

VALIDATING THE EVIDENCE OF VIOLENCE IN PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS WITH REGARD TO XHOSA AFRICAN WOMEN

Nontando Jennifer Mesatywa, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa

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Abstract

This article reports on how African women understand the forms and meaning of violence in partner relationships. The findings suggest that many African women experience physical, emotional and economic abuse. Some of the reasons for abuse which emerged include a patriarchal system, alcohol abuse, infidelity and failure to support children financially. The influence of Xhosa African practices on violent partner relationships was explored. The study indicates a need for ethnically sensitive interdisciplinary programmes for social service practitioners, and an effective, accessible legal system for rural women to reduce incidences of abuse.

## **VALIDATING THE EVIDENCE OF VIOLENCE IN PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS WITH REGARD TO XHOSA AFRICAN WOMEN**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Gender-based violence is increasingly attracting national and international recognition as an issue of human rights abuse. This is the reason why Millennium Goal No. 3 is envisaged in the world of gender equity, equality and fairness in the treatment of women. Although domestic violence seems to be a widespread phenomenon in South Africa, not much has been documented about the perceptions and experiences of African women in violent partner relationships. Much information is based on eclectic data sources, whilst reliable statistics on African women in abusive relationships are inadequate, unavailable or scarce. However, results obtained in a study covering three provinces – the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and Limpopo – confirmed the widely held belief that partner violence against women is a major problem in South Africa (Jewkes, Penn-Kekana, Levin, Ratsaka & Schrieber, 1999:20). The level of abuse reported in that study indicated a general under-reporting of abuse in South Africa. Some women were ashamed of the abuse and probably regarded it as a private matter; others did not wish to denigrate their husbands or partners, and some were afraid to admit that they were being abused. Some even viewed their abusive experiences as “normal”.

The research findings of a study conducted in urban (Bellville) and rural (Paarl) areas in the Western Cape indicated an overall increase of 37.6% from 1999 to 2000 in the number of women applying for protection orders (Mathews & Abrahams, 2001:2). The study found that the most common forms of violence reported by women were physical and psychological abuse. In most of these cases the women experienced both forms of abuse.

Parenzee and Smythe (2003) investigated experiences, perceptions and attitudes regarding domestic violence among Coloured and African farm workers on selected farms in the Western Cape. Their findings suggest that both Coloured and African women living on these farms were vulnerable to domestic violence. Artz (1999) stated that this may be a result of easy access to alcohol, unequal wages, unfavourable working conditions and cramped living conditions. According to Human Rights Watch (2001), Southern Cape African women in violent partner relationships encountered problems in gaining access to basic social and legal services because of lack of transport and telecommunication services. In addition, they had to travel substantial distances to reach the police and the magistrate’s offices. There were also barriers to the effective implementation of the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act, No. 116 of 1998, along with a lack of police assistance, and prejudice towards the victims of violence in partner relationships (Fortune & Enger, 2005; Mathews & Abrahams, 2001; Parenzee, Artz & Moul, 2001).

Generally, one out of every six women in South Africa experiences physical violence from her male partner (Vetten, 2005). Despite the prevalence of abuse, however, the nature of the violence is not well understood. Firstly, the methods of recording instances of violence are not consistent. Secondly, violence itself may be described in various ways which include grievous bodily harm, attempted murder, assault and others (Camerer & Kotze, 1998). In South Africa there is a greater need for research to provide deeper understanding of African women's experiences in violent partner relationships.

Cultural factors, such as gender relations within family systems, often place African women in situations that differ from those of other nationalities or races (Collins, 2000:124). It is also likely that a simple application of theory generated from studies of women of other races may be insufficient when working with African women in violent partner relationships, Gender relations are still inscribed in some of the socio-legal practices. Therefore, information derived from an African context as a primary source may contribute to an understanding of African people's perspective on politico-economic empowerment and autonomy (Fineman & Mykitiuk, 1994:97).

Traditional ideologies of patriarchy exclude African women from settlement of domestic disputes. Even in matrilineal societies, women are still subordinate to men and there is still an unequal division of labour based on gender. This indicates that African women may endure violent behaviour in partner relationships, but find it hard to rebel as a result of traditional socialisation (Busia & Abena, 1993; Masuku, 2007; Parenzee & Smythe, 2003).

