

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Perceptions of male partners towards intimate partner violence in the Gambia: A qualitative study

DOI: 10.29063/ajrh2022/v26i9.8

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Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a form of Gender-based violence that is a public health problem. The health outcomes of IPV have cascading effects on the family's financial, emotional, sexual, and physical wellbeing. Sub-Saharan Africa carries a significant burden of IPV. In The Gambia, domestic is prevalent, with more than 80% of the women believing that it is justified for a man to beat his wife. Men are the predominant perpetrators of IPV in the Gambia. The study employed a cross-sectional design using a qualitative approach utilizing phenomenology focused on the participants lived experiences. The study was conducted in Basse in the Upper River Region in The Gambia. The study purposefully sampled 26 respondents, all of whom were married. Semi-Structured in-depth interviews were administered to the respondents in Mandinka, Wolof and Serahuli to collect the study data. Both deductive and inductive approaches were used to develop the codebook and themes relevant to the study data. The participants expressed various ideas regarding IPV, with the general perspectives suggesting the causes, effects, and ultimate probable solutions to the phenomenon. The respondents interviewed believed that both women and men bared the responsibility of IPV. Varying connotations were placed on the individual's responsibility towards perpetrating IPV with men seen as physically and financially violent compared to women. Solutions to the IPV problem were seen as both external and internal, with government intervention being offered up as a solution. The overall response in the study indicated that there was a general understanding of IPV and a need to educate both men and women of its dangers to the overall health. The finding of this study shows that further needed on a large scale to understand the dynamics of IPV in The Gambia. This will help in designing sustainable solutions to the IPV problem. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2022; 26[9]: 76-84).

Keywords: Intimate partner, males, perception, violence, URR, the Gambia

Résumé

La violence conjugale (VPI) est une forme de violence basée sur le genre qui est un problème de santé publique. Les effets sur la santé de la VPI ont des effets en cascade sur le bien-être financier, émotionnel, sexuel et physique de la famille. L'Afrique subsaharienne porte un lourd fardeau de violence conjugale. En Gambie, le domestique est répandu, avec plus de 80% des femmes estimant qu'il est justifié qu'un homme batte sa femme. Les hommes sont les principaux auteurs de VPI en Gambie. L'étude a utilisé une conception transversale utilisant une approche qualitative utilisant une phénoménologie axée sur les expériences vécues par les participants. L'étude a été menée à Basse dans la région du fleuve supérieur en Gambie. L'étude a délibérément échantillonné 26 répondants, tous mariés. Des entretiens approfondis semi-structurés ont été administrés aux répondants en Mandinka, Wolof et Serahuli pour collecter les données de l'étude. Des approches déductives et inductives ont été utilisées pour développer le livre de codes et les thèmes pertinents pour les données de l'étude. Les participants ont exprimé diverses idées concernant la VPI, les perspectives générales suggérant les causes, les effets et les solutions ultimes probables au phénomène. Les répondants interrogés pensaient que les femmes et les hommes dévoilaient la responsabilité de la violence conjugale. Diverses connotations ont été placées sur la responsabilité de l'individu dans la perpétration de VPI avec des hommes considérés comme physiquement et financièrement violents par rapport aux femmes. Les solutions au problème de la VPI étaient considérées à la fois comme externes et internes, l'intervention du gouvernement étant proposée comme solution. La réponse globale de l'étude a indiqué qu'il y avait

une compréhension générale de la VPI et qu'il était nécessaire d'éduquer les hommes et les femmes sur ses dangers pour la santé en général. Les conclusions de cette étude montrent qu'il est encore nécessaire à grande échelle de comprendre la dynamique de la violence conjugale en Gambie. Cela aidera à concevoir des solutions durables au problème de la VPI. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2022; 26[9]: 76-84).

Mots-clés: Partenaire intime, hommes, perception, violence, URR, Gambie

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life"¹. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is an important form of GBV which poses a great threat to the physical and mental health of those affected¹. IPV is any assault and coercion by an intimate partner leading to physical, mental or sexual injury^{1,2}.

