

Exploring women's perception of psychosocial factors maintaining abusive spousal relationships.

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Abstract

Spousal abuse can be traumatizing both physically and psychologically to the victims though many women continue to stay in abusive spousal relationships. This is despite the fact that trauma experienced as a result of betrayal from a loved one is much deeper with serious psychological effects. Using Psychological Entrapment and Cycle of Violence theories, this study examined how psychosocial factors engulf the lives of women in abusive spousal relationships, thereby disempowering them from resolving their abuses. Data were collected from women in a shelter by use of an in depth semi-structured interview schedule and focused group discussions (FGDs). A phenomenological data analysis process was used to analyze the descriptions of the psychosocial factors that were brought out by the 20 respondents. Results showed that the need for identity, marriage is permanent, need for father figure, need for identity, lack of social support, modeling of abuse, love for the abuser and hope that the abuser would change were some of the psychosocial factors that influenced women's stay decisions. The said psychosocial factors frame women's lives beyond the graves and persuade them to suppress their painful experiences so as to save the image of their families. However, entrapment in abusive marriages not only leads to suffering of the individual women, but their children as well and has the capacity to model abuse to the young generations. Therefore, the article recommends that women need to be empowered to discern individual and cultural beliefs in a way that can enable them resolve their abusive situations.

Key words: Spousal abuse, abusive spousal relationships, psychosocial factors, resolve, empower

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I. INTRODUCTION:

A lot of available literature views the family as a haven for personal safety, affectionate relationships and shared trust (Strong & Cohen, 2013). However, studies by Dragiewicz & DeKeseredy (2012), Weizmann-Henelius, Gronroos, Putkonen, Eronen, Lindberg & Hakkanen-Nyholm, 2012, have shown that it can be a trap of restraint, injury and death.

Statistics by Gutierrez & Boselli (2010) reveal that about 70 % of women are abused by their intimate partners globally and according to Durose, Harlow, Langan, Motivans, Rantala & Smith 2005 and Astion & O'Brian, 2009, 85 % of intimate Partner Violence victims are women. Further, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention point that about 4.3 million women in the United States suffer physical attacks and 16.6 million experience psychological assaults by their spouses annually (Black, Basile, Breiding, Smith, Walters, Merrick, Chen & Stevens, 2011). However, these rates are even higher in some countries. For example, LaViolette & Barnett (2014), reveal the annual rates of femicide in Russia to be as high as 16000; the highest wife murder rates worldwide. Moreover, Speizer & Pearson (2011) & Pandey (2014), echo that these rates are even higher among adolescent married women though the known prevalence rates are still low as a result of massive underreporting due to the privacy accorded to domestic issues among others.

Spousal abuse has no universally accepted definition as abuse is culturally sanctioned. However, it broadly encompasses economic, sexual, emotional and mental torture as well as threat of such harm (Azziz-Baumgartner, Homaira, Hamadani, Tofail, Dahlberg, Haque, Luby & Naved, 2014). The manifestations can be physical assault, rape, sexual harassment, verbal abuse, threats to kill or to harm and denial of access to resources among others (Garcia, Soria & Hurwitz, 2007; Basile & Smith, 2011).

Battering of women by their spouses poses enormous health and psychological challenges. For example, a conference held in Rome in 2009 reported that among women aged 15 to 44 years, spousal abuse is the main cause of death and disability as it supersedes cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and war combined (Gutierrez & Boselli (2010). Several studies have shown that victims of spousal abuse experience a myriad of physical and psychological effects such as visible injuries and invisible effects, such as diminished self esteem, confusion and memory lapses, anger directed to self and others, depression, poor interpersonal relationship and psychosomatic illnesses like hypertension, ulcers, gastrointestinal complications, growing older

than ones actual age and excessive loss of body weight among others. These sufferings have a radiating effect in that other family members like the children or extended family members also get affected (Riger, Raja & Camacho, 2002).

Despite the debilitating effects of abuse on women, FIDA (2001) noted that most victims, 90 %, watch in helplessness and despair and stay in their abusive situations. As they continue to stay their psychological upheavals spiral into a pit of heightened stress, frustrations, self blame, depression and suicidal ideations (Hinga, 2006; Lindgren & Renck, 2008). There was therefore a need to find out what psychosocial factors influence women to stay in such abusive spousal situations.