## **STUDY AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

The broad research study from which this article emanates was designed to investigate the perceptions and experiences of Xhosa African women with respect to violent partner relationships; the study was undertaken in Ilitha Psychological and Community Support Centre, Ezibeleni, near Queenstown, Eastern Cape Province. The main aim and objective of this article is to seek an understanding of the forms of violent partner relationships among African women, what this means to the women, as well as the influence of African practices on violent partner relationships.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT AND FOCUS**

The dearth of studies on African women in violent partner relationship may result in a lack of understanding of their perceptions and experiences. There is a need to gain an understanding of what African female victims perceive and experience socially and emotionally, and to explore how they can be empowered (Trevethick, 2000:80).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD**

A qualitative exploratory and descriptive research design was applied, because very little is known about the perceptions and experiences of Xhosa African women in violent partner relationships (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2005; Franklin & Jordan, 1995:281). Twenty (20) participants from the Ilitha Community Psychological Centre at Ezibeleni Township in the Eastern Cape were purposely selected for interviews and five

others for a focus group discussion. Ilitha Community Psychological Centre is a non-governmental organisation based at Ezibeleni Township near Queenstown. The Centre provides psycho-social services to this community and is also a crisis centre for cases of gender-based violence. It has about 600 clients and was of interest to the researcher as it is the only comprehensive community service centre that has a link with the Department of Psychology and Social Work at the University of Fort Hare.

The study was conducted in two phases: phase one consisted of detailed in-depth and one-off face-to-face interviews, while the second phase was a one-off focus group session. Interviews and the questions were in Xhosa, the participants' home language. This allowed participants to describe events in their home language by mutual arrangement, with their informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality, and in a non-condemning atmosphere (Babbie, 2007; Kruger, 2008). The Ethics Committee of the University of Stellenbosch also gave ethical clearance to the study.

The individual interview schedule comprised of in-depth interviews covering personal details; history of partner violence and the actual nature of the violent incidents; nature of social support and empowerment services offered by the psychological community centre; and other available formal and informal resources. The focus group interview consisted of five in-depth interviews with the following main themes: personal details, perceptions and experiences of abuse, nature of abuse, the meaning and impact of the act of abuse, perceptions of abuse and need for services, and social service practitioners' empowering services.

The researcher used a tape recorder for data collection, The data from the interviews including the focus group discussion were transcribed and translated. In keeping with the qualitative requirements, the data analysis searched for shared themes, trends and understanding as recommended by Rubin and Rubin (1995:234). The data were substantiated by the existing theory as a frame of reference (Mouton & Marais, 1990:103-104). Data were therefore analysed using an interpretive approach and triangulation for both individual and focus group discussion.

## **Results and discussion**

The results of the study and discussion of findings will be presented in accordance with the aim and objectives mentioned above. This section discusses the four major themes emerging from the one-off interviews and the five major themes emerging from the one-off focus group discussion and how these themes relate to the literature. De Vos *et al.* (2005) state that themes provide an explanation of how or why things happen and they also offer descriptions of how people do or should behave.

### **Themes and sub-themes**

#### **Forms of violence**

The concept of violence is referred to in a variety of ways and the term has been used interchangeably with others such as abuse, battery and domestic violence in this study. Violence lies on a continuum that may include such diverse acts as slapping, coerced sex, threatened beatings, hitting with sticks and other objects, pushing, assaulting with

fists, violent rape, stabbing with a knife, threatening with a gun, issuing threats and public humiliation (Nicholas, 2008). Women in violent partner relationships may encounter different kinds of abuse, therefore the forms of abuse were investigated and then the results are discussed.

### **THEME 1: FORMS OF VIOLENT PARTNERSHIP ABUSE**

A discussion on the forms of violent partnership abuse experienced by African women will be presented according to the sub-themes and categories as outlined in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**FORMS OF VIOLENT PARTNERSHIP ABUSE**

<b>Theme one: forms of violent partnership abuse</b>	
<b>Sub-themes</b>	<b>Categories</b>
Physical abuse	Beating
Sexual abuse	Forced sex
Verbal and psychological abuse	Verbal insults
	Oppressive and controlling
Economic abuse	Refusing to give money
	Giving inadequate money

#### **Physical abuse**

The majority of participants from both interviews (18 or 80%) and focus group discussion (4 or 80%) referred to physical abuse as a form of battery. Some of the experiences were cited as:

*“He kicks, slaps and sometimes uses a knobkerrie, also beats the children. He broke my arm and also took my son and threw him by the scruff of the neck, banged his head against the wall and he fainted. It was in school that the teacher noticed that his arm was broken.”*

*“He beat me and used a sewing needle to make drawings on my skin with the needle. He even wrote his name on one of my breasts. He told me that there is no other man that would want me.”*

These findings concur with those of Vundule, Jewkes, Maforah and Jordan (2001), who mentioned that physical beatings were the most general and common means by which some men assaulted their female partners to enforce discipline and control over them. This usually occurred when the man perceived the female partner as having transgressed certain “often implicit rules” underlying the relationship (McCue, 2008). The women might also have resisted male attempts to enforce these “rules” and control of their behaviour. This could be due to actual or suspected sexual infidelity, their sexual refusals, or their acts of resistance to male partners’ attempts to dictate the terms of the relationship. In explaining their violence, men may frequently refer superficially to a loss of control caused by anger or mood changes exacerbated by the use of alcohol and drugs (Visser, 2007).

