

Men Don't Cry: A Qualitative Inquiry of Ghanaian Men's Lived Experiences of Domestic Violence

*Mercy Nana Akua Otsin

Department of Health Administration, University of Education, Winneba Ghana, West Africa

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the often-overlooked issue of domestic violence among men in Ghana. Utilising the hegemonic masculinity theory, the study explored how sociocultural values and deeply ingrained patriarchal and gender norms hinder Ghanaian men from recognising and reporting abuse. Data was collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews with 11 men between August and October 2024. The findings revealed the strong influence of patriarchal and gender norms on men's endurance of various forms of violence within the domestic setting. Their experience, however, remained concealed due to stigma, shame, and societal beliefs. The study concludes on the need to shift towards a gender inclusive perspective on domestic violence which recognises men as potential victims. The study recommends public awareness campaigns, gender sensitive training for service providers, counselling to encourage men to report their experience of domestic violence and policy reforms.

Keywords: Domestic violence, males, Ghana, qualitative study, hegemonic masculinity theory

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is often used to describe behavioural patterns involving the use of power and control by an individual against another person within the domestic space (Abramsky et al. 2011; Drijber et al. 2013). The perpetrators of domestic violence typically engage in acts like blame, intimidation, withholding intimacy, verbal aggression, humiliation, slapping, kicking, throwing objects and belittlement to firmly establish, gain control and authority within a domestic relationship (Crossman et al. 2016, Herman, 2015).

Much of the early literature on domestic violence suggested that violence and abuse within the domestic sphere were a result of men's need for control and domination (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; 2004; Pence & Paymar, 1993; Stark, 2007). Hine et al. (2022), for instance, argues that socially and historically constructed patriarchal values facilitated domestic violence, which was mainly perpetrated by males against females within the home. In another study, Weldon and Htun (2013) suggest that feminist movements have generated a wealth of research and academic discourse on female victimisation in domestic violence. These feminist movements contend that men are primarily the perpetrators of domestic violence and women are mainly the victims (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). Such a unidirectional conceptualisation has contributed to a 'domestic violence stereotype' and a 'gender perspective' which explains domestic violence, as a problem of men's violence against women (Hine, 2019).

However, recent evidence, suggests that men are also increasingly becoming victims of domestic violence (Hine et al., 2025; Carmo et al., 2011). Evidence from countries like United States, United Kingdom, Kenya and South Africa confirms that men experiencing domestic violence is a widespread phenomenon (Gubi & Wandera, 2022; Bates & Douglas, 2020; Thobejane et al., 2018; Straus, 2010). Despite, the gradual increase in existing literature on male victimisation in domestic violence, men still significantly underreport their experience of abuse (Cook, 2009). Evidence suggests that, some men underreport their victimisation in domestic violence and thus avoid help-seeking due to factors such as fear of gender biased ridicule, shame, or fear of being labelled the initiator of violence (Machado et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2019). For instance, in a study that examined men's experience

with domestic violence, specifically intimate partner violence (IPV), Walker et al. (2019) established that in cases where men reported being victims, the police exhibited gender biased behaviours. They ended up accusing male victims of being the perpetrators of the violence and threatening them with arrest (Walker et al.2019).

Indeed, such actions and perceptions have significant negative consequences for men reporting their experience of domestic violence. Some scholars argue that the tendency for men to under-report or refuse to report their abuse constitutes a substantial barrier to raising awareness and addressing male victimisation in domestic violence (Hines, 2019; Scott-Storey et. al., 2023). Within the Ghanaian society; sociocultural norms often emphasise male dominance, strength and self-reliance (Adjei, 2023). Expectations which not only portray men as invulnerable to abuse but could act as obstacles, preventing them from reporting their experience of abuse. This study aims to explore the causes of domestic violence against men and the socio-cultural factors accounting for men's underreporting of their experience.

Hegemonic Masculinity Theory

The hegemonic masculinity theory argues that strength, emotional restraint, assertiveness, aggression, control and authority are the idealised character traits society expects to see in the real or dominant men (Connell,1995). It explores how societal standards and expectations about masculinity influence individuals' behaviour, attitudes, and identities. The theory suggests that men who conform to this dominant form of masculinity often enjoy higher social status and respect.

