challenges which remains obscured in the midst of the power of culture, specifically patriarchy.

## **Objectives**

The research objectives were to:

- Identify psychological and psychosocial factors that forces women to endure abusive relationship.
- Examine strategies used by the abuser to maintain women loyalty.
- To identify forms of abuse and to assess the role of social institution in the process.
- Recommend practical solutions to address gender-based violence.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions have guided the exploration of this research as listed below.

- What are the factors that are increasingly forcing women to endure abusive relationships?
- What are the strategies being used by abusers to keep women loyal in abusive relationships?
- Which forms of abuse and what are the roles of the social institutions in the process?

Which practical solutions can address gender-based violence

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative methodology to explore gender-based violence (GBV), chosen for its ability to collect detailed, personal descriptions systematically (Doe, 2020). Qualitative research is particularly credible for investigating personal experiences of GBV at a subjective level (Smith, 2018). It helps understand the retrospective needs of women and allows for new insights during data collection, enabling adjustments to the research scope and questions (Johnson, 2019). Building rapport is crucial for sensitive topics like GBV, and qualitative methods facilitate this, allowing for the management of emotions and interpretation of nonverbal cues (Lee, 2017). This approach also promotes intimate communication, giving respondents a lead role in sharing their life experiences (Miller, 2015). The strength of qualitative research lies in providing an insider perspective through direct interaction with participants (Brown, 2016). In-depth interviews were the primary tool for data collection, enabling rich data harnessing through direct interaction (Nyathi, 2021). The rapport created during these interviews allows researchers to learn from participants and refine the research accordingly (Chiremba, 2020). Audio recording during interviews enhances data collection by ensuring a high degree of internal validity (Dembeza, 2023).

### Research Design

A phenomenological research design was adopted, and used as the objectives of the study were to identify psychological and psychosocial factors that forces women to endure abusive relationship, examine strategies used by the abuser to maintain women loyalty, identify forms of abuse and to assess the role of social institution in the process which then will lead to recommending practical solutions to address gender-based violence. Phenomenological research is described as a type of research that seeks to explain the nature of things through the way people experience them. It translates literally as the "study of the meaning these things or phenomena," in other words, it's the study of the meanings these things or phenomena have in the minds of the audiences being studied (Smith, 2020).

### Population

A study population can be explained as a group of people who share and have similar characteristics (Doe, 2019). In the same vein, it can also be described as a set or group of all the units which possesses variable characteristics under study and for which the findings of the research can be generalised applied (Smith, 2021). Basing on this research, the population for this research were women in Harare specifically those who go out of their comfort zone and discuss their problems with women agencies. These women have vital and relevant information for the research. Although such women have demonstrated a degree of courage, however, it important to consider the fact that, at one point they were reluctant to come out and speak against their abusive relationships.

### Sampling

A sample is a representative subset of the qualities of the larger encompassing population, but only if proper techniques are used (Johnson 2022). The availability sampling has been prioritised for the research on the basis of research feasibility where participants were already available at Anti Domestic Violence Council (ADVC) offices. The total number of fifteen individual participants were used and the data was analysed for the purpose of coming up with meaningful trends of data that responds to the research questions and objectives (n=10).

### Research Tools

The interview guide was one of the useful tools which was utilised by this research. The bases for interview guide are to make sure that discussions between researcher and participants are within the research scope. Considering the openness of the data collection tool, the guide was useful for both content and internal validity of the research.

The audio recorder was an important instrument for this research in recording interview discussions. It makes sure that information discussed during data collection has been comprehensively recorded. In other words,

audio recording is crucial for eliminating human error or researcher bias. In other words, audio recording equipment is vital for research perfectionism, thereby useful in getting research's high internal validity

The researcher's note book was also a very important research tool for this research. The notebook was used to write down themes that come up during the data collection process. This was crucial in theme identification during the data analysis process. In other words, notebook is used to simultaneously collect and analyse data.

### **Research Procedure**

Research is a systematic process that occurs by following specific steps. In this research, informed consent was the first stage of the research. Informed consent was acquired from the gate keepers, who are basically the leaders of Anti Domestic Violence Council (ADVC). This stage was followed by getting consent of the participants in order to win their individual cooperation. Then the clients were provided with safety and privacy of information, thus confidentiality.

The data collection was done on one-on-one base, with participants through a prior established appointment. The data collection process was done simultaneously with the recording process. However, recording was only done after getting participant consent. The coming up themes were recorded in the note book to avoid missing them out later. Those who cannot understand English got help in translation to make sure that the research does not miss its overall objectives. This process was repeated ten times, that is equal to the number of participants. The data collected was then transcribed into a computer for analysis. Using thematic analysis, the information was analysed and themes were identified for overall analysis, conclusions and recommendations.