II. METHODOLOGY

The research question guiding the study was “What psychosocial factors influenced women to stay in abusive spousal relationships? The current study is derived from a larger study on “Women’s perception of endogenous factors influencing them to stay in abusive spousal relationships in Women Rights Awareness Program in Nairobi County”. In this section, the focus is on the methodology used for the specific components of the study that were relevant to understanding women’s experiences of psychosocial factors influencing their stay decisions.

Participants and recruitment

The study focused on 20 women who were victims of ongoing abusive spousal relationships. To participate in the study, the women had to meet the following selection criteria:

- a. They had been in ongoing intimate relationships where they were experiencing various forms of spousal abuse.
- b. They had been in those abusive relationships for at least two years.
- c. They were able to express themselves in English or Kiswahili languages which are the national languages in Kenya

The twenty victims of abuse were recruited through purposive sampling from WRAP; a shelter that gives temporary accommodation and counseling to abused women in Nairobi County. The purpose of the study was explained to them and informed that participation was voluntary.

The study utilized phenomenological research design which is a qualitative mode of inquiry. Phenomenology differs from the quantitative methods of inquiry which are based on the measurable variables and provable prepositions (Groenewald, 2004). Phenomenological inquiry focuses on the experience as lived by a person. It aims to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essence of the experience (Patton, 2002; Groenewald, 2004). By penetrating deeper and deeper into the reality, the researcher uncovers and interprets the inner essence of the subject’s cognitive processing of the experience thus getting into contact with the true meaning of the phenomenon. The researcher however has to bracket the outer world and the personal biases in order to successfully achieve an objective view of the essences (Laverty, 2003). As a way of bracketing, the researcher identified her personal biases on spousal abuse and attempted to set them aside so as to allow objectivity. The researcher engaged the participants in active face to face interactions so that they could explore and describe the psychosocial factors that influenced their stay in their abusive situations. This led to revelation of the meanings that the victims had attached to their experiences of abuse and how that had possibly contributed to their entrapment.

Instrumentation and procedures

This study used an interview schedule and Focused Group Discussions on all the 20 participants so as to allow for triangulation of data. The responses were audio recorded. The participants were requested to voluntarily participate in the study and they agreed and signed an informed consent before data collection. The interview schedule had three parts: (a) a demographic questionnaire (b) a series of open-ended questions about participants’ experiences of the psychosocial factors that had influenced their stay decisions. The FGD had open ended questions derived from a case scenario that involved a woman who was being abused by her husband. The questions were as follows:

1. Describe some of the factors that could be influencing the woman to stay in the abusive marriage in terms of her;
 - a. Beliefs
 - b. Thoughts
 - c. Emotions /feelings
 - d. social factors
2. Explain how each of the above factors may have contributed to the woman’s stay in the abusive situation.

III. DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis process was grounded in phenomenological research methodology (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis). The method was found suitable as the study aimed at identifying the participants' lived experiences of the psychosocial factors that had influenced their stay in abusive spousal relationships. Before analyses, the researchers bracketed their assumptions and their personal views on abuse of women by their spouses so as to avoid any potential biases that could arise during transcription and analysis. According to Willig, 2008; Hays & Wood, 2011; Creswell, 2013, interpretative phenomenological analysis involves identifying the initial themes from the descriptive summaries and initial interpretations of the verbatim.

The researchers independently read the transcripts several times and highlighted participants' expressions that were indicative of how they perceived the psychosocial factors in relation to their stay decisions. The researchers then worked together to compile the list of meaning units they had identified from the descriptive summaries of the verbatim. Once the final list was created, the researchers identified the final themes (master themes) from the initial themes within the items on the list. From there, the researchers wrote textural and structural descriptions of these themes with excerpts serving as illustrations. Some of the steps taken to enhance validity were: (a) reading and re-reading the transcripts several times to get accurate descriptive summaries (b) keeping an audit trail through the records during the data analysis process (c) identifying the meaning units from the descriptive summaries independently before the researchers compared their lists of initial themes (d) obtaining a feedback on the final themes from the participants

IV. FINDINGS

The findings revealed that some demographic factors influenced women's stay in abusive spousal relationships. These were; age, education level and socioeconomic status of the victim, type of marriage and duration of stay in the abusive relationship. For example, in relation to age, the responses indicated that 17(85%) out of the 20 respondents were in the age bracket of 20 to 40 years while those between 40 and 50 years were 3(15%). It was also evident that there were no respondents in abusive marriages who were above 50 years.

