

# Intimate Partner Violence: Exploring Experience and Coping Strategies of Survivors in Addis Ababa

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## Abstract

This study was conducted between January 2017 and June 2017 to explore the experience of intimate partner violence victims with special reference to female survivors currently residing in the Shelter for Abused Women in Addis Ababa, run by the Association for Women's Sanctuary and Development (AWSAD). It was conducted with the purpose of understanding the experiences of victims from the time they entered the relationship up to their placement in the shelter for the abused women. The study employed qualitative approach to generate data. Data were gathered both from primary and secondary sources, but heavily relied on primary sources. Six in-depth interviews and one focus group discussion was conducted with the victims of intimate partner violence and the data gathered were analysed thematically. The findings of the study showed that the girls were unable to break up with their abusive partners due to their own emotions, attributed to low self-esteem, guilty feeling and shame. Moreover, close people's negative attitude, family disapproval and humiliating stigma attached to those who tried to break away generated feelings of remorse. In spite of this, it was also revealed that some of them fought back for their freedom. Based on the findings, it was recommended that there is a need to strengthen the existing violence reduction and prevention efforts by different institutions.

**Keywords:** Intimate partner, Gender Based Violence, Survivor, Abused Women, coping strategy, Addis Ababa

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## 1. Introduction

An intimate relationship is an interpersonal relationship that involves physical and/or emotional intimacy. Individuals in an intimate relationship seek protection and love from one another. Although people enter into relationships to satisfy their needs and desires, not always are both parties beneficial from the outcome. One may be the giver and the other the taker. However, it is generally believed that relationships are the means by which one satisfies his/her emotional as well as physical needs. But there are two sides to a relationship. And not all relationships become a source of happiness and protection. Once the intense feelings (love) subside the cruel reality surfaces. The relationship may turn troublesome and end up in separation or simply as a lifeless co-habitation and even be followed by violence. Scholars from various disciplines such as sociologists, family psychologists, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and others refer to this type of violence as the intimate partner violence (Davis 1994).

According to WHO (1996), when intimate partner violence occurs, most of the time women are the victims. A study by Chai *et al.* (2016) further attests that women are more likely to be victims of abuse and murder perpetrated by their intimate partners. Although women can be violent in relationships with men, often in self-defense, the most common perpetrators of violence against women are male intimate partners or ex-partners (Mathur 2004). Merry (2009) writes that one out of every three women (35%) worldwide has experienced domestic violence once in their life time. Recent research in developing countries, particularly in Africa, suggest that many young women experience domestic violence, including forced sex, within marriage, but most women may not feel at ease reporting these experiences due to shame, fear of reprisal or deep-rooted unequal gender norm (Population Council 2004). In general, the consequences of violence can be severe, and, in fact, intimate partner violence can lead to injuries and death (Population Council 2004).

In the history of human society, one way or another, there has been no time when women were freed from gender-based abuse and attendant suffering. Thus, it could be said that the history of women has been the history of

dominance and inferiority. This happens even in an intimate relationship where love, mutuality, and strong physical and emotional bondage between partners were supposed to thwart or tame male's abusive urge against female. In Ethiopia, too, the degree to which women are abused by their intimate partners who were expected to give care and love is pervasive.

As indicated earlier, domestic violence exists everywhere in the world and no society is free or immune from it. Regardless of where it occurs, this strand of violence is often conceptualized within the framework of "gender based violence." This is mainly because it is derived from women's subordinate status with regard to men in the society. The United Nation Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (UN 1993), for instance, states that domestic violence involves "any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life."

Studies in the field of gender based violence attest that intimate partner violence is the most common form of domestic violence perpetrated by a current or former spouse or partner in an intimate relationship against the other spouse or partner (Maguire and Shaikh 2007). It occurs in all settings and among all socio- economic, religious and cultural groups. Yet, the overwhelming global burden of intimate partner violence is borne by women. Although women can be violent in relationships with men, often in self-defense, and violence sometimes occurs in same-sex partnerships (WHO 2012). The harm inflicted upon the victims by intimate partners includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and controlling behaviours by an intimate partner.

A cursory look at some of studies on Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) shows the pervasiveness of the act. For instance, a study conducted in Valencia community, Spain showed that women who were exposed to physical, psychological and sexual violence experienced a higher incidence and severity of depression and anxiety symptoms and suffered from physical harm and psychological (mental) disorder (Alfonso *et al.* 2006).

A study by Lee *et al.* (2007), examined the role coping strategies and social support played on the relationship between intimate partner violence and psychological distress. The findings of this study indicated that there was a significant, indirect effect by the level of violence on psychological outcomes via the mediating role of coping strategies and perceived social support. Ethnic group comparisons, in the same study, indicated that among Caucasian women, the level of violence had an indirect effect on psychological outcomes via the mediating variables of perceived social support and passive coping strategies but not for Asian women. However, direct effect of the level of violence on psychological outcomes was strong and significant. To protect the family face and the family unit, Lee *et al.* (2007), suggested that Asian women may internalize the problem of violence and were less likely to seek support.