The findings of the study also indicate that the acts of physical abuse caused not only immediate injury but would also result in many psychosomatic disorders that might

include chronic pain, disfigurement, physical limitations and miscarriages. Some would suffer injuries from physical abuse, such as broken bones, facial trauma such as fractured mandibles and tendon or ligament injuries. Some abused women are also most likely to be coerced into substance abuse by their abusers as a mean to maintain control over them (Campbell, 1998). These findings indicate that male partners at times used physical violence to settle disputes with their women. These actions may be exacerbated by the use of alcohol by the men.

This kind of physical abuse also appears in Kim's (2000) findings that link the abuse with terms such as punishment or discipline, even with some form of approval by their communities, because they claim to maintain order in their homes.

### **Sexual abuse**

Some participants (3 or 15%) who were interviewed highlighted enforced sex as another form of physical abuse. The focus group participants 4 (or 80%) stated that it was difficult to report forced sex, because it was a taboo for African women to divulge and talk about sex openly to another person, including relatives. Some participants said:

*“He forces himself on me and would have sex with me even if I have not consented to it, he refuses to have protected sex or use condoms and he doesn't care how I feel.”*

*“I can't report about sex matters as he has a right to have sex with me when he wants to. I cannot discuss it with anybody as my in-laws will be angry with me as culturally sex matters are perceivable as private.”*

Forced sex is a form of rape which often results in genital and other bodily injuries (Christofides, Webster, Jewkes, Penn-Kekana, Martin, Abrahams & Kim, 2003). The findings of the study correspond with those of Moser and Clark (2001), who state that silence is locked into loss and cultural differences, which highlights that if a woman speaks out she may destroy possibilities of a positive future for herself. Consequently, in several indigenous cultures words that describe rape and genitals may not be mentioned even in front of adults (Dunkle, Jewkes, Brown, Gray & McIntyre, 2003). Furthermore, sexual assaults may not be readily disclosed because of intense feelings of fear of further trauma from the abuser, lack of confidentiality, embarrassment, stigmatisation and not being believed, fear of retaliation by the perpetrator, shame and a perception that such reporting would be unlikely to result in punishment of the abuser (Christofides *et al.*, 2003). In some instances, the abusers may be sexually promiscuous and this might place the woman at risk of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection. Some of the abusive men may refuse to use protection or condoms for safe sex and after receiving a diagnosis of a sexually transmitted disease or HIV infection may either not inform their female partners or blame them for the infection (Fortune & Enger, 2005).

Mataure, McFarland, Fritz, Kim, Woelk, Ray and Rutherford (2002) mention that as a result of sexual assaults women may be at risk of getting pregnant, suffer from post-traumatic stress, depression, chronic pelvic pain and may be at a greater risk of repeated sexual assault than other women. Loss of function at work and difficulties in sexual expression may manifest (Morojele, Flisher, Muller, Ziervogel, Reddy & Lombard,

2001). The women may become traumatised, shamed and live in fear of the abuser and may suffer from verbal and psychological abuse.

### **Verbal and psychological abuse**

In this study some participants (15 or 75%) who were involved in the individual interviews explained verbal and psychological abuse as emotionally distressing and a manifestation of insulting behaviour. Eight (40%) individual participants experienced oppressive and controlling attitudes from their partners. This was confirmed by all the focus group participants (5 or 100%). Regarding this, two participants stated:

*“He humiliates and verbally insults me almost every time. He is very oppressive and controlling and he calls me useless, stupid, and not able to control money and make people look down on me.”*

*“He emotionally abuses me about the fact that I could not bear children and humiliates me in front of friends and he told me that whether I liked it or not he was going to go outside our marriage to have children.”*

The study confirms that psychological and emotional abuse is linked to controlling behaviour by one's partner. Emotional abuse is also perceived as a powerful weapon that contributes to pain; it depersonalises the victim and increases the power of the abuser, as argued by Paymar (2000:83). Kunfaa, Dogbe, Mackay and Marshall (2002) also affirm that degrading and insulting utterances may cause these women to suffer from shame, isolation and a sense of loss of dignity and self-worth. Murray (1994) also attests that under the customary law, Section 11(3) of the Black Administration Act, No. 38 of 1927, male partners were head of the household and had control of the family property and children also “belonged” to the husband's family. Martin (2001) mention that these patterns of behaviour place a woman in a state of confusion and she may usually begin to question the severity of the abuse and may gradually and progressively limit contact with outside sources of help, such as social welfare agencies, health and medical care facilities (Turner, Ndira, Akello & Bukare, 2003).