Within the context of domestic violence among men in Ghana this study notes that societal expectations regarding masculinity can exert significant pressure on men to conform to a particular set of ideals and behaviours, including the suppression of vulnerability and the concealment of experiences that challenge their perceived strength and control

The expectation of male dominance and the belief that men should be firm and self-reliant may lead men to perceive seeking help or reporting abuse as a threat to their masculine identity (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). These expectations may influence men into choosing to remain silent or 'bottle up' their experiences, conforming to the societal expectation of maintaining control and avoiding perceived weakness. Additionally, the fear of social stigma and the potential loss of social status often associated with male victimhood can further reinforce adherence to societal expectations of who a real man is (Thobejane& Luthada, 2019; Mantey, 2019). Men may also fear being labelled as 'weak' or 'unmanly' if they disclose their experiences of domestic violence leading to an underreporting of the phenomenon.

METHODS

Study Design

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adopted to understand the lived experiences of male victims of domestic violence within the Kumasi metropolis, Ashanti region, Ghana. IPA focuses on personal experiences of individuals and the meaning making that occurs in relation to those experiences (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021; Shinebourne,2011). IPA involves “double hermeneutics” or a dual interpretation of the phenomenon under study, that is the participant making a meaning of their world, while the researcher interprets their meaning making (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA also relies on idiographic single case in-depth analysis of individuals experiences in their unique context (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Researching domestic violence experienced by men is very sensitive given the patriarchal nature of the Ghanaian society. The use of IPA helped us to move beyond surface level description to an in-depth understanding of these deeply personal experiences. This study complies with the set of ethical principles recognised in the declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2007). All participants provided written consent to participate in this study and the publication of their anonymised responses. Also, the names used in this manuscript to illustrate examples of individual accounts are pseudonyms.

Participants and Data Collection

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants from the Kumasi metropolis between August and October 2024. Participants were eligible for inclusion in the study if they were 18 years and older, had resided in the study area for a minimum period of 1 year and had experienced domestic violence from their partners. In recruiting participants, initial challenges were encountered due to participant concerns about being shamed and stigmatised if their experience became public. These concerns were addressed by explaining the objectives of the study to them, assuring them of confidentiality, anonymity and the voluntary nature of their participation. They were also made aware of the presence of a counsellor should they need one.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide formulated by the researcher. The interview guide was pretested through initial interviews with 7 men from the study area. The pretesting of the interview guide enabled the author to reduce ambiguity and make the questions clearer. Sample interview questions included: tell me what you know about domestic violence; how can you describe your experience of domestic violence; what do you think were the reasons for the abuse; how have you been impacted by the experience, how did you respond to the abuse, how did you make the decision to inform others about your experience. For the main study 11 men were recruited. In interpretive phenomenological analysis research, there is no definitive guideline regarding sample size (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith, 2011). Study sample size was therefore chosen based on the number of cases that allowed for a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon and an in-depth understanding of the personal significance of the experience for each participant. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Twi. The interviews were conducted by the author who had a background in conducting sensitive research, qualitative research methods and analysis and was also a native Twi speaker. Considering the sensitive nature of the study the interview venue and time were chosen by the participants. Interviews lasted between 20 and 35 minutes. Audio recordings were transcribed by the author following each interview., incorporating details from the field notes and participants speech dynamics and pauses.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed in accordance with the steps and procedures outlined by Smith et.al. (2009). Data analysis was done by the author and two colleagues who were serving as peer debriefers. The process started with reading and re-reading of the interview transcript and listening to the audio recordings multiple times. During the process detailed notes were taken on observations, contextual nuances, reflections, significant thoughts and initial interpretative comments. Further immersion in the data by examining language used and semantic content led to greater familiarity and enabled an identification of how participants articulated, understood and reflected on their domestic violence experience.