IPV is a public health and human right problem²⁻⁴, affecting people from varying sociocultural, religious and economic backgrounds^{5,6}. IPV can be committed against men or women; however, studies have shown that women of reproductive age are mostly affected with men being the likely perpetrators^{2,7}. World Health Organisation (WHO) in a recent study done in multiple countries found that worldwide, the prevalence of IPV varied from 15% to 71% with greater than 30% of women of reproductive age have been victims of either physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime^{8,9}. Evidence suggests that there are regional variations in the prevalence of IPV with Africa especially sub-Saharan Africa bearing a majority of the burden^{10,11}. IPV in this region is generally perceived as a sociocultural norm due to the highly patriarchal nature of the cultures prevalent among the Africans^{4,12-14}. In this region IPV is often perceived as a means to discipline women as they are often seen to be under the control of their husbands^{15,16}. The World Bank reported that 14 out of 15 countries with a great percentage of women indicating that wife-beating is justifiable were in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)¹⁷.

Both research and anecdotal evidence suggests that violence against women is prevalent in the Gambia. Although the Gambia has legal provisions for criminal prosecution for domestic violence; in reality, cases of IPV are usually settled within the family or outside the confines of the

law¹⁸. Also, there are provisions of laws against rape and assault; however, rape by a spouse in the context of marriage is not an offence recognized by the law¹⁹. Greater than 80% of Gambian women believe that it is justified for a man to beat his wife¹⁹. Researchers in a cross-sectional study among pregnant women in the Gambia reported that 61.8% of participants reported IPV, with verbal forms being more prevalent²⁰.

With evidence suggesting IPV is highly prevalent in the Gambia with men being the predominant perpetrators; it becomes imperative to understand the male perception of IPV and factors that influence its practice. This will help understand the drivers of IPV in the Gambia to further mitigate and prevent it. Also, there is a gap in knowledge on the opinion of men on IPV and the determinants of these behaviours among men in The Gambia. Therefore, the present study aimed to determine the perceptions of male partners towards intimate partner violence in The Gambia.

Methods

Study design and study area

This study used a qualitative method and a cross-sectional design. The study took a phenomenological method, which emphasizes that only those who have witnessed a phenomenon can characterize it as a lived experience²¹. As a result, people's own experiences are interpreted to reveal reality. The researchers were able to explore and describe the subjective views of male partners on intimate partner violence by using phenomenology in this study. The study took place in Basse (URR). The Gambia is divided into seven (7) administrative regions two of which are municipalities. The Upper River Region (URR) is one of the 5 administrative regions in the country. People in this region have the lowest ratings on social indicators compared to other regions in the country²². The primary health care facilities provide health services to people of the communities around its catchment. The study period was from February 23rd to May 10th, 2019.

Recruitment of participants

In this study, 26 males were selected. The sample size was deemed to cover the major themes needed to generate information on male partners' perceptions²³. Males who were married or partnered and are residing in the URR for more than 6 months were considered eligible to participate in this study. Participants in this study were selected using the convenience sampling technique. The female partners that came for antenatal at Basse reproductive and child health (RCH) clinic were met and through convenience, the numbers of their partners were taken. The eligible partners were called on the phone and those who consented to the interview were met at a convenient place to be interviewed. Two of the males that were contacted however declined the request to participate.

Data collection techniques and tools

The primary qualitative data gathering method in phenomenology is the in-depth interview (IDI)²⁴. After participants had given their agreement, IDIs were done at a time that was convenient for them. Before the audio-recorded interviews, the participants were asked for their informed consent. Furthermore, secrecy was guaranteed. All the interviews were done in Mandinka and two other local languages (Wolof and Serahuli) by the primary investigator and trained research assistants. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes on average. The interviewers utilized a semi-structured interviewing guide. To extract enough information from research participants, the interview guide was pre-tested and more probe items were included.

