Domestic Violence in Africa: Exploring the Perceptions of Ghanaian Adolescents

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Abstract

Studies over the years have shown that, domestic violence in Africa is often in relation to expected gender roles and is described as a manifestation of socially accepted normal behaviour patterns that allow men to exercise control over women. This influences socialisation of adolescents who might accept violence as a norm and even those who were not directly exposed to domestic violence in their adolescence sometimes becoming perpetrators or victims. Yet there are few studies focusing on the general population of adolescents and exploring their perception of domestic violence. This paper discusses findings of a qualitative study conducted in one of the cities in Ghana, Kumasi. Using semi-structured interview guide 32 adolescents within two identified communities were interviewed. The study revealed that the perception of domestic violence of the adolescents within the two communities were the same irrespective of the fact they were from different socio-economic backgrounds. Also the adolescents acknowledged that violence between intimate partners is an unacceptable behaviour yet it is a socially permissive tool for conformity. The study concluded that perceptions of domestic violence can only change if there is a more concerted effort to change behaviours of adolescents, through life skills such as communication and relationship building skills which will empower them to be assertive in situations that deviates from the socially expected behaviour instead of resorting to violence.

1. Introduction

Violence between intimates is not a recent phenomenon, it has been documented by religious scholars and historians dating several centuries ago [1]. Yet, domestic violence is an issue that can no longer be viewed only as a private issue or a concern for a particular family as it is an issue that affects the larger community also. Consequently there are specialised police units, hospitals and professionals such as medical doctors, social workers and psychologist who use State resources to ensure that victims of domestic violence are protected and perpetrators punished. In Africa, it took a long time for the acceptance of State involvement in the private issue of domestic violence [2]. Addressing conflicts within a home was best regarded as a private issue to be tackled within the family, including the extended family, without the interference of non-family members such as the State [3]. However, perceptions have changed; largely influenced by international legal frameworks such as The Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the enactment of domestic violence laws in several countries. That notwithstanding, domestic violence is still an issue that needs to be eradicated in all communities.

In the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals, goal five on

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gender equality, one of its target is to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls; an indication that domestic violence is a social problem that is not going away. One of the population groups that could give an indication of future attitudes towards domestic violence are adolescents. However there are very few studies focusing on the general population of adolescents and their attitudes towards domestic violence. For instance quantitative studies of general populations of adolescents in England revealed a disturbing evidence of tolerance of violence against women [4][5]. An indication of a social problem which is deemed undesirable but been taken as the norm by young people. This study, part of a larger research, was conducted to explore how adolescents in the general population of an African country, Ghana, perceive domestic violence. The study adopted a qualitative approach for a better understanding of their opinions including the prevalence, justification and how domestic violence could be addressed. It is expected that this paper will provide empirical evidence for stakeholders and policy makers in the development of social intervention projects and programmes to curb domestic violence in Ghana. This paper discusses domestic violence and its prevalence in Africa, the construction of adolescence and how social relations are very important in that period; it is followed with a presentation of the study design, empirical findings and its implications.

2. Domestic Violence and Adolescents

The prevalence of domestic violence has obtained great recognition unfortunately the numbers of victims and perpetrators also keep on increasing. This section discusses related works on domestic violence, specifically its meaning and how it is manifested in Africa and Ghana; the construction of adolescence and adolescent exposure to domestic violence in Ghana is also highlighted.

2.1. Domestic Violence Explained

Domestic violence according to the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women is any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering of women, including threats such as coercion and arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in private or public life [6]. Therefore, domestic violence can be described as violence in relation to socially constructed gender roles.

Domestic violence is also a health, legal, economic, educational, developmental and above all a human right issue. Hence, it has necessitated international consensus culminating in the establishment of legal instruments like Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) and CEDAW [7]. In addition, there have been countless expired and on-going efforts by researchers and concerned international bodies like the World Health Organization (WHO), World Vision International (WVI) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to curb the high prevalence of domestic violence. Nonetheless, in a WHO's research on regional differences in domestic violence in 2013, it was found out that women, defining women as females between the ages of 15 and above, in Africa are almost twice as likely to experience violence than women in Europe [8].