### **Economic abuse**

Generally, participants in the study described economic abuse as controlling behaviour that led to economic hardships. During the individual interviews (12 or 60%) participants mentioned that their partners would refuse to give them money to maintain the households, with four (80%) participants in the focus group also highlighting the same. Other participants (7 or 30%) in the individual interviews and participants (5 or 100%) in the focus group mentioned that their partners gave them inadequate money, but spent the rest on liquor, in taverns or on girlfriends and were secretive about their earnings. One of the participants stated:

*“My husband never gave me money and is always reluctant to pay fees and household commodities.”*

Another participant said:

*“He used most of his money to buy liquor and spend some on girlfriends. Sometimes I had to get money from relatives.”*

The findings of the study point to the fact that abusive men may also limit a woman's access to family money and resources, or take her pay cheque, wage or salary and provide her with only a small allowance. Societal discrimination in the workplace may also reinforce economic dependence because many women, especially those with minimal literacy, earn low wages and some men may fail to pay maintenance for their children (Giddens, 2006; Lein, Jacquet, Lewis, Cole & Williams, 2001). Francis (2000) suggests that the experiences of the different forms of abuse usually manifest in circumstances where the abused woman may fear for her life and hence find it difficult to leave the relationship (Suffla, Seedat & Nascimento, 2001; Visser, 2007). Therefore, women suffer in silence because of their economic dependence, poverty, lack of alternative shelter and fear of reprisal from the community. Ponton (2002) agrees with the finding that women's finances and allocated funds can be controlled at the discretion of their male partners. Financial abuse is also a structural constraint that leads to financial dependence of women on their male partners.

## **THEME 2: MEANING OF ABUSE FOR AFRICAN WOMEN**

Table 2 sums up the meaning of abuse for African women. It is based on the findings from both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion.

**TABLE 2**  
**THE MEANING OF ABUSE**

<b>Theme three: Meaning of abuse</b>	
<b>Sub-theme</b>	<b>Categories</b>
Feelings and experience	Degrading Lack of care and love Feel trapped Humiliation Poverty

The categories relating to the women's feelings and experience will now be discussed.

### **Degrading**

This study investigated what abuse meant to African women in violent partner relationships. Walker (2000) cited feeling degraded as one of the categories whereby the abused woman exhibits symptoms that are consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder, a diagnosis commonly given to persons who have suffered severe trauma. The findings of the study revealed that all participants (20 or 100%) mentioned that abuse was personally degrading and they were in constant fear of their lives. This was further confirmed by all participants (5 or 100%) from the focus group, who stated that the abused woman may lose self-value as well as the respect of society. Some of the participants said:

*“I have been in constant fear of being violated and the experience and meaning of abuse is degrading, being oppressed, assaulted and labelled as a useless person, who is stupid, worthless and undermined.”*

*“It is degrading but I love him and he always looks sorry afterwards and I believe he will change. To me it means he dominates me because I come from a poor family background and he punishes me when he feels I transgressed.”*

The literature corroborates these findings as it has been found that virtually all accounts of abuse are degrading, and there is an anticipation of further male partner violence that leaves women in much greater fear of injuries in situations of domestic violence (Moffit, Robins & Caspi, 2001).

### **Lack of care and love**

Diminishing love and care was reported by three quarters (15 or 75%) of the participants. The women mentioned that their partners hardly had time to show love and care for the family. In some cases, their partners would be contrite and ask for forgiveness. Some focus group members (4 or 80%) stated that although they loved their partners, there was lack of love and care on their partners' side as they would abuse them and then ask for forgiveness almost all the time. The participants stated the following:

*“Abuse means that my partner does not care nor love me. He beats me today and later calls for forgiveness and claims that he loves me!”*

*“He doesn't love me anymore, he claims that he still loves me but I provoke him into anger and then he always asks for forgiveness.”*

Budlender (2002) mentions that some men abuse their partners and in the aftermath would plead for forgiveness only to start the cycle of violence again. Some of these men do spend quality time with their families to show love and care, but they would rather spend money on entertainment (Zastrow, 2004); this is confirmed by the findings of this study.

### **Feeling trapped**

All participants (20 or 100%) in the interviews felt trapped in their abusive relationships but had minor children, who depended on male partners as providers and for shelter. The focus group participants (5 or 100%) mentioned that unsupportive families in their ordeal made them feel trapped in their circumstances. Some of them held that:

*“I feel trapped because I have children.”*

*“He is the main income provider and dominates me because he has power and money and I am unemployed.”*

Since women need economic resources to escape or leave abusive relationships, the extreme poverty of African rural women will generally make them feel more trapped and vulnerable to domestic violence, as confirmed by the findings of the study (Artz, 1999; Clarke, 2006).

### **Humiliation**

All the participants (20 or 100%) in the individual interviews and all of the focus group participants (5 or 100%) claimed that abuse was humiliating, because their children,

friends and community members usually witness the abuse. Some of the participants attested that:

*“Abuse is humiliating but family expectations, poverty and male domination makes you to stay and endure because of the children.”*

*“My husband shouts and beats me in front of my children and at times in the presence of his friends, and to me it’s humiliating.”*

The findings of the study concur with those of Walker (2000) and Hester, Pearson, Harwin and Abrahams (2007), who mention that women caught up in domestic violence may be humiliated by the act of abuse, and may learn to become passive as a way of coping with their violent spouse; they may have been conditioned to believe that they are powerless to get out of the violent situation.