The interview guide was preceded with sociodemographic data. The guide was used to collect information on themes such as; understanding of violence, cause of IDV, providing financial resources, controlling behaviours, physical or sexual assault and consequences of violence. These were also translated into the local language (Mandinka or Wolof) in the IDV for easy understanding of the questions. Before the interviews began, the aim of the study was described to each selected respondent, and their informed consent was acquired. Written informed consent was also obtained for the use of an audio recorder, together with assurances that the recordings would be kept private.

More probing questions were added once the tools were built and pilot-tested, eliciting comprehensive replies from the participants. Following the interviews, field notes detailing the first interviewee's reactions to the interview, as well as pertinent observations such as the respondent's demeanor, were taken. The information obtained was kept in a secure location with only the study team having access. In this study, the Lincoln and Guba metrics for ensuring qualitative trustworthiness were used. The method utilized include a long-term engagement between the researchers and the subjects of the study, followed by member screening to guarantee credibility²⁵.

Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were read several times more and any grammatical problems were corrected. Deductive and inductive analysis were employed in a theme analysis²⁶. Based on the study's aims and the topics discussed during the interviews, a codebook was produced. Each transcript was opened in, and each sentence was read line by line and coded into nodes. To develop themes, the coding was examined, with some nodes reorganized and others combined. As the coding progressed, the codebook that had been created was updated. The table of themes was then analyzed once main and sub-themes were found. In the result section, some of the most profound quotes were chosen and presented.

Results

A total of 26 in-depth interviews were conducted with men who were married. The findings are categorised under the following headings, sociodemographic characteristics of participants, general perspectives on IPV, consequences of IPV, the reason for IPV and forms of violence perpetrated by men and women. Information encompassing the understanding of the male partners on IPV and its causes, their perceived consequences and conclusive statement, was analyzed to capture their general perception about IPV.

General perspectives on IPV

The common understanding of IPV among the interviewed men was that: Violence is a product of

a wrong marriage. Some of the respondents described violence as being foundational to lack of due respect for each other by the partners; some described it as a manipulation by close persons to either the man or the woman, through use of witchcraft and spiritual powers, with a view to jeopardizing the joy of the relationship; some other respondents described violence as any form of fight or deprivation between the partners in a relationship; while some respondents described violence as a product of untrue love between the partners. A few responses curled from the men during the interview is presented as follows:

“IPV is something very ugly in a marriage. Between a man and a woman, there should be giving of due respect to each other. This goes to the man especially; he needs to give the woman her due respect, because he is the one responsible for the woman...” (51 yr/o IDV 024).

Another participant had this to say about intimate partner violence:

“It can be because of enemies and the kind of person you marry and the type of friends she keeps. Because if she is married and her friend is not, she (her friend) could do her best to ensure that that marriage does not work. Those friends can use witchcraft or marabout to ruin the relationship because initially the marriage is sweet but as time goes on you will not even know where the problem comes from...bad people also would do their best to come between you and your wife just to ruin the relationship. ‘I have seen her here or there’ they’ll say ‘oh she’s like this or like that’ jus to ruin the marriage...if you as the man are not careful, even if you see her talking with another man, even if the person is your own friend or visitor, seeing her joke or offer the person some water you could become jealous and thus lead you to think perhaps what people have been telling me about this woman is actually true and thus begin to be violent towards her and therefore make rules that she can’t keep. Violence is the work of the enemies; these enemies could be the friends of the man or the woman...” (43 yr/o IDV 003)

“When two people are not truly in love and you make them marry each other it could end up in violence among the partners and subsequent

regret. But if they love each other and decide to marry there is less chance of violence.” (61 yr/o 008)

Perception of the men towards the consequences of IPV

The perception of the men towards the consequences of IPV towards the partners involved was expressed in negative undertones; majorly encompassing loss of love and respect for each other; anger and malice within homes; short-term separation and eventual divorce; retrogression in family goals and plans; poor children upbringing emanating from repeated witness of domestic violence or lack of empathy received by step parents. A few of the responses on the consequences of IPV as mentioned by the men during the interview is presented below:

“It leads to both partners losing respect for each other. The love which was once between the two disappears; it takes away honor from the marriage. IPV brings sadness in the marriage. It leads to reduction of the love in the marriage. Constant violence in fact gets you to the point where in you can’t even love each other. The two people will thus lose respect for each other and it can subsequently lead to divorce.” (28 yr/o 0018)

The men particularly emphasized the decline in love and respect violence brings into families, which can be traced to recurring and long-occurring anger and malice between partners; which is then consequential to separation or divorce, either masterminded by one of the partners or the family; and then its eventual impact on the children, as they are predisposed to poor parenting, lack of good upbringing, survival lifestyle from step-parents and uncontrolled bad-habit picking from peers or toxic parents.

“Violence could lead to divorce and when that happens the children suffer because the man will marry another woman and the woman would get married to another man, violence only brings regret. The children will suffer. They might not develop a good character as they might spend time with both parents and be taught different things by both parents.” (60 yr/o 004).

“Violence leads to many things but to mention 3. Divorce; because the lady’s family can say

that they don't want to see their daughter suffering and then intervene by separating the two and then look for someone else to marry her. Love; constant violence in the marriage could diminish the love married partners have for each other. Children; the children could be frustrated by constant violence. The children also suffer as they might end up being with step parents where there might be limited empathy and understanding towards them. In most homes, we observe that children whose mothers are not around tend to suffer more than those whose mothers are around." (61 yr/o 0015).

Reasons for IPV by male partners

Major reasons for intimate partner violence, as emphasized by the respondents were: Lack of understanding of each other's comments or motives; inability of the man to provide for woman's desired needs; hearing ill-statements about one's partner, from friends or family; denying the husband sex; deliberate deprivation of the wife from financial benefits or dues; forced or family influenced marriages; lack of education – religious and formal education. As mentioned above, reasons identified from the interview as determinant of IPV were diverse, but inter-related; while some respondents pointed out to faults from both partners, some hinted at faults from one of the partners, some indicated external and background factors could be mainly responsible for IPV between the partners. A few of the responses is seen below:

"Peoples wealth status differs, therefore if a man cannot provide fish money equal to his wife's friend or neighbor, this can produce violence...If for instance she goes with a neighbor and the neighbor takes hundred dalasis to the market daily, and you can only provide D25. The woman has a tendency to compare her fish money to that of her friends and she is unhappy with what you give her and this could lead to violence...If you listen to people speak ill of your wife too, this could lead to violence." (43 yr/o IDV 021)

Forms of violence perpetrated by men and women

Common types of violence reported to have been experienced or witnessed by the interviewed men

were reported to connote financial/economic violence, physical violence, and psychological violence. These various types of violence are key determinants to intimate partner violence experienced within the homes, as reported by the men. Participants reiterated lack of love among partners precipitated by forced marriages being a critical factor in triggering violence among partners. For instance, one of the participants retorted:

"In our culture our family gets you a wife whether you like it or not. Some people out of respect or courtesy for their parents oblige and marry people they are not necessarily in love with just to please their parents. Those are the kind of marriages that breeds violence...also, another factor is lack of education and by education, I mean both Arabic and English education, and to know and understand human behavior. Lack of education might lead to violence by either the man or the woman." (61 yr/o 008).

"...if I want to have sex with my wife and she's not willing, this could get me angry and lead to me bottling up anger against her and a slight mistake from her could trigger a fight..." (60 yr/o 004).

Participants also expressed their views with respect to the forms of violence perpetrated by men on their intimate partners. Some of the most common forms of violence as stated by the participants are physical, economic, and sexual violence. One of the participants noted that

"...violence can be the man refusing to give the women money when she asks for it or refusing to grant the woman permission to go out when she wants to." (51 yr/o IDV 001).