From the findings, it was evident that the bulk of the women in abusive marriages, 80%, had attained secondary education and below, while 20 % had college or university education.

It was noted that the type of marriage the participants were in contributed to entrapment. For instance, 9(45%) of the victims were in customary marriages, 8(40%) were cohabiting and 3(15%) were in Christian marriages.

The duration that women had stayed in their abusive marriages was also found to influence the likelihood of entrapment in their abusive situations. For example, 35% of the victims had stayed for a maximum period of five years in their marriages while 15 % had stayed for a maximum of twenty years.

In terms of the participants' socioeconomic status, the findings revealed that 50 % of the victims were engaged in small scale businesses as their main source of income and 80% of them earned below Ksh10, 000 per month.

The phenomenological method of data analysis revealed that certain psychosocial factors contributed to women's entrapment in their abusive situations. These were: (a) a marriage is permanent (b) rigid gender roles (c) normalization of abuse (d) fear of revenging spirits if a woman leaves (e) love for husband (f) hope that the abuser would change (g) need for a father figure for children (h) need for a woman and children to get identity. All the themes were presented with excerpts serving as illustrations.

Marriage is permanent

Abused women believed that marriages were supposed to be permanent and could not be broken at all cost as illustrated in the excerpt:

...first and foremost, I love my marriage, I really care, I want to be in a stable marriage, I want to become a grandmother in my marriage, I want to see my grandchildren. I want to stay in my marriage because my grandmother told me staying in a marriage requires perseverance and when you keep a marriage you are respected as a woman. I love my marriage I want to stay there, I want my husband to be a good man, I love my children. So what keeps me there is my children because I cannot go with them to another marriage to get them another father, it is hard. I want these children to have one father and I want to be buried where the first man I married is, that is where I want to be buried, even the bible says that. It's hard but when I imagine leaving I wonder where I can go at my age and I am already old. If I would get something to do, I would stay and see how my life will be, in case he decides to change then he can come to me I will still welcome him.

(Purity, 36 yrs)

Purity had an intimate emotional attachment to her husband and her marriage because she believed a marriage was a permanent union. This belief made her focus on thoughts such as, growing old in her marriage, her children needed to grow with their father, she needed to be respected as a married woman and to be buried in her first marriage despite the abuses she experienced.

Need for Identity

Most other women believed that if they left their marriages they would be treated as social misfits and the children would lose their inheritance from their father. Some of these beliefs are evident in the verbatim:

...if you leave your marriage you will be regarded as a prostitute, people will wonder how come you want to leave when you are now old. If I leave and go to rent a house to stay, people will think I want to get involved in extra marital affairs. So people will talk a lot of things and I don't want that. I would rather stick to my marriage and wait upon God, he can change my situation...If I leave this marriage with the children, especially if they are boys, they will not get their inheritance. So you are just forced to stay because we believe when you leave your marriage your children will lose their inheritance from the father's family .So you have to persevere for the sake of the children.

(Blessing, 47 yrs)

Blessing had stayed in her abusive marriage so as to maintain her social status. Leaving her abusive marriage meant loss of respect accorded to a married woman by the society. The children would also lose their identity and inheritance from their father.

As reflected in the description of the abuses, women were mistreated to the extent that they lost their own identity as they got entrapped in their marriages. So serious was the entrapment that some other women felt a strong sense of attachment to the marriage and would rather keep it at all costs since that was where they belonged:

... what, I am there, now that sense of belonging, the sense of belonging that I feel, this place I have all the rights to be there, my children have the rights to be there, so there is no way I am going to get out of here, yeah!

(Alice, 38 yrs)

Alice felt that she and her children were the rightful occupants of the home and therefore she had to stay in the marriage to safeguard it irrespective of the pain of abuse in her life.