### **Poverty**

During the individual interviews all participants (20 or 100%) claimed that coming from a poor family background meant that their partners could beat them, because it was difficult for them to leave with their children as their family members were poor and could not accommodate them. All (5 or 100%) of the participants in the focus group also emphasised that poor family backgrounds made them to be prone to partner abuse. They endured the abuse as they could not afford to get alternative accommodation and to become further impoverished. Participants stated:

*“To me it means that should I leave, my children won’t have any other place to stay and we can become destitute and poor. He doesn’t care and he is domineering and use his power and authority all the time.”*

*“Poverty and not having a supportive family makes me a target of violence.”*

These findings coincide with Wojcicki’s (2001) statement that the precarious, poor social and economic circumstances under which African women live in rural areas may contribute to their vulnerability to violent partner relationships and may limit their ability to escape it. Shortage of paid employment for rural women contributes to their general dependence on remittances from husbands and other family members and this make them prone to endure abusive circumstances. Moreover, Bennett (2004) states that the “*phuthuma* custom”, whereby the husband negotiates payment of compensation for mistreating the wife, may expose women to continued abuse. When African women leave an abusive relationship they may be forced or coerced to return to their partners as their impoverished fathers and families would have been compensated.

### **THEME 3: THE INFLUENCE OF AFRICAN PRACTICES ON VIOLENT PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS**

This study also examined the influence of African practices that made African women prone to violent partner relationships. The patriarchal system which prevails in African societies was mentioned as one of the factors that endorsed male domination and the subservient behaviour of women. It has also been noted that domestic violence among ethnic racial groups is attributable in part to poverty, and that traditional cultural values

encourage maintenance of male-dominated relationships (Bell & Matis, 2000). The African practices are discussed below.

### **Male domination**

All the participants who were interviewed viewed the Xhosa culture as contributing to male domination, which is entrenched by socialisation, as young girls are told to respect and obey their husbands. Four participants (80%) in the focus group mentioned that they were being dominated by males. One of the participants stated:

*“Socialisation has educated us to allow the male to dominate, to look upon the man as the head of family who has control in the home and must be respected.”*

Another participant noted:

*“Traditionally men have more power and authority compared to women and exert demands that I cannot fulfil.”*

It is noted that the findings of the study support Mqoke's (2003) statement that a culture with a “macho” concept of masculinity, which includes dominance, toughness or male honour, was found to prevail in high levels in cases of abuse against women. The patriarchal system that is dominant in African culture in particular entrenches traditional and cultural practices that contribute to the root causes of women abuse (Ojacor, 2005). As suggested by the findings of the study, this is usually acceptable in many African societies.

### **Head of household**

Traditional African culture relates to the experience of 18 (90%) participants, who regarded their partners as the heads of the households. Three (60%) participants in the focus group stated that their male partners had major power and authority, and their decisions were final in whatever was discussed. Some of the participants said:

*“Yes, tradition socialises us to accept that men are head of households. They have power on us and they are our ‘gods’.”*

*“Men as heads of household oppress us because we are told to obey and respect them even if they do not deserve it.”*

Yet Mqoke (2003) points out that violence against women has long been identified and disapproved of in Xhosa law. This indicates that the husband, although he is regarded as the head of a household, cannot do exactly as he pleases with his wife or abuse her. This also contravenes the principle of Xhosa law which states that women should not be abused. An old Xhosa maxim states that “*induku ayi namzi*”, meaning that there can be no peace or harmony where brute force (a stick) rules a home. Should the husband ill-treat the wife, the in-laws and elders would also speak to and counsel the couple. Xhosas believe that they can sort out their own problems amongst themselves without recourse to the justice system. However, should the abuse continue, the wife may leave the husband for her maiden home and the husband would be fined a bull, goat or a cow. The family may retain her and refuse to let her go back to her husband, which is referred to as “*telekwa*”, until the matter has been satisfactorily resolved.

In the living Xhosa law women are encouraged to seek police protection and lay criminal charges against their partners, especially in situations where the woman is severely injured. If the matter has been handled in a traditional court, the court of appeal is the magistrate's court. The perception that Xhosa law perpetuates violence against women is misplaced, as the act of partner abuse has never been sanctioned by Xhosa law (Mshunqane, 2007).

### **Secrecy**

Seventeen (85%) of the individual participants confirmed that they were socialised into keeping abuse and whatever else happened in a household as a family secret. Three (60%) participants from the focus group discussed their experiences of abuse with other family members such as relatives and in-laws in trying to find solutions for their experiences. Below are some of the participants' remarks:

*“You are told by your parents that family matters should be kept as a family secret and you cannot talk about your abuse matter to other people who are not family. I don't have any other alternative but to stay.”*

*“In Xhosa culture when you get married you are sworn into secrecy by in-laws and whatever happens within the family cannot be divulged.”*

Livingstone (2002) affirms that family secrets were referred to in cases where battery in a home or intimate relationship was continuous and hence the victim, as well as family members, does not divulge it or only reports it in worst-case scenarios. Secrecy was connected with social standing within the community, as the family would be shamed should knowledge of the abuse be divulged to other people.