Notes made were then discussed to resolve any discrepancies. These notes were then transformed into emergent themes through collaborative analysis. Relationships between themes were explored based on conceptual similarities. Superordinate themes were then developed by applying abstraction to identify patterns among emerging themes. Once we were done with one participant, we moved on to the next participant. Moving on to the next participant, we bracketed previous themes developed and focused on each of the cases independently. The same process was applied to each of the individual participant transcript. After this cross-case analysis was then conducted to find connections between the main themes developed from each of the participants. A master table of themes and sub-themes was created and then transformed into narrative accounts which was used in this writeup.

Rigour and Trustworthiness

Participants were purposely selected from different communities, age groups and backgrounds to gain a rich understanding of their experiences. Thick descriptions of the procedures and findings were also presented to enhance the application of the study to different contexts. Regular debriefing sessions were held by the author and colleagues serving as peer debriefers. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the study to acknowledge the researcher's influence on the various stages of the research process. All interpretations were supported by direct participant quote and observational evidence from field notes.

RESULTS

Participants demographic characteristics

Eleven men with ages ranging from 34 to 59 years were interviewed. As shown in table 1 the majority were aged in the 50's and were married. In terms of employment, most participants were self-employed and educated to the senior secondary school (SHS) level. Christianity was the predominant religion practised by the participants (table 1).

Table 1: Participant socio-demographic characteristics (n=11)

Pseudonym	Age	Religion	Marital status	Education level	Occupation
John	57	Christian	Cohabitation	SHS	Self employed
Ben	49	Traditionalist	Married	Primary	Self employed
Cecil	38	Christian	Married	JHS	Self employed
Jacob	53	Traditionalist	Married	Primary	Self employed
Max	40	Christian	Cohabitation	Tertiary	Formal employment
Jerry	44	Muslim	Married	JHS	Self employed
Isaac	52	Traditionalist	Married	JHS	Self employed
Steve	55	Christian	Married	SHS	Self employed
Robert	34	Christian	Married	Tertiary	Formal employment
Ernest	59	Christian	Married	SHS	Self employed
Joshua	41	Muslim	Married	SHS	Formal employment

Themes

The study explored men's experiences of domestic violence. The themes which emerged from the analysis centred on the causes of domestic violence against men and the socio-cultural factors influencing men's underreporting of their domestic violence experience.

Causes of domestic violence against men

Under this theme two subthemes emerged showing how participants absolved their intimate partners of all responsibility for their abuse. They instead blamed themselves and the changes occurring within the wider society.

Means of venting or showing their frustration at their partners behaviour

Most participants mentioned being abused by their partners when they consumed excessive amounts of alcohol. Due to their difficult financial circumstances, they indicated that their partners become angry and violent towards them as they felt the money could have been put to better use than on alcohol. Others stressed experiencing abuse from their partners due to the behaviours they put up whenever intoxicated. They mentioned their partners abusing them due to the shame they felt with their behaviour. Joblessness which worsened their financial condition was also mentioned by participants as influencing their partners into abusing them. Speaking about their experience of abuse some participants rationalised their partner's behaviour by saying that:

... it is because of drinking alcohol... When I come home drunk, my wife gets angry, fights with me and sometimes even beats me. ...the money for the upkeep of the house I use it for alcohol (John, 57 years)

... alcoholism is the main cause of tension and conflict in my home... due to the strain that it brings to our finances. ...sometimes it makes me behave in a way that shames my wife ...it sometimes even makes me neglect my responsibilities... she gets frustrated and becomes violent (Jerry, 44 years)

Ernest explained how his behaviour when drunk makes his wife violent towards him:

My wife gets angry with how I behave when I am drunk. ...I come home late, vomit around and do all sorts of unnecessary things. When it happens like that, she fights and sometimes... ends up beating me (Ernest, 59 years)

Participants also reiterated the financial strain brought on their relationships due to joblessness as influencing their wives into becoming violent. Joshua for instance mentioned the wife using violence as a means to show her displeasure at bearing a greater portion of the financial burden of running their home. Joshua for instance said:

I was operating my own business all was well in the house everything was peaceful ..she started being abusive when I started suffering losses in my business so could not bring much money home. ...you women when we are down you support us for a short while and you get tired. Now the business has collapsed. ... the upkeep of the house is mostly on her... I am trying to put things together to start again. She uses the least opportunity to abuse me...she can really insult and make me feel useless (Joshua, 41 years)

Leadership struggle and power imbalance in the relationship

Some participants held the view that the current happening in their homes reflects occurrences within the wider society where women are fighting not only to be present but also to lead. They argued that nowadays women want to dominate all spheres of life including in their marriages. Cecil for instance said:

My wife wants to decide on all issues about the children and the home without my involvement ...when I complain she gets angry... this leads to quarrel and insults, sometimes she fights me.... Nowadays women want to be in charge they are fighting us for control in all spheres of life. (Cecil, 38 years)

The narratives also revealed participants' lament about a change in the behaviour of their wives after they had been married for a while:

When you marry a lady, you may think you know her but after some few months or years they tend to show you their true colours. My wife behaves like a man; she wants to be in control...she becomes aggressive and abusive when she cannot have her way. ...I can't report to the police who will believe me (Isaac, 52-years)

Ben, on the other hand stressed on how he sees the wife's attempt to challenge is authority as an aberration of the Ghanaian culture:

Culture has given men the right to be head of the family... but my wife does not believe in this she is always challenging me in the house, shouting on me here and there, our home is not the best because we are both fighting to rule... (Ben, 49 years)

Sociocultural factors contributing to men's underreporting of domestic violence

Under this theme, two sub-themes emerged; deviation from gender norms and the stigma and shame associated with being abused by a woman on the societal factors contributing to men's underreporting of domestic violence, gender norms were found to predominate. Participants perceived that being a victim of violence did not align with an ideal form of masculinity hence their desire to not report. Others were worried about being shamed and stigmatised for deviating from the ideal form of masculinity by reporting that they had been abused by a woman.

Deviation from Gender Norms

The narratives of the participants revealed that they perceived that it was unmanly and a deviation of gender norms for them to report that they had been abused by a woman hence their decision not to report their experience of abuse.

...as a society, we have norms or role that set men and women aside, in our Ghanaian culture, a man is not supposed to cry, you are supposed to be the strong one in the family, and this has been the norm since our ancestors. ... so who are you to even come and report if your wife is beating or abusing you in any form (Robert, 34 years)

Another participant who felt shame and weakness due to his experiences said:

To be a man means bravery, lion, fearless and a king. You are supposed to be strong...your wife must not beat you. But the truth of the matter is that some women are very strong... most women control the home and everything ...(Max, 40 years)

Participants narratives also revealed instances where they perceived that reporting their abuse by a woman was less than the ideal societal expectation for men. They felt that they would not be believed, hence their decision not to report:

...it takes a lot for a man to go out and search for help in the first place. ... if you have an issue and you gather the courage to approach somebody and that person just brushes you off that's obviously going to have an impact...there is the perception that men are the real perpetrators. When something like that happens, you decide to keep it to yourself because you know you wouldn't even be believed (Jacob, 53 years)

Social Stigma and Shame

Participants' concerns about the shame and stigma that they could experience from the society for reporting that they had been abused by their partners also emerged as an important reason why they chose to keep their experience to themselves.

... there is a fear that you will be ridiculed, laughed at and not be taken seriously if you report. This used to be a real problem where men were not believed and in fact often mocked when they reported. This still happens in pocket's but not as endemic as it used to be. The police are so much better these days... the only thing is you do not know how yours will be if you report (John, 57year old)

Another Participant said:

When you go to the police to report, they don't even believe you and they will be making statements like "look at your height and arms, how can you tell me your wife is abusing you". It really not fair sometimes, some of us we were brought up well, we were taught not to lay a hand on a female so no matter what, we won't dare to beat our wives. but when matters get out of hands in the house and we report to the police then they tend to compare our body sizes and strength (Ben, 49 years old)