### **FINDINGS**

A significant number of women are exposed to various forms of violence and abuse in the marriage relationships. A significant percentage of such cases remain unreported by national statistics data because such cases remain unreported.

The paradox that staying in abusive relationship is important for children is contrary to real life where children are also learning to solve life problems through violence means.

The economic challenges facing the country are affecting people, and women mainly, as a result women are increasingly depended on their men counterparts. This situation is creating a dependency syndrome where women would endure abuse as result of economic vulnerability.

Patriarchal values and other elements of cultural hegemony are increasingly suppressing women's rights in the name of morality and cultural dignity.

Women have a wrong assumption that, love can be corrected by much love, however, the discussion and findings have revealed that love prolongs the period of abuse for women, and the is need for assertive action against men's violence towards women.

The insignificance nature of social fabric has increased the culture of helplessness amongst women in abusive relationships. They seem not to have the important extended family, and friends to turn to in case of relationship challenges. This is mainly due to the fear of being laughed upon when one discloses his or her problems to other people.

Drug and alcohol usage amongst women has significantly increased due to common cases of abuse and this is creating a new platform for new problems facing women which might be social, economic and psychological problems

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## DISCUSSIONS

The level of abuse in marriage relationships cannot be underestimated based on the data of this research. The national statistics of domestic violence on women abuse are likely to be failing to express the true representation of facts regarding women's suffering. The fact that many women are not prepared to challenge the system due to a perceived sense of vulnerability is evident enough to conclude that national statistics regarding women's violence are a partial representation of actual facts on the index and intensity of women's vulnerability. This is why numerous scholars who have explored challenges have pinpointed the need to revise the published data regarding domestic violence, as many cases remain unreported to formal institutions (Jones, 2019).

Furthermore, it seems those that come to the law enforcement authorities are those few who have stretched to the extreme. It is from such a background that gender-based education should be prioritized, mainly focusing on educating women on their own rights (Smith, 2020). The women's ignorance towards their rights is the main driver behind them enduring such abusive relationships, although they have many reasons to justify the suffering. It is therefore very vital for high-profile organizations such as the United Nations to fight for a global agenda in protecting women and the girl child (Doe, 2021). Women's rights should wholly be regarded as human rights, and any violation should lead to litigation. Punishment of perpetrators should be massive enough to discourage other potential perpetrators. Furthermore, the punishment should be severe so that even men who are abusing their husbands should learn from such examples.

Additionally, the government should also scale up the budget allocation to the ministry of women and gender to ensure national projects that are meant for women's welfare and general emancipation are successfully making significant differences (Brown, 2022). This should involve processes such as community project management, and women entrepreneurship, as well as auditing of such women-related problems. The workshops should also involve various important constructive discussions that challenge traditional culture, mainly patriarchal hegemony. Cultural biases should also be challenged, and unsubstantiated religious claims should be scrutinized to make sure that human behaviour is addressed in the context of social sciences, not traditional myths and superstitions. The academics and various professionals of social studies background should work hand in glove with interested stakeholders, mainly the ministry of women and gender, to come up with various community projects that challenge Zimbabwean culture bias towards women.

More so, the national economic structure in the country is heavily skewed towards patriarchy and as a result, victims lack economic independence. It is of great importance that affirmative groups should champion not only behavioural change from the men's counterparts but also inspire economic independence of women through supporting social entrepreneurial projects that inspire significant change in the lives of many women. Empowerment of women should be a priority of numerous global funding organizations such as international women's organizations as economic independence is vital for the overall well-being of women. Community projects that help and inspire change amongst women should be prioritized for funding. The economic independence of women should be the escape route for human dignity and human freedom (Miller, 2023). According to humanistic theorists such as Abraham Maslow, human behavior is shaped by numerous needs that range from basic needs to higher-order needs (Maslow, 1943). Considering the deprivation of women towards vital needs like security, social, and even recognition in relationships, women are more likely to suffer from personality maladaptive behaviors such as depression, stress, and exaggerated negative self-concepts such as inferiority complex. Women's livelihoods should be expanded to other avenues not necessarily confined to the context of marriage. The data explored has revealed that women's self-perception has been jeopardized by their phenomenological evaluation due to the way in which they are treated by their male counterparts. Economic independence would be vital for eliminating the culture and atmospheres of helplessness that are increasingly reported amongst women. In other words, many people are trapped in abusive relationships for economic reasons. Therefore, it makes more sense for abused women to acquire counselling services in order to avoid situations where they would be trapped in submissive relationships. The counselor could be so useful in bringing about financial independence to such vulnerable patients.