### **Culture**

Eight (40%) of the participants who were interviewed doubted that culture contributed to male abuse, whilst three (15%) other participants did not believe Xhosa culture contributed to abusive behaviour. However, five (100%) of the focus group participants perceived culture as perpetuating partner abuse. Three quarters of the participants (15 or 75%) indicated the misuse and misinterpretation of cultural traditions, and this was reinforced by three participants from the focus group. Two participants remarked:

*“Yes, it is African culture that makes us prone to abuse because even parents used to go through the same situation and could not leave an abusive relationship because they did not want to disgrace the family name.”*

*“Traditional African culture condemns abuse and traditional courts are used to settle matters of partner abuse”.*

Ojacor (2005) and Dutton (2006) agree with the findings that domestic violence is rooted in a social and cultural context, and in public attitudes that prescribe what is or is not acceptable in intimate relationships, and that these values are entrenched in social and cultural norms. Londt (2004) refers to a Population Report which noted that, although culture can aggravate women's vulnerability, it also serves as a creative resource for intervention. These may include traditional cultural practices such as public

shaming and African *imbizo* or traditional family meetings that could be mobilised to address abusive partner relationships (Hemstreet & Vermeulen, 2007).

### **Customary rituals**

Fifteen participants (75%) mentioned that some forms of traditional practices such as customary rituals made them prone to abuse, as their partners would force them to work and be involved in the customary process irrespective of whether they wanted to or not. Additionally, (2 or 40%) participants from the focus group mentioned that they were beaten by their partners when they refused to take part in family customary rituals. Some of the participants said:

*“Traditional belief and practices like customary rituals make me prone to abuse as they contravene my Christian beliefs as born again. I seem not to be cooperative as I refuse to be part of these ceremonies and this leads to battery.”*

*“Customary rituals are part of the marriage package, so you are forced to observe and practise them.”*

Customary rituals are considered to be part of an African culture that encompasses specific beliefs, values, world views, behavioural norms and social expectations. These may include brewing of African beer and traditional ceremonial functions that entail slaughtering of a goat or cow or sheep, depending on the main purpose of the ceremony. Customary rituals may provide direction, purpose and meaning to life in a particular ethnic group as they are goal directed (McCue, 2008). However, these rituals should be performed through voluntary participation and not enforced, as indicated by the study's findings.

### **Ilobola practice**

Majority of the participants (19 or 95%) spoke extensively about their perceptions of *ilobola*, reiterating that it is not supposed to contribute to violence in partner relationships. However, ten (50%) of the participants stated that *ilobola* practices contributed to their battery as their partner mentioned that they had a right to do whatever they wanted to their women as they owned them (bought) through the payment of *ilobola*.

All participants (5 or 100%) in the focus group perceived the *ilobola* tradition as a compromising factor in the tolerance of abuse. They mentioned that partners always reminded them about the amount of *ilobola* payment whenever they were abusive. In this regard, some participants commented:

*“Ilobola payment is a proof that I belong and married to my husband.”*

*“My partner always remind me that he has bought me by paying Ilobola and if I leave I will have to return it.”*

Mndende (2006:19) mentions that *ilobola* is based on relationship building between two families. This is for the protection of children who will be born of a relationship that is based on either traditional or civil marriages. There is a misconception that women are sold through the payment of *ilobola*. The bride has an obligation to bring certain

possessions from her original homestead to the new home and gifts for the in-laws (*ukwambesa*).

Milne (2004) argues that *ilobola* is a cultural practice that encourages problematic gender relations and stereotypes, leading to gender violence and the abuse of cultural norms and standard practices. This study suggests that *ilobola* is interpreted by men, “conveniently so”, as a bride-price to buy a woman instead of building family relationships between the two families. This interpretation results in perceived ownership of women by men, which may lead to battery (Johnson-Latham, 2005). Hence, at times men are not afraid of losing their honour compared to losing their power, prestige and their position of superiority and the privileges that go with it (Imbrogno & Imbrogno, 2000).

Bennett (2004) adds that *ilobola* functions to “compensate” the wife’s family for raising and educating her; it transfers her productive capacity to her husband’s family and it protects wives. Husbands who ill-treat their wives may forfeit *ilobola* and the in-laws may be inclined to treat a woman for whom they had paid *ilobola* well. Nowadays *ilobola* is generally paid in cash rather than cattle. The *ilobola* is now usually not retained by the wife’s family, but is spent to meet economic needs (Dutton, 2006).