Nonetheless, domestic violence is influenced by socially rooted role expectations, though there are instances where it is just violence in a domestic context; often the phenomenon stems from social relations, and the dynamics of being either male or female in cultural settings [9]. Violence is thus used as an instrument for reinforcing social control in a context where women are socialised to be passive and dependent on men for decisions affecting their lives. That notwithstanding, men can also be described as victims of domestic violence, 66% of men surveyed in the National Violence Against Women Survey in the US said that they were physically assaulted as a child by an adult caretaker [10].

2.2. Domestic Violence as a Public Issue in Africa

Though domestic violence gained public attention across the continents of the world in the 18th century, it's acceptance as a public issue in Africa is relatively recent with studies about partner abuse beginning to appear in the mid 1990's [2]. African women have a high degree of exposure to domestic violence and one in every three women is likely to experience domestic violence in their lifetime [11]. Bowman [12] argues that women in Africa are subject to customary African law and traditions; much of which reinforces the subordinate position of women within the family. Though some African countries have initiated a number of legislations to curb the high incidence of domestic violence, the passage of laws on domestic violence is unlikely to lead to change in the absence of concerted efforts to minimise its occurrence. It is therefore critical to change laws that institutionalize the inequality of women and their dependent status [13]. Enactment of legislation on domestic violence may not be the most important step in this process, but it is an important element. Vetten [2] also noted that both legal and social changes, including a change in consciousness, are necessary to address the incidence of domestic violence in Africa.

One thorny social issue is marriage. Marriage is still a

property transaction in traditional communities in Africa [12]. It is a relationship not just between the individuals involved but between the two families. Hence, a woman's reproductive capacity is considered ''owned'' by the husband's lineage after marriage in some African societies. This is particularly evident in areas where widows are still ''inherited'' by their husband's brother under customary law [2]. Though one may argue the existence of legal reforms that liberate women in such circumstances, practitioners in law enforcement agencies are themselves defending such customary laws and working to maintain the status quo. For instance in 1995, Human Rights Watch reported that police in South Africa delayed in responding to domestic violence calls in some cases. In others, they counselled the woman not to waste her time on legal processes but simply to go back to her husband and sometimes even actively intervened to get her to drop the case [14]. This is an indication that culture or social expected roles and responsibilities are contributing factors to domestic violence in Africa.

2.3. Factors Promoting Domestic Violence in Ghana

Ghana is a nation in West Africa that covers a total area of 239,460 km2. It has a constitutional democracy with a presidency and unicameral 275 seat parliament. Ghana has a young population; it is estimated that 38.6% of its total population of 25.8million are below 15 years [15]. Half of the population live in urban areas and about 97% of children are enrolled in primary education [16]. Kumasi, the second largest city in Ghana, is located in the transitional forest zone and is about 270km north of the national capital city of Accra. The Kumasi metropolis is the most populous district in the Ashanti Region. There are more females in the metropolis than males. It is estimated that 48% of the population are urbanized [17].

Many practices against women are either overtly or covertly steeped in the ideology of unequal gender relations in Ghana. Violence against women in Ghana often occurs in the context of patriarchal relations which perpetuates a system of female subordination and male domination. Tsikata [9] argues that the subordinate position of women is strengthened by socio-cultural practices and a socialisation process which socialises women to accept these practices and inequalities. She further argued that in traditional Ghanaian society, men have been regarded as household heads and breadwinners and charged with the responsibility of the welfare of all household members. Although women's roles and responsibilities have changed, there are many women who contribute immensely to the family income in Ghana, yet domestic violence keeps on increasing. Also, empirically, it has been identified that domestic violence is socially accepted; when presented with

a list of five reasons for which a man might be justified in beating his wife, 44% of women agreed with at least one reason [18]. Therefore Tsikata [9] argues that whatever form male violence takes, it is a manifestation of socially accepted ostensibly normal behaviour patterns that allow men to exercise control over women.