Need for a Father Figure

A number of women held a belief that the children needed a father figure:

...Some of my beliefs that made me continue staying is just the father figure of these children, father figure of these children aah especially for my boy, you know my boy is quite a naughty boy, so I think sometimes, I say Edwin, my son is called Edwin, he needs a father figure because to tame him, because he tries, he tries sometimes to tame Edwin, he is quite naughty. And basically, that is it.

(Nyambura, 47 yrs)

Nyambura strongly believed that staying in her abusive marriage would ensure her son had a father figure and a mentor without considering the effect that abuse had on him. That perceived benefit had apparently outweighed its adverse effects and consequently influenced Nyambura's stay in the relationship.

Rigid Gender Roles

Some other women believed that if they left their marriages, there would be no one to take care of their husbands. This is portrayed in the extract:

...so if I leave this man and I was taking care of him, what will happen? But because I feel for him, one time he used to call me darling and sweetheart and I used to feel good, so let me stay...

(Muthoni, 32 yrs)

According to the traditional gender roles, a woman is supposed to take care of her husband as well as children. This gender role had influenced Muthoni's stay in her abusive marriage.

Abuse is Normal

Some women held onto other beliefs that normalized abuse as their own mothers were abused and yet they tolerated. For others, there had been no history of leaving a marriage within their families. One of these beliefs is as follows:

... when I was growing up, my father left my mother and disappeared to Nairobi for a long time, we did not see him when we were growing, So my mum worked very hard to bring us to where we are right now. When I remember how my mother worked very hard to bring us up, I don't see why I should leave my children. It makes me believe that one day it will come to an end because right now my mum is in her marriage and she is very much healthy, she is ok, she has enough to sustain her. I normally say, if my own mum made it, why not me? I get that picture now from my parents because now my father has gone back home after retirement, yeah...So I get encouraged, I have realized whatever comes, whichever way, I will stick to it to the end because to me there is no other solution.

(Flavian, 38 yrs)

Flavian had a childhood experience of abuse in her family which made abuse appear alright.

Due to some gender specific socialization, some other participants held strong beliefs that abuse was a normal occurrence. One participant had this to say:

...if I go to my mother's home and report to her that I want to leave my marriage because I am being abused, she will tell me to stay because it is normal for a woman to be abused.

(Agnes, 39 yrs)

Agnes believe that abuse was normal seemed to have been controlled by external locus of control which ultimately influenced her decision to maintain her abusive marriage.

One participant believed that all marriages were abusive as shown in the verbatim:

...I believe this man will change... I thought even if I leave this marriage and go into another one, there is no better marriage, so I hope he will change.

(Janet, 22yrs)

According to Janet all marriages are abusive in some way since men were inherently abusive. So leaving her abusive husband does not guarantee her an abuse free marriage elsewhere.

Lack of Social Support

Some women feared rejection by their family if they decided to quit their marriage:

...For example, I was told by my parents to wait a bit but I married against their wish. Now how do I go back, now after I have stayed for over ten years and with five children? Where will I take the children? ...

(Schola, 30 yrs)

Schola had stayed in her abusive marriage due to fear of rejection by her relatives and parents as she had married against their wish.

Revening Spirits

Some respondents held beliefs that were very unique. For example, one respondent believed that there was a spirit of death that tormented family members who had left their marriages:

... Another one is like in our family we have this, we have this problem, and that almost all our aunts are at home. They get married and then they come back, when they come back home, because of anger, they commit suicide. So I have decided and I know if I leave my husband and go back home out of anger, that spirit that is moving can also follow me and I will also die and leave my children alone. But my main goal in life is to bring up my children till I see my grand children and that is what has kept me in my marriage.

(Ruth, 29 yrs)

Ruth believed that the spirit of suicide was revenging on the relatives who had left their marriages.

Love for Husband

It was realized that most of the women referred to their love and desire for their partner as a crucial factor for staying with them:

...its love, I love him just the way he is and I cannot force myself to love another man even if I were to get out of this marriage yeah...I still love him, I love him though he abuses me and that's why I have continued to stay with him.

(Janet, 22yrs)

Despite the negative emotions such as fear or hatred which are associated with abuse, it is evident that a woman can hold on to an abusive marriage due to strong feelings of love towards her husband.