Another said, "A man can beat his wife up..." (IDI 46 yr/o 002) in response to what forms of violence can be perpetrated by men on their spouses.

"...they might want sex but the woman refuses to provide or comply and this leads to forceful sex if the man isn't able to control himself or perhaps introduce vindictiveness." (36 yr/o IDI 007)

The participants described the forms of violence perpetrated by women and this includes being disobedient to their husbands and challenges their authority, others noted that the wife makes demands

(financial) that they know their husbands cannot provide just to frustrate them, one respondent said

“Women can be violent towards their husbands by being disobedient to them.” (IDI 46 yr/o 002
 “...she can be violent towards you by challenging your authority in the home. She can even humiliate you in public or reveal your secret in public...”(43 yr/o IDV 003)

“They make demands (usually financial) that you as a man can't provide women can also deliberately refuse to have sex with their husbands when they want to annoy their husbands.” (61 yr/o 008).

Suggestions on IPV prevention

Major suggestions from the participants were directed towards control measures which encompasses: Government intervention to settling marriage disputes; having multiple wives to cater for the men's sexual urge; adopting patience and endurance in marriage, by both partners. The preventive measures elucidated by the interviewed men were: Avoiding forced or family influenced marriages, as they have been most times built on family affiliations; not hastily getting into marriages, without having a common understanding between both partners; men should not plunge into having multiple wives without assurance of being able to bear the financial responsibilities. Responses obtained from the interview are presented as follows:

“The government should intervene and help settle disputes within marriages.” (51 yr/o IDV 011).

“People should have two wives so that when one refuses you sex, you can leave her alone and get it from the other. But I will obviously be angry at being deprived of sex.” (IDI 46 yr/o 002)

“.... parents should avoid forced marriages. Our parents should stop forcing their children to marry people they are not in love with.” (60 yr/o 004).

“...sometimes though what brings violence is that someone has one wife and cannot adequately take care of the needs of his home and perhaps wants to bring in/marry another wife. This will surely not go down well with the first wife because she knows the poverty and hardship they are enduring and won't be happy

seeing her husband add to that hardship by taking more responsibilities...” (52 yr/o IDI 006)

“People should not rush into marriage know who you want to marry first. Get to know each other well...Truth must be told to each other before marriage. There must be love between the partner.” (61 yr/o 008)..

Discussion

General perspectives on IPV

The study findings identified that intimate partner violence was a result of myriad of triggers that are common but unique to different intimate relationship. All of the men interviewed in the study had an idea of different forms of IPV and reported different triggers leading to violence. Frustration, shame, loss of love, loss of respect, unplanned and forced marriages, spiritual and outsider interference into a couple's marriage were cited as some of the key causation or triggers resulting to IPV.

There was a general agreement that IPV is a crude way of dealing conflict in marriage. Most of the respondents viewed IPV as an act that happens in the confines of marriage and did not highlight other types of intimate relationship violence. The study findings also indicated a general increased awareness in IPV among men in Basse community. This is comparable with studies from other countries like Tanzania exploring the perception of gender and intimate partner violence²⁷. Men were seen as the default perpetrators for IPV as they are seen as being responsible for women in the marriages. Also, culture was seen as an indirect propagator of IPV with families forcing the children to get married to partner without consideration for love. This is in line with findings in Uganda and other sub-Saharan countries where loveless marriages and lack of choice in partner trigger IPV²⁸.

Perception of the men towards the consequences of IPV

IPV was seen as a precursor to loss of love, separation, malice and divorce which would eventually result for undesirable household outcomes leading the children to adopting toxic behaviours from the parents and continuing the

generation of violence and cited in^{20,29,30} where early exposure to IPV among children results to normalization of abuse.

Reasons for IPV by male partners

Male partners perceived IPV to be associated with a combination of external and internal factors in the marriage and not necessarily internalized anger only. Jealousy associated with enemies' interference and friends were seen as an important motivator towards perpetrators exercising IPV. The study findings were in line with^{20,29} one act of IPV from one partner instigated another act of violence, especially sexual and economic violence.