DISCUSSION

Men also suffer domestic violence, however, for most of them their experience is often downplayed (Barber, 2008). This study explored men's experience of abuse from their intimate partners and why they are often unwilling to report to the law enforcement authorities. Two major themes centring on the causes of domestic violence against men and the socio-cultural reasons why men refused to report the abuse were explored. On the causes of domestic violence against men; how a significant number of study participants took the blame for provoking their wives into abusing them is noteworthy. From the narratives of participants, it could be observed that they justified their attack because they felt that their behaviour was below the idealised form of masculinity. According to hegemonic masculinity an ideal man is expected to be the primary provider and protector of his family (Cornell, 1995). For most of the participants, they might have felt, they failed in their duties as men by putting their families in difficult financial situations and making them a subject of ridicule through their

behaviour when intoxicated. The study findings also revealed instances where men faced violence due to a struggle for control in their unions. Participants mentioned women's attempt at controlling not only matters related to the home and children but also to their personhood as an important source of conflict. Some felt that women were attempting to bring the women's right movement into the home environment. Others argued that women's attempt at controlling men was an aberration of the Ghanaian culture and an attempt usurp the powers that tradition has given to men. Participants indicated that their attempts at resisting the control of their partners often lead to verbal, emotional and sometimes physical assault. From the participants narratives it could be deduced that though some took responsibility for provoking their wives into abusing them, they found women's attempt at taking control of the union; a duty which had been assigned them by the society as an overreach (Wadei et al. 2023). The resistance shown by participants to their wives' control which led to violence may have been their attempt at gaining back control so that they could become the idealised form of man.

On the sociocultural factors contributing to men under reporting domestic violence, gender norms were identified as important. Study participants reiterated the roles of stoicism, bravery and leadership assigned to them by the society. Some indicated that they felt reluctant to report their abuse based on these assigned roles. Others were worried that they would either not be believed or may be ridiculed for reporting that they had been abused by a woman. In Taylor et al.'s (2021) study, they similarly, found that men hesitated to report domestic violence because they felt it was a deviation from gender norms. Their study reports that being identified and labelled as a male victim of domestic violence challenges societal perceptions and expectations of the role of men. Hine et.al. (2025), on the other hand, found that, gender norms expectation on men reinforces the idea that they should be strong and capable of protecting themselves; a societal perception that plays an important role in discouraging them from reporting their experience of abuse. Within the Ghanaian context, Mantey (2019), similarly, reports on how societal perceptions of masculinity discourages men from reporting abuse.

Social stigma and shame also came up as a decisive factor accounting for men's hesitation to report their experience of abuse. Participants mentioned concerns about ridicule and damage to their pride as important in their decision not to report. Other studies, also found that men's recognition of their experiences as victims of domestic violence and some of its consequences like shame and societal stigma, does not align with societal ideals of masculinity (Hogan et. al., 2022). Therefore, some victims may be unwilling to seek help or report their experience of abuse to protect themselves (Hogan et. al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated men's experience of domestic violence, within Kumasi in the Ashanti region of Ghana. Rooted in the theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity, the study presented how sociocultural expectations and gender norms prevented study participants from accusing their partners of abuse and reporting them to the appropriate authorities. To address the problem, the study recommends targeted educational campaigns aimed at creating an awareness among the general populace that men also experience domestic violence. This would help loosen society's rigid conceptions about masculinity, thereby allowing male victims to come public with their experiences of abuse without a sense of shame. There is also the need for gender-sensitive training for police, healthcare providers, and social workers to eliminate institutional bias against men who present with domestic violence. Establishing confidential counselling and support centres specifically for male survivors of domestic violence is also vital. Additionally, partnerships with community and faith-based leaders can help reshape socio-cultural attitudes. The study concludes that though most men keep their domestic violence experience private due to Ghana's sociocultural and hegemonic gender structures it is pervasive. These cultural constructs perpetuate silence, stigma, and the systemic exclusion of male victims from support systems. To address this, there is the need for a holistic framework anchored in a redefinition of masculinity to include vulnerability and emotional expression, alongside an inclusive, gender-sensitive policy approach.

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