Hope for Change

Most women had feelings of hope that their husbands would stop abusing them:

.... one thing I believe, God does not put you in a situation for nothing. Me I believe that in all things, God has been aware and he has a reason he placed me there because in my Biblical belief, for everyone who has been in a situation in the Bible, there is always something good that has come out of it and that is one of the beliefs that I have. I always believe there is something good that will come out of me staying there. That is why I have still continued staying there...Sometimes I think maybe this man has gone through a lot of trauma in his life and so I always think that, maybe if he gets assistance, he might turn around. Maybe he will turn around for the good, I always think that he might change...and things will just turn out for good mm.

(Alice, 38 yrs)

Alice had hoped that, through God's intervention, her abusive husband would change. She also felt her husband may have experienced a lot of trauma which she attributed to his abusive behaviour though that might have been partly the denial or rationalization of abuse. If assisted, he would perhaps change and that hope kept her hanging on.

Some other women stayed as their husbands kept apologizing whenever they abused them and this rekindled their hope that the situation would change. This is illustrated in the excerpt:

....now that is what has encouraged me to stay. He comes and tells me "if I have wronged you and I ask for forgiveness, you need to let go, what happened yesterday and the previous day, just forgive me and forget it. Stop revisiting what happened yesterday, the other day, and some years back, forget it, it's over, it's over and just wait and see if I will do that again, now it's over with me, it's over completely". Now that is what makes me stay. But now as I stay, I am realizing years have passed and I am growing old without a sense of direction...

(Mwende, 30 yrs)

V. DISCUSSION

Most of the participants were within the age bracket of 20-40 years but a small proportion was between ages 40 and 50 years. This implies that younger women were more vulnerable to spousal abuse and entrapment in their painful relationships compared to older women. The finding is consistent with Rahman, Hoque, Mostofa & Makinoda (2011) & Le, Tran, Nguyen & Fisher (2013), whose studies revealed that younger women were at a higher risk of spousal abuse than older women. It is worth noting that abuse among this vulnerable group (20 and 40 years), interferes with their overall psychological functioning and probably this is what contributes to their entrapment as they are not able to engage in rational decision making. This resonates with studies by Helfrich, Aviles, Badiani, Walens, Sabol (2006) & Al-Modallal, Sowan, Hamaideh, Peden, Al-Omari & Al-Rawashdeh (2012) though Amanor-Boadu *et al* (2012) claims that older women perceive a higher risk of leaving an abusive spousal relationship, hence more likely to get entrapped. Conversely, LaViolette & Barnett (2014), point out that older women who are victims of abuse rarely seek refuge at the shelters. This could explain the absence of abused women who were above 50 years in the current study as it was conducted in a shelter.

The finding on the participants' education level indicated that 80 % had secondary level and below, which suggests that most of the victims had low levels of education and were therefore unskilled. This implies that low education level could be a predictive factor to entrapment in an abusive marriage. Indeed, findings by Amanor-Boadu *et al*, 2012, Estrellado & Loh, 2013, showed victims with low education perceive a higher risk of leaving an abusive relationship as low education attainment is associated with lack of job skills, minimal chances of employment and a high degree of financial instability which increases dependence on the abuser.

Findings revealed that 45 % of the victims were in traditional customary marriages and 40 % in cohabiting relationships, which may imply less commitment to the relationships. Daigle (2012) reiterates that cohabiting couples perceive their relationships as less stable. Consequently, the victims in the cohabiting relations may have perceived their marriages as less secure, hence the need to hold on. This may have contributed to entrapment in their abusive situations.

The victims who had stayed for shorter periods in abusive marriages were more than those who had stayed longer. This trend implies that there is a higher likelihood of entrapment among the victims who have stayed for shorter periods than those who have stayed longer. This finding contradicts findings by Estrellado & Loh (2013) who realized that the older a woman is in a marriage, the more she perceives the risk of leaving due to the perceived amount of investment in it. However, LaViolette & Barnett (2014) point out that older women rarely seek shelter services. Since the current study was done in a shelter, there is a possibility of more women who had stayed longer in abusive marriages in the general population.