Bowman [12] also adds that sexual harassment occurs widely in Ghana although it is not widely acknowledged or reported partly because of problems of its definition and problems associated with tradition and difficulty of proof. Non-sexual violence is equally prevalent in Ghana and takes many forms. Cultural practices such as widowhood rites, child betrothal, child marriage, female genital mutilation, the banishing of suspected female witches among others perpetuate violence especially against women [12]. Cantalupo et al. [19] also argued that although there are statutes that sanction domestic violence, many cases go unreported to law enforcement authorities. They highlighted that physical coercion is commonly expressed through hitting with fists or an object, and by kicking. Also, common reasons for wife battering include suspected infidelity, disagreements over domestic chores and child rearing, and failure to have husband's meals ready on demand. However, their findings revealed that husband-beating is an undocumented phenomenon that is believed to be rare. Husband victims of spousal battering are said to be for philandering behaviour and infidelity, alcohol abuse and failure to provide for their families. Nevertheless, wife-initiated divorce is relatively infrequent in Ghana; women are expected to stay in an unhappy, unfulfilling marriage rather than risk the stigma that accompanies divorce [20].

To address the issue of domestic violence Ghana like many other African countries has implemented legislations to curb the high incidence of domestic violence. Public efforts aimed at addressing cases of abuse and domestic violence in Ghana came to the fore in 1997 following a nation-wide study on the prevalence, patterns and responses to gender-based violence undertaken by a partnership of NGOs under the leadership of the Gender and Human Rights Documentation Centre [21]. These discoveries contributed to the establishment of the Women and Juvenile Unit (WAJU), now renamed the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) by the Ghana Police Service in 1998. By 2002, DOVVSU offices had been extended to all regions to address reported cases of domestic violence. On the 21st of February 2007, Ghana's parliament passed the much-awaited Domestic Violence Act 2007 (Act 732), which had been laid before it in 2003. Nonetheless, these legislations have proven inadequate since domestic violence statistics in the country seem to be rising rather than declining. DOVVSU only provides residual measures to domestic violence victims and perpetrators with

little on prevention. It is often argued that the existence of laws to penalize perpetrators is a definite deterrent but the socially constructed gender roles of men and women that keep the statistics of domestic violence rising are ignored [22]. It is for this reason that it is deemed necessary to address domestic violence with a keener focus on other younger members of the community who are not direct victims or perpetrators, adolescents, but are however exposed to the socialisation process and traditional norms that reinforce the subordinate position of women and domestic violence [23].

The increasing rate of cases recorded on domestic violence worldwide has necessitated international consensus on the need to tackle the problem from different perspectives. The 2014 first quarter report from World Vision International (WVI) noted that, violence affects men as well as women, it affects the family, the community and the nation at large with children(including adolescents) being most vulnerable. Millions of children including adolescents are abused every year and statistics reveal as many as one in three girls and one in six boys are sexually abused prior to the age of 18 [24]. Although many parents report trying to shelter their children from marital/intimate partner violence, research suggests that children in violent homes commonly see, hear and intervene in episodes of violence [25]. However, it is likely a larger proportion of young people never experience domestic violence in their own homes but still do witness domestic violence.

2.4. Adolescence

Adolescence is a period in an individual's life but the exact period may be based on biological, social and cultural underpinnings. Biologically, Kaplan [25] argues that the term is commonly defined as the period of life between childhood and adulthood. Lerner and Steinberg [26] are more specific in their definition by stating that the period covers the second decade of human life; whilst WHO [27] emphatically identified that it is between the ages of 10 – 19 years. However, the period connotes different developmental stages and issues [28]. On one hand, UNICEF [29], notes that adolescence is a period where an individual develops lifelong behaviours therefore a very pertinent time for adults to guide such individuals to acquire socially accepted behaviours. Also, Larson et al. [30] argue that adolescence is a social construction depending on the cultures which results in the accepted role expectations. Nonetheless, adolescence is a paradoxical contradictory stage; a stage of vulnerability and awkwardness during which children are frequently overwhelmed by the events of maturation, but at the same time a period of incredible promise and hope for the future of the human race if properly managed [31]. Adolescence is

therefore critical to the quality of adulthood, how young people in this period are socialised to accept socially constructed roles of their respective sex will go a long way to determine the wellbeing of the entire community.