Despite their limitedness in scope and skewed focus on urban settings, studies (e.g., Fozia 2014; Sosena 2007; and Muluneh *et al.* 2020) conducted in Ethiopia also corroborate the above assertions. They clearly indicate that intimate partner violence is one of the most widely spread forms of gender based violence. According to WHO (2012), in Ethiopia, more than 48% of women aged between 15 and 49 years had experienced physical violence by an intimate partner and among these, 59% reported sexual violence. They are abused simply because they are women (Davis 1994). Some empirical studies in Ethiopia also indicated that 47% of ever married women had been physically abused by their husband and husband occupation, alcohol consumption, marital status and women's aggressiveness further exposed women to violence by their husbands despite rarity of reporting and court cases, intimate partner violence is rampant in the country (Fozia 2014). Sosena 2007, based on a study on women living in Kolfe-Keranyo Sub-City of Addis Ababa, concluded that poverty and transgression of gender role constituted the main cause of domestic violence.

Keeping in mind the findings of the above studies, the current study explored the life experience of women abused by their intimate partners. Case histories were used to illuminate the magnitude of the problem and coping strategies employed by the victims to overcome the challenges. Apart from violence committed within wedlock, this study analysed the

condition of cohabiting partners and those who were at the dating stage, mainly to elucidate the level of abuse and discern the intensity of psycho-social trauma they engendered.

Recent studies conducted in Ethiopia have reflected on the prevalence of this phenomenon (Kiddus *et al.* 2019; Tiruye *et al.* 2020; Wondimye *et al.* 2020; Muluneh *et al.* 2020; Abebe *et al.* 2016; Sileshi *et al.* 2012; Achenef *et al.* 2017; Fozia 2014). However, these studies did not closely examine the experience of individual victims and survivors of intimate partner violence. The current study is, therefore, an attempt to narrow the existing knowledge gap by examining the experience of intimate partner violence survivors in an urban setting, i.e., in a Shelter for Abused Women in Addis Ababa. In so doing, the study seeks to attain a better understanding of the issue: its root causes, psycho-social repercussions and coping strategies used by the victims to overcome sustained trauma.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

The lived experience of the survivors of intimate partners' violence in this study was addressed using a constructivist paradigm that typically utilized a qualitative methodology (Creswell 1998).

### **2.4. Study Site**

The research was conducted in Addis Ababa particularly in the shelter (safe house) that is run by the Association for Women's Sanctuary and Development (AWSAD). The shelter provides support to the violence victims and helps them to recover from the incidents, by offering them psychological counselling, medical treatment and financial assistance when they leave the shelter. This study area was selected because the shelter was already working with intimate partner violence survivors and all victims were found at a single site. The shelter supported women survivors of intimate partner violence and was committed to provide them with opportunity to become productive and self-reliant members of the society.

The duration of stay in the shelter ranged from one month up to three years depending on the victim's health status. In general, they were allowed to stay in the facility until they fully recovered and showed interest to leave.

Upon discharge from the facility, there was a follow up mechanism through which progresses were tracked and remedies were sought by AWSAD.

### **2.5. Sampling Design**

Purposive sampling technique, specifically critical case sampling technique, was used to select study participants as all informants were found at one platform, i.e., in the Shelter.

The selection of participant was preceded by a brief discussion with the administrative officials in the shelter in order to get their opinion on the criteria which were used to select participants. These criteria were the severity of the violence (abuse), the length of time in the abusive relationship (at least above one year), the time spent in the shelter, and the willingness of the participants. Thus, based on these criteria, the selection of participants was accomplished with the help of the administrative officials in the shelter, who knew the victims' stories and the participants. The size of the participants was determined by data saturation, the level where new information did not come by conducting more interviews with others. Accordingly, four in-depth interviews with intimate partner violence victims about the issue were found. And, the total number of participants used, including the focus group discussion, was nine females, all of whom were victims of intimate partner violence and currently residing in the safe house.

### **2.6. Data Collection Instruments and Methods of Analysis**

In this study two data collection instruments have been employed these are in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The selection of participants to be interviewed was undertaken purposively, with the help of the administrative officials in the shelter.

In the course of this study, one specific Focus Group Discussion (FGD) consisting of eight individuals was conducted with the victims of intimate partner violence. The inclusion criterion was being the survivors of the violence. Each of the participants was allowed to raise any question at any time for clarification and escape questions if they felt uncomfortable in group discussion. The focus group discussion was held in one of the rooms of the shelter, tape recorded and took an hour. The topics during focus group

discussion were about the experience, causes, consequences and pathways of intimate partner violence.

Tape recorded information was not transcribed word for word but organized in to themes and was divided in to subthemes that were relevant to the study. The presentation of collected data included description and quotations.

### **2.7. Ethical Consideration**

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from concerned shelter officials. Important explanations about the purpose of this study was given to participants and their verbal consent to participate was obtained. Confidentiality of tape recorded information and anonymity of respondents was maintained.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

All of the informants had rural origin, but they were living in Addis Ababa while the incidence happened, and their ages ranged from 19 