The findings revealed that 50% of the victims were in small scale businesses and 80 % of them earned below ten thousand shillings (10,000). These are suggestive of low income and low economic stability of the victims of spousal abuse. Kim & Gray (2008) and Amanor-Boadu *et al* (2012), assert that women who are economically unstable are likely to remain in abusive marriages due to dependence on their husbands. Hence in the current study, economic instability could have been a factor that may have contributed to entrapment of women in their abusive marriages.

From the findings, it is evident that the beliefs that the women held about their abusive situations contributed to their entrapment. These beliefs are a reflection of societal attitudes towards abuse or the institution of marriage. The women had thus internalized their societal beliefs and constructed their world view from the lenses of the society. Therefore, their thoughts and emotions were shrouded by societal beliefs and

attitudes that appeared to make them normalize the abusive conditions. For example, some participants uncritically and strongly believed in the importance and permanency of marriage. This gave rise to other related beliefs such as, a woman must be buried where she is married, need to identify with the husband, children must get their paternal inheritance, the wish to grow old in a marriage, fear of revenging spirits if a woman left her marriage, emotions such as love for the spouse and hope that the spouse would stop being abusive.

The women focused on saving the marriage at all costs irrespective of their sufferings. This view of marriage as permanent is reflected by Khoury and Wehbi (2014) who found that abused women focused on saving the marriage and saving their face as leaving is not socially approved. The implication is that the victims were more concerned with living by the societal expectations rather than their own. Hence, they struggled for their self image rather than the self. According to Kohut (2011), this is pathological as one foregoes their own psychological needs in favour of the societal dictates. Moreover, according to Fanslow & Robinson (2010) and Rana (2012), women's perception of marriage as a permanent union prevents them from seeking help from available community resources.

The premium placed on marriage in African communities has also been emphasized by Mbiti (1990) and Magesa (2002) who point out that once a marriage contract was executed it was extremely difficult to break it. This is because marital union ensured continuity of life through childbearing and fulfilling other obligations such as providing love, care and sense of security to its members. Mbiti further acknowledges that in rare circumstances such as, continued cruelty from the husband, unfaithfulness by either partner or desertion of one partner by another, marriage could be dissolved. All in all, the women's perception of marriage as a permanent union affects their decisions to end abuse especially through leaving and solidifies their stay in their abusive situations.

The need to identify with their husbands has been brought out as a key factor contributing to women's entrapment in abusive relationships. For example, a married woman who attempts to end abuse by leaving risks loss of her sense of identity with the husband and his family as well as her children losing their paternal inheritance. This is clearly brought out by Magesa (2002) and Dasgupta (2007) who emphasize that the deep sense of kinship in African and Asian communities is reckoned either through birth or marriage. Indeed according to Kim & Gray (2008), when abused women focus on such external loci of control they are likely to harbour self blame and low self esteem at the mere thought of ending their abusive situations. Towards this end, rather than confront the problem of abuse, the abused women may invest heavily and recommit themselves to saving their marriage institution, but in maladaptive ways that end up enhancing entrapment.

The need for children to have a father figure was also one of the factors that contributed to women's stay decisions. Notably, Blankenhorn (1995) & Lamb (2003) acknowledge that paternal investment is important in the children's development as an involved father provides father's affection, paternal identity, physical protection, financial and other material resources, character and competence. However, according to Salisbury, Henning & Holdfold (2009), paternal involvement is higher when parenting relationships are less conflicting. After all, as observed by Bair-Merritt, Feudtner, Localio, Feinstein, Rubin & Holme (2008); Graham-Bermann & Howel (2010), abusive spouses may also abuse their children and model their abusive behaviours to them. So the perceived father figure in the lives of their children could be seen as a psychological fallacy that only serves to entrap the women in abusive marital relations.

As revealed by the findings, modeling of abuse can have significant impact on one's view of spousal abuse. For example, in the case of Flavian abandonment of her mother by the father and subsequent stay may have led to the formation of deeply ingrained beliefs that it is alright for husbands to disappear from the family. This may have informed her stay in her abusive marriage. Moreover, Engel (2002) reiterates that growing up in an abusive family is likely to lower one's self-esteem, thus increasing dependence on the abuser and the likelihood of entrapment in the relationship. Further, Finkelhor, Ormond & Turner (2007); Tusher & Cook (2010), Edwards, Gidycz & Murphy (2010) affirm that there is a correlation between childhood abuse and tolerance of abuse in future relationships. Accordingly, there is a possibility of normalizing the abuse. This renders the victims of abuse inactive and entrapped at the contemplation stage of abuse resolution.