Adolescents Exposure to Domestic Violence in Ghana

There is significant evidence that sexual exploitation of children and adolescents is a problem in Ghana [32]. Records of DOVVSU indicate that, every year quite a number of children and adolescents go through series of sexual abuses. Hence, an appreciable number of adolescents in Ghana are exposed to violence in the family and community which stems from cultural and social norms.

Landsford and Dodge [11] also maintain that most adolescents in Ghana live in families and communities where physical violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflict within a relationship, a man has the right to correct or discipline female misconduct in a marriage setting. Also, sexual abuses including the notion that sex is a man's right in marriage, sexual violence is an acceptable way of putting women in their place and sexual activity is a marker of masculinity. These are all different dimensions of violence which emanates from gender social relations. However, there are varied studies on adolescents as victims or witnesses of domestic violence and how it has affected their development [33][1][34] and they becoming perpetrators or victims [35][36], thus the likelihood of an unending cycle of violence which could easily be misconstrued as a social norm. Yet this is not indicative that all children growing up with violence will become perpetrators or victims [37]. That notwithstanding, there is a need to know the perception of adolescents, who are neither victims nor perpetrators, on domestic violence.

3. Study Design and Methods

3.1. Study Design

In line with social constructionists fundamental argument that 'social phenomena and social reality generally are taken as created out of the actions and interpretations of people during their social interactions' [38], the study employed a qualitative case study research design. A case study design is described as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context [39]. Therefore, a case study approach represented a suitable methodology for the exploration of how adolescents perceive the concept of domestic violence in their lives. The main research methods were documentary analysis and in-depth interviewing. This study also adopted the biological definition of an adolescent, since Kumasi is multi-ethnic therefore age was deemed as the best criteria for identifying the target research participants.

Further, Taylor et al. [31] argued that a person's character is formed between 15-19 years, hence one of the criteria for selection of research participants, were those in the second half of the adolescence period.

3.2. Methods 1: Documentary Analysis

To identify the prevalence of domestic violence in communities in the Kumasi Metropolis, a documentary analysis was conducted using administrative data of the regional DOVVSU office in Kumasi. The data were collated from old case dockets from January to November 2014 on reported domestic violence cases to the various police units in the metropolis. The criteria for the collation were the location, type of abuse and demographic characteristics of domestic violence victims and perpetrators. The analysis revealed that a total of 747 cases of physical abuse and sexual assault were recorded from 21 communities who reported such cases to various police units within the Kumasi Metropolis in 2014. Out of these, Ahinsan estate recorded as low as seven cases and Moshi Zongo recorded as high as 112 cases, thus these two communities were described in this study as low and high risk communities respectively. Ahinsan estate is inhabited by middle to low income individuals whilst Moshie Zongo residents are mainly low income with many extremely poor. Therefore these two communities were selected for the in-depth interviews to explore adolescents in the general population perceptions of domestic violence.

3.3. Methods 2: In-Depth Interviews

Adolescents were recruited to participate in the research through mainly the snow ball method. To identify possible research participants, researchers in this study went to popular places in the respective communities where adolescents frequent for example grocery shops, football parks and market centers for two weeks in December 2014 and January 2015 when many schools were on vacation. Each adolescent who volunteered to participate in the study was informed of the research objectives and his/her confidentiality and anonymity, they were also informed that they could halt the interview at any point if they so wish and could decline to be audio recorded. In each study community, data saturation was obtained by the eight interview, however as there is no magic number that constitutes sufficient data in qualitative studies [41]; it was decided for this study the interview will be curtailed after the 16th interview, specifically the eight male and female, in each community. Thus the total number of adolescents interviewed for this study was 32.