The steady “inflation” in the amount paid for *ilobola* has made it difficult for some people to marry and this has increased cohabitation, thus removing the protective aspects of *ilobola*. These changed practices around *ilobola* potentially increase women’s vulnerability to abuse and decrease their ability to resist or flee abusive circumstances, as affirmed by the findings in this study. Since men pay *ilobola* instead of their families, and because payment is in cash, men sometimes “justify” their right to abuse wives by claiming that they “paid” for them. If people believe that men are entitled to abuse their wives because of the payment of *ilobola*, wives will tend to accept partner abuse and traditional courts will not assist them unless their families can return the *ilobola* (Bennett, 2004; Falalo, 2005).

### **Ubuntu**

Notably, participants (18 or 90%) mentioned that there was lack of empathy in their communities. This was reinforced by the participants in the focus group (3 or 60%) who claimed that traditionally *ubuntu* is supposed to prevail in African societies, but family and community support seems to have diminished in cases of women in violent partner relationships. Two participants stated:

*“Traditionally we are supposed to help each other, but things have changed. There is lack of empathy and ubuntu has been lessened.”*

*“People don’t show ubuntu any more and family support is rare. Delays in intervention processes due to traditional communication protocols that one needs to follow exacerbate abuse.”*

Karsten and Illa (2005) equate *ubuntu* with empathy, a pervasive spirit of caring and community harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness that individuals and groups display towards one another. *Ubuntu* is not synonymous with either Western

individualism or collectivism, but is an expression of an African life's view of the world that is entrenched in the person, culture and society and it is difficult to define in a Western context (Falalo, 2005). This view is central to participants, who stated that *ubuntu* has been diminishing among African societies. However, the African community as a social entity is constantly under construction and it attempts to shape indigenous social and political institutions which develop African nations and African civil societies (Nussbaum, 2003).

### **Traditional healer**

Two of the participants who made up 10% of the individual interviewees mentioned that they had sought traditional expertise as they believed that they had been bewitched. Four participants (80%) from the focus group obtained traditional medicine from the traditional healers. One participant stated:

*“Witchcraft practice is a traditional belief that can make you have an unhappy and abusive relationship. At times you have to go to a traditional healer called isangoma.”*

Another participant mentioned:

*“You spend a lot of money and the traditional healers may tell you where the problem lies but they always give you muti, that is, traditional medicine to appease abuse.”*

Cloete and Naude (1991) argue that Xhosa and Zulu indigenous value systems and beliefs distinguish between a soothsayer (*isangoma/igqirha*), a medicine man or herbalist (*inyanga/ixhwele*), and a sorcerer (*umthakathi*). *Umthakathi* is the one who is feared and condemned when abuse emerges. Findings of this study support that an *umthakathi* engaged in witchcraft uses magical potions or calls upon supernatural forces to harm others, for instances, the husband is bewitched to hurt the wife or abuse her. The belief is that witchcraft is a despicable phenomenon, recognised as a force that can be in control of the world, and it reflects a low level of ability for abstract thought. However, the *sangoma* and *inyanga* are persons who provide traditional medical services with or without the use of herbs, can diagnose illness, can predict events and are respected members of the community (Labuschagne, 1990).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following conclusions and recommendations are drawn from the findings of the study.

### **THEME I: FORMS OF VIOLENT PARTNERSHIP ABUSE**

Participants from both the individual interviews and focus group discussion understood violence in partner relationships as complex, continuously perpetrated male violence against women, embedded in a multifaceted, oppressive and controlling attitude. Participants identified aspects of control and abusive behaviour from their experiences, which included psychological and emotional abuse, rape, being hit with sticks, assault with fists, kicking, and scarring with sewing needles and other objects. The experiences

of participants from the focus group included not being cared for or loved by their partners because of the abuse that was inflicted on them. Also, jealousy and suspicion prevailed in their relationships. Budlender (2002) indicates that the precarious social and economic hardships and circumstances under which rural women live may contribute to their vulnerability to domestic violence and limit their ability to escape it.

Conclusions drawn from these findings indicate that alcohol abuse by male partners at times contributed to arguments that led to verbal, emotional and physical violence. Economic deprivation and the partner's lack of financial support formed part of an abusive behaviour pattern. In addition, infidelity or extra-marital affairs left African women vulnerable to violent partner relationships.

Recommendations drawn from these conclusions were that infidelity and extra-marital relationships should be condemned in society, as they not only lead to arguments that end in violent episodes, but make women victims of sexually transmitted infections and of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Women should be trained in skills development programmes that may assist them to develop marketable skills, become employable or assist them to be self-employed. This will aid them in overcoming the issue of economic dependence, which contributes to incidences of abuse.

## **THEME 2: MEANING OF ABUSE FOR AFRICAN WOMEN**

The following are some of the kinds of abuse that both individual and focus group participants emphasised as being specifically related to African women's experiences. Participants perceived violence in partner relationships as psychological and emotional control that was humiliating, emotionally degrading and fraught with verbal insults, social isolation and threats. The Domestic Violence Act, No. 166 of 1998 in its broad definition of domestic violence includes a range of behaviours constituting physical, sexual, emotional, verbal and psychological abuse; economic abuse; intimidation; harassment; stalking; and any other controlling or abusive behaviour where such conduct harms or may cause imminent harm to the safety, health or wellbeing of the abused (Vetten, 2005).