Similar to other studies conducted in the Gambia and other parts of sub-Saharan African, low education levels and religious influence played a part in IPV. Partners without good education or right religious ideology tend to be more abusive²⁰.

Forms of violence perpetrated by men and women

While traditionally IPV was viewed as a gendered crime perpetrated by males, the study findings indicated that both men and women can be perpetrators of IPV as in³¹. The study results associated male IPV to physical, economic, psychological and sexual while women mostly perpetrated sexual, emotional, and economic/financial violence towards their partners.

Suggestions on IPV prevention

The study participants suggested that marriage should be between partners who love each other and not influenced by parents which breeds resentment and leads to IPV. Solutions such multiple partners or wives were suggested as a means of reducing violence towards and individual partner. However, this did not account for emotional and financial violence and only catered for men's need in marriage. Respondents believed that government interventions to settling marriage disputes will reduce the incidents of IPV in Basse community. Also, delayed marriages also were presented as a solution to solving IPV as it would allow room for partners to build trust and understand one another³². The findings suggested that partners did not take responsibility in changing IPV and suggested

external solution in line with²⁰ study where both perpetrators and the abused did not take action towards reporting or stopping IPV.

Strengths and limitations

The methodology approach used in the study allowed for in-depth expression of views by the respondents providing thick description. The limitations to the study includes the small sample size as a the sample size of this qualitative survey is small, may not be representative of the general study population and hence cannot be generalized. Also, the study only sampled male participants which could imply gender bias in the results.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Review Board of the University College of Medicine, University of Ibadan in Nigeria. Ethical clearance was further be obtained for permission to conduct this study from the Research and Publication Committee of the University of the Gambia (RePUBLIC) and then The Gambia Government/Medical Research Council Joint Ethics Committee (Reference number: R018031V1.1). The goal of the study was communicated to the participants in a language they understand, and each study participant's consent agreement was acquired before data collection began. The participants were informed that they had the option to participate or not engage in the study. Furthermore, the respondents had the option of withdrawing from the study at any moment throughout the interview without having to give a reason. The participants were told that the investigators would handle the data solely and that they would stay entirely anonymous in the report. They were also told that if they wished, they may peruse the transcripts and sources. Furthermore, the confidentiality of the information received from each participant was preserved, and the lead investigator kept a softcopy of the database on a password-protected computer.

Conclusion

This study emphasized on the causes, forms and possible solutions to IPV as perceived by male partners. The respondents identified that IPV

hinders progress, results in regret and loss of respect between partners. Understanding IPV in a community is crucial, not only does the effect of IPV determine health outcomes for both men and women it also determines the economic output of an individual. The study focused on the perception of men partners towards IPV perpetrated by both men and women. There was a general feeling that both men and women had a responsibility to carry when it comes to IPV and not just a skewed gendered approach. In The Gambia, solutions to IPV are not yet sustainable and there is need to encourage community led solutions.

Recommendations

The study recommends an increased sample size in order to create a database of intimate partner violence ideologies to guide in creating community strategies to empower both men and women to find solutions to deal with the phenomenon. There is need to explore other forms of partner violence that come with the increased use of social networking platforms and how this has changed traditional perception of partner violence.

Availability of data and materials

There is no restriction on the availability of the data, and all data used in the study are already provided as part of this article.

Competing interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests

Funding

Pan African University covered all expenses related to data collections.

Author's contribution

JWJ, OIL and TAM made substantial contributions to the conception, design, literature search, acquisition of the data, analysis, interpretation of data, drafting of the manuscript and the critical review of the draft manuscripts. AB, BJ, OIF and OAO assisted with the design, analysis, and interpretations of the data and the critical evaluation

of the manuscript drafts. All authors read and approved the final draft of the manuscript.

Acknowledgements

Our deepest gratitude goes to PAULESI for facilitating this study. Finally, our respect goes to all respondents and data collectors in this study.

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