3.4. Methods 3: Analysis of in-Depth Interview Data

The analytical process adopted for the study followed Miles and Huberman's [40] recommendation of analysis of qualitative data, specifically data reduction, display, derivations of conclusions and verifications. The analysis commenced with the transcription of all the audio recorded interviews. The three researchers read through a sample of the interviews from the two communities and identified emergent themes by focusing on how participants interpreted their perception of domestic violence. They then agreed on a coding scheme and the categorisation of the responses. NVivo11, a computer-assisted qualitative analysis package, was then used to manage the transcribed interviews in relation to the coding and the categorisation of the themes.

4. Results

Research participants in the in-depth interview sessions were individuals between the ages of 15- to 19 years. They were all either at the Junior High School level or the Senior High School, a few had completed both levels.

4.1. Adolescents Exposure to Domestic Violence

The two study areas, from the documentary analysis, were communities with high and low reported cases of domestic violence. However, the interview data revealed majority of the adolescents in both communities have been exposed to domestic violence. When asked whether they had witnessed any type of domestic violence majority cited physical abuse, this is what one had to say;

'Yes I have seen some men giving their wives some slaps a couple of times around the market' R9

Another based her comments on secondary sources, she stated;

'... Sometimes there are rumours that some women have been beaten by their husband in the homes, you don't get to see the incidence happening though but often such women are seen with swollen faces' R15

However, these comments were based on men being physically abusive towards women, yet the interview data also revealed few instances where the research participants had witnessed a female being physically abusive towards her male partner. One had this to say;

'Oh well ..... the other day I saw a woman shoving her husband violently for failure to pay the school fees of their son' R11

From this, it is maintained that, adolescents live with domestic violence victims and perpetrators in their families and/or communities and they witness and hear about violence.

4.2. Reaction to Domestic Violence

When the question was asked what will be their reaction if a partner hits them, majority both males and females indicated that they will walk away, one female participants stated;

> *'The best behaviour in such situations is to walk away, it is not a good thing to hit back' R11*

However, some argued that they will retaliate; one male emphatically stated;

> *'I can't stand by for anyone to hit me without me hitting back, nobody should get away with violence' R7*

The interview data further revealed that adolescents living in the high risk community expressed more violent specific behaviours compared to adolescents living in the low risk community.

4.3. Women as Subordinates

Participants were asked of their opinion of the social role expectation of women as subordinate to men. The main themes that emerged from the interview data was that women are helpers and have equal rights as men. Majority of the females argued from a religious perspective that, as females they were helpers to their male counterparts and not subordinates one female research participant stated;

> *'I am helper not a subordinate' R2*

Some of the female participants also argued that they were equal to men by stating;

> *'No I'm equal to a man, we have the same rights' R24*

Although many of the males shared similar opinions with the females, some had the opinion that men had the final say. One male participant stated;

> *'Women are not subordinate to men, we are all equal, however the man has the final say' R26*

4.4. Justification of Domestic Violence

Majority of the research participants had the view that beating of wives should not be tolerated; however a few argued that in some circumstances women have to be beaten by their spouses; one female made this argument:

> *'... the acceptability or unacceptability of beating by an intimate partner or spouse is subject to the situation; if it is a severe case then one has to be beaten for instances stealing or continuous nagging' P20.*

One male also had this to say;

> *'You know sometimes women have to be beaten, it is a form of discipline, especially if they go contrary to what their men tell them to do' P17*

Hence, when the women are subjected to beating in a situation classified as warranting, beating would not be considered an offensive act. However, some few females had the opinion that men should not get away with everything but if they continue to bully women it is right for a woman to react violently, one female research participants argued;

> *'......if a man continuously treats his partner badly then she has to also react violently towards him' P16*

In other words, the female partner should also be violent.