Conclusions drawn from these findings indicate that women in violent partner relationships experience a wide range of abuse that includes physical, psychological, sexual and economic abuse. Violent partners use various tactics to instigate battery as well as uttering threats and verbal insults to frighten the women. Abuse at times can also affect the discipline of children who from time to time witness their mothers being insulted and assaulted. Women who are unemployed or under-employed suffer financial constraints as they lack sufficient money to support themselves and their families.

Recommendations drawn from these conclusions suggest that abused women should be vigilant about the manipulative tactics that could lead to battery and be vocal about the abuse. They should seek help from professional service practitioners to combat abuse. Women should be skilled in labour-related areas and be enabled to participate in a viable labour market system. Also, women should be empowered in finding ways to save money within the banking system.

### **THEME 3: THE INFLUENCE OF AFRICAN PRACTICES ON VIOLENT PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS**

The findings of the study portray a variety of negative feelings and experiences that were influenced by tradition and cultural practices. Participants explained that abuse in partner relationships was related to gender, cultural practices and power issues that were entrenched by socialisation. Acts of violence were kept as family secrets and not reported because of their fear of shame, social status, racial or familial loyalty, fear for their own safety and the arrest of one's partner. One participant perceived her abusive situation as a possible result of witchcraft and this is not peculiar in African traditional belief systems.

Participants were asked to name the belief systems that exist in African societies that might contribute to acts of violence in partner relationships. They cited traditional belief systems such as ancestor wrath and angry spirits that have to be appeased by customary rituals as they caused family disruptions such as abuse in family relationships. These angry ancestral spirits contribute to partner abuse as the men are unable to control their emotions. Sorcery and witchcraft were also mentioned as causes of violence and these could be invoked at times by girlfriends and relatives or community members to destroy a love relationship. The patriarchal system also entrenched male domination, where men have to show that they are in control and have power and authority over women by subjecting them to acts of violence.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that participants were of the opinion that when a man has paid *ilobola*, it is culturally acceptable and right for him to impose punishment by beating or abusing the wife if he feels she has transgressed. It was revealed that men as head of families have power and authority, and that women have to accept abuse as a form of punishment for misbehaviour. Payment of *ilobola* is also misinterpreted as leeway to own wives and in turn men may ill-treat their women because they feel they bought them from their families. Some participants mentioned that men felt it was acceptable for them to beat their women as they loved them.

Participants' responses to *ubuntu* in African societies were that *ubuntu* practices were disappearing; there was lack of compassion due to people being jealous of stable relationships. Violence in partner relationships was treated as a private matter and societies did not want to be perceived as meddling in other people's affairs.

McCue (2008) and Dunkle *et al.* (2003) point out that female victims of abuse run a greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, which may include HIV/AIDS, because of their inability to negotiate safe sex practices with their partners. Male domination, multiple sex partners, infidelity and many rules of official customary law render women vulnerable to domestic violence and prevent them from escaping abusive relationships. However, there are also rules which protect them (Falalo, 2005). Bennett (2004) mentioned that polygamy was not only tolerated but even approved and the validity of the African union depends mostly on the payment of *ilobola*. Marriage is a private affair that requires no intervention by civil or religious authorities to give it a stamp of validity (Fortune & Enger, 2005).

According to Masuku (2007), some women who experienced abuse in South Africa have found themselves ostracised by their families and communities, even though they had legal representation. African culture socialises one into a sense of “belonging”, meaning “*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*” – a person is a person because of other people. This is a very significant statement in African culture that may be open to various interpretations. This philosophy of *ubuntu* entrenches loyalty values, but can also subject the abused to a conspiracy of silence about the abusive relationship (Falalo, 2005).

Conclusions drawn from these findings were that the male domination that still exists within patriarchal African societies contributes to violence in partner relationships. The interpretation of *ilobola* as payment to “buy” a woman leads to the perception of ownership, which places women at risk of abuse. Traditional belief systems which indicate that ancestral wrath and witchcraft contribute to abuse make women endure abuse and they end up not reporting it, as they see the act of violence as being caused by such phenomena.

Recommendations based on these responses are that African societies and all ethnic groups in South Africa should revisit cultures that are dehumanising and compromising the lives of women and children and all humankind.

The primary goal of the article was to explore the experiences and perceptions of African women in violent partner relationships. The meaning of abuse and the African practices that may be encouraging gender-based violence were articulated. The findings of the study are consistent with the literature reviewed. The findings confirm that African women find themselves caught up in a complex cycle of abuse that is characterised by male domination, cultural expectations that may include racial loyalties, culminating in under-reporting of abuse and keeping it as a family secret.

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*Dr Nontando Jennifer Mesatywa, Department of Social Work, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa.*