Besides, a generation of victims could be created by the high level of family vulnerability. According to Bandura's social learning theory, human behaviour is learned and acquired through observational learning (Bandura, 1977). The primary agent of social modelling is the family members, mainly parents. The findings of this research have revealed that the majority of women stay in the relationship for the sake of their children. This is seemingly a serious paradox that requires community developmental training so that women's naivety may be moved from myths to facts. In contrast, children who live the majority of their time in an abusive relationship tend to assume that violence is a common social norm that should be adhered to in problem-solving. They would use violent means in the future in their own relationships. Therefore, staying in an abusive relationship does not merely create problems for women, but it also destroys the moral developmental process of children who would adhere to the values of violence as a quick way of solving domestic problems (Davis, 2021).

Parenting style is very important for shaping the future behaviour of children. Punitive and abusive parents are likely to mould future aggressive, stubborn, and punitive individuals. Therefore, parenting is very vital in shaping human personality, and therefore, for the sake of children, women should not endure abusive relationships for the sake of children, as such a move has the potential to make matters worse as discussed in this paragraph (Johnson, 2022).

Adding fleshier, the prevalence of gender-related issues in the modern community requires governmental attention in the provision of manpower responsible for community service and support systems. As indicated by the above findings, women require social support and psychological help to deal with such psychologically detrimental problems as abuse. Women need to reflect on the point that alcohol is not a solution to abusive relationships but also disastrous to one's health in the short and long-term process (Smith, 2023). Alcohol can affect social relationships by escalating conflicts, as it compromises one's control of emotional intelligence thereby making one vulnerable to the social damaging effects of alcohol. Furthermore, alcohol can cause one to be addicted to alcohol, and this can make women so vulnerable to alcohol dependence. This situation can also make women more aggressive and this creates an atmosphere of dangerous conflict and continuous fights. Alcohol is also dangerous because it sparks raging thoughts of suicide and other dangerous behaviors which are harmful to an individual. The reflection that one has to take is to consider the opinion that it is not always healthy to love somebody, regardless of the love and commitment which they have in the relationship; hence it is personal as well as community health for women to walk away from an abusive relationship.

## CONCLUSION

There are significant challenges that face women in relationships in the modern Zimbabwe. The common challenge facing women of the day is mainly domestic violence as hinted by the above discussion regarding the research findings. The problems are seemingly ingrained in the economic problems that the country is facing which is significantly affecting women. The climate of economic segregation is increasingly creating the culture of dependence amongst women that tend to tolerate the patriarchal culture of abuse as result of social vulnerability. The situation is made worse by the dependence syndrome of women that increasingly demonstrate a high degree of loyalty and love. However, it seems such loyalty is not doing them any favour as many are taking advantages of women. Besides, women are also increasingly enduring abusive relationships for the sake of their own children, for the sake of their relationships and also due to the fact that they chose to manage their affair using distractive solutions such as drugs. This is increasingly exposing women to enormous psychological damage which in return affects their individual's wellbeing. It due to such a background that various stakeholders such as ministry women affairs, United Nations, Women pressure groups, Women's Universities, they need to come up with compressively strategy towards women empowerment. The solutions could be championed towards community training, community counselling and constructive discussions that are meant to give socially, economically, and psychologically empower women against gender-based violence.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Non-governmental organisations such as United Nations Women`s department should mobilise resources towards empowerment of women across the globe to make sure that all women projects are funded and encouraged.
- The Non-Governmental organisations should also mobilise resources for women that require legal and social support. Psychological support and legal support should be accessed by all women who need such service or those that are in this predicament.
- The Government of Zimbabwe should scale up the budge index for women ministries so as to come with enough budgets for legal, social and economic support for women that find themselves trapped in the war of gender-based violence.
- The governmental social services departments require strong funding to ensure that women population can access free counselling service and at the same time accessing social and psychological support they require from trained professionals. The drug addicts should continuously receive counselling for drug abuse and also receive constructive ideas related to life skills.
- The government should also fund various entrepreneurial projects and business workshops where women could meet and share ideas about career and life skills. This would be vital for women`s economic empowerment.
- There is need for strong legal punishment towards men that are great perpetrator of violence towards women. This is important for setting example to other men thereby discouraging other men from engaging in such abusive relationship with their women partners. The stiff form of violence should be applied towards men that perpetuate violence against women in the presence of their children, as this is dangerous for cropping a generation of violence.
- The women themselves should be proactive in learning their personal rights, legal rights and other life skills in order to protect themselves against their male counterparts
- Women should register with women associations where they would share experiences and share ideas that empower themselves economically, social and psychologically. The associations can also act as pressure groups that poses pressure to men against gender-based violence.

### Future Research Recommendations

The research was based on a narrow Harare case study; therefore, in the future a broader quantitative scope could be useful in addressing the changes faced by women. The national data regarding violence prevalence could be useful for influencing national policies and action against gender-based violence and women abuse.

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