4.5. How Domestic Violence Can Be Addressed

Research participants were also asked how domestic violence could be addressed in Ghana. The themes that emerged from the data were accepted social roles, more tolerance and effective sanctions. One participant argued;

> *'domestic violence can only be addressed if both men and women do what is expected of them, including learning what their partners like and dislike' R31*

Another argued that:

> *'If everyone behaves well in the society and exercised more tolerance there will be no violence' R26*

Earlier in the interview majority of the research participants mentioned that they will walk away when confronted with violence but when asked how domestic violence could be addressed, majority were emphatic on sanctions. One participant also stated;

> *'we shouldn't allow any form of violence by men or women in private homes or publicly. As community we have to sanction perpetrators immediately' R19*

Others were also of the view that the existing sanctions were not effective but should be made more instant. One stated;

> *'I believe strongly that the sanctions against domestic violence are not effective; if they were, the problem might have ceased by now, punishment have to be more severe and instant'. R7*

5. Discussion of Findings

Adolescence should be a period where more socially accepted behaviour is exhibited, but this depends on the social context. Adolescents who participated in this study did not express any different opinions irrespective of the fact that they were from different communities with different socio-economic backgrounds. This suggests that as Ghanaians irrespective of the socio-economic backgrounds of their parents, the adolescents who participated in the study have been socialised with the same gender role expectations.

The findings also revealed that adolescents who participated in the study had witnessed domestic violence in their respective communities. This is influencing some of the adolescents' perceptions. All the research participants acknowledged that violent reactions are inappropriate but shared the opinion that in some circumstances violence has to be used to achieve or maintain a desired behaviour. The violent behaviours were not limited to only females as some also mentioned that they had witnessed females physically abusing their male partners for neglecting their social responsibilities. This confirms Tsikata's [9] argument that the gender role expectations perpetuate domestic violence. Also, the findings mirrors the studies conducted in England, however in this study participants argued that in some situations violence had to be used and this was mentioned by both males and females. This suggests a normalisation of violence behaviour between genders in instances of deviance from expected gender roles.

In Ghana, it is argued that gender role expectations suggest that females have to be second fiddle to their male partners [9] but it was interesting to note that majority of the research participants stated that women were rather to assist men. That been said the notion of men being superior was still a sentiment shared by a few as they suggested that men had the final say. This finding is also indicative that although traditionally women are supposed to be subordinates, adolescents in this study rejected the notion but the traditional role expectations cannot be described as an abandoned notion yet.

Further, violence between partners was justified by some research participants. Although it was stated as an unacceptable behaviour just as in the previous studies [41], violence was perceived as a tool to correct or to ensure acceptable social behaviour. This suggests that irrespective of the legislations and advocacy work being carried out violence is constructed as a means to ensure socially accepted behaviour.

The response to the likely actions when faced with violence, suggest that majority of the participants were not violent and will rather avoid such situations. Hence, it can be concluded that empowering them with alternatives to ensure that in instances where there is a deviation from socially accepted roles, violence is not resorted to. Also the findings suggests that adolescents in the study were more aware of the victims but had little knowledge of how perpetrators were punished, a possible reason why majority cited instant sanctions as a means to address domestic violence.

6. Conclusion

Adolescence is the period where, amongst others, social role expectations are acquired; observation of activities within the family and community serve as one of the methods. Domestic violence in this study was perceived by research participants as a tool for punishment when one deviates from socially expected roles. This suggests that the adolescents in this study had normalised domestic violence. The findings in this study are also indicative that majority of the adolescents who participated in the research abhor domestic violence but there were a few who believed violence in a relationship does serve a purpose. It is imperative therefore that socially constructed roles have to be disassociated from violence. So if perceptions are to change there is a need to imbibe into adolescents that domestic violence is an unacceptable behaviour that everyone has to avoid and prevent. This suggests a need for public education on domestic violence with emphasis on the harm it causes and reasons why it should not be tolerated. Further, the various responses also implies that adolescents would require life skills such as communication and relationship building skills which will empower them to be assertive in situations that deviates from the socially expected behaviour instead of resorting to violence.

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