Victims of abuse expressed an inherent need to care for their husbands; a factor that directs their stay decisions. To this end, Musson-Sedaat (2008) and Estrellado & Loh (2013), echo that certain gender specific beliefs make women feel a strong sense of taking care of their husbands and keeping their families intact. Also, according to Thapar-Björkert & Morgan (2010); Estrellado & Loh (2013), the existence of dominant feminist discourse that scripts passive loving, caring and nurturing roles for women makes women value relationships and especially those of significant others as important for their psychological health. This factor though protective of psychological wellbeing of women could also render them vulnerable to exploitation by abusive spouses and could gradually contribute to their entrapment in abusive marriages.

The belief that abuse is normal for women is consistent with previous studies by Baly (2010); Fanslow & Robinson (2010); Towns & Adams (2015). They argue that women's construction of their abusive situations is influenced by the wider social and cultural discourses which tend to normalize spousal abuse. The common

feminist discourse requires women to be passive, deny or minimize a partner's violence and accept blame and responsibility for his behaviours. Therefore, it was not surprising that some participants in the current study had accepted abuse as normal and as a result ended up stuck in their abusive marriages.

As shared by Scola (see page 7), abused women may stay due to fear of rejection by their families. This is consistent with Latta and Goodman (2011); Ondicho (2013); Sylaska & Edwards (2014), who argue that though social support is not always beneficial, battered women who feel unsupported may be more likely to stay in their abusive relationships. This is probably because lack of support by significant others could lead to self-blame, low self-esteem and hopelessness which may gradually entrap women in abusive situations.

Moreover, it has come out that the societal regard of abuse as normal is deeply entrenched even in government institutions as witnessed in chiefs' offices or children's departments where women seek support. For instance these institutions fail to challenge the dominant culture of blame and responsibility in relation to abuse of women by their spouses. Their failure to challenge the societal dictates seems to perpetuate these acts though deviously. The observation buttresses findings by Jaffe, Crooks & Bala (2009) who noted that victims of domestic violence often face a biased justice system in family courts than in criminal courts. As such, service personnel may be unhelpful and judgmental, making the aggrieved women more helpless in their situations (Lindhorst, Meyers & Casey (2008), Dichter (2013)). These societal attitudes however need to be addressed as they often render women helpless and passive in their situations; acting as barriers to seeking help towards resolution of abuse.

The concept of spirits causing death among women who leave abusive marriages was expressed by one participant. Mbiti (1990) asserts that the living dead (in spirit form) could cause death if they were offended or dissatisfied with a family member. This kind of belief and subsequent thinking creates fear and leads to helplessness that could inhibit women from engaging in rational decisions to end abuse. However, such beliefs stand to be challenged rather than be assimilated wholly.

The study has shown that love for their spouses and hope that the batterer would stop abusing were two of the emotions that featured in the participants' responses. These emotions echo the honeymoon stage of the cycle of abuse where an abuser becomes kind, loving and remorseful for his abusive behaviour after an abusive episode. The sense of hope that an abuser would change also seems to be the driving force evidenced in the Psychological Entrapment Theory as a victim engages in relentless recommitments to end abuse. The emotions of love and hope as influencers of women's stay decisions are echoed by Musson-Sedaat (2008); Enander (2011) and Estrellado & Loh (2013) who indicated that women stayed in abusive marriages as they loved their abusers and expected the abuse to stop. In the same vein, Enander (2011) asserts that battered women form attachment and become emotionally dependent on their spouse. Indeed, according to Fangundes (2012); Thomas, Goodman & Putnins (2015), these feelings of attachment may cause a lot of emotional disturbance even after a woman has managed to leave the relationship while others may return. Women may therefore struggle with positive and negative emotions trying to align them with what is good about the marriage. For example, Enander (2011) echoes that when abused women focused on the good traits of their abusers, their emotions oscillated from bad to good leading to love and re-commitment to their relationships. As the victims focused on the positive aspect of the abuser, they also felt hopeful that the abuse would stop. Though the abuse keeps recurring, the victim may gradually develop learned hopefulness (optimism) and forgives her abuser continuously thinking that he would change his personality and stop being abusive. However, Pansera & La Guardia (2011); Strelan, McKee, Calic, Cook & Shaw (2012) point out that optimism and forgiveness may have a healing effect to the victim if she perceives her abuser as genuinely remorseful. Hence the state of wavering emotions renders the victims helpless and may act as reinforcers towards their entrapment.

Fromm as cited by Ewen (2010) points out that human beings have non-organic drives that have no innate programme to ensure their fulfillment. Therefore humans often find themselves opting for goals that are more alluring but that ultimately could result in unhappiness or even psychopathology. Among the non-organic needs that could lure individuals is need for others which leads to love. Women in abusive relations seem to be lured and perceive the need for love but without much reflection on what love should be like in comparison to the unhappiness that it causes them. Therefore they appear to harbour irrational thoughts about love. Towards this end, their insistence on perceived love for their spouses appears to be pathological. Fromm as cited by Ewen (2010) observes that genuine love involves genuine care for and giving to others, an objective and accurate knowledge to their true feelings and wishes, respect for their right to develop in their own particular way and responsibility towards all humanity. However, as evidenced by the excerpts from the women in abusive marriages, all the components of genuine love appear not to feature in their relationships. In relation to this view Ellis as cited by Nelson-Jones (2013) observes that thinking and emoting are closely related and they often accompany each other in shaping behaviour. Accordingly, Ellis observes that unhealthy emotions interfere with achieving a sensible balance between short range and long range hedonism. Therefore, though love is viewed as a positive emotion, unreflective approach towards it can lead to what may be termed as 'social enslavement' which is characterized by admiration for authority and a desire to submit to powerful others (Ewen 2010). This

could be said to be unproductive frame of orientation that leads to irrational beliefs that serve to entrench psychological entrapment.

Strengths and Limitations

The findings of the current study have certain limitations. For example, data obtained in the study was based on self reports of the abused women whereby social desirability is likely to be a bias. In addition, the study engaged a small sample of twenty victims of abuse who had sought refuge at a shelter (WRAP). This limits the ability to generalize the findings to the abused women in the other shelters in Nairobi County. Despite the limitations, this study findings gave rich, holistic insights gained from the lived experiences of the participants as captured in their own voices. Accordingly to Padgett (2008); Willig (2008), the use of detailed personal narratives makes the qualitative data more trustworthy and credible. The diversity of the participants in terms of their demographic variables such as age, type of marriage, duration of stay in the abusive marriages and education level provided diversity to the findings(in verbatim).

Implications of the findings

The findings offer implications for future research, policy making and practice, especially for therapists who work with clients who are victims of spousal abuse:

The study realized that the psychosocial factors influencing women to stay in abusive spousal relationships mainly emanate from the cultural mores. As a result of these cultural factors that tolerate and normalize abuse of women by their spouses, victims continue to experience difficulties or face stigma when they seek help from community authorities such as the chiefs, the police and the children's departments. There is therefore need for the national government to help in creating more awareness so as to challenge the norms that sustain the vice. Moreover, the national government could provide specialized service trainings to the personnel dealing with issues of domestic violence so as to demystify their perceptions of spousal abuse. Further, demographic factors like low levels of education and economic instability have been shown to be some of the factors which contribute to entrapment of women in abusive marriages. Hence, the government could scale up the existing provisions for women's higher education and economic empowerment so as to boost their economic status and self-efficacy. This would assist them in resolving spousal abuse.

For further research, a similar study could be carried out with the other shelters of abused women in Nairobi County so as to enable generalization of the findings to the entire county. Since the participants from WRAP were mainly of the lower socio economic status, future studies need to incorporate women of a higher economic status. This would help to control the effects of economic instability as a factor which increases women's vulnerability to stay in abusive marriages. Future research could also utilize correlational studies to investigate the relationship between various psychosocial factors and the women's stay decisions. Finally, it is imperative to explore through future research, the interventions that can be tailored to the unique contexts of the victims so as to empower them break from the chains of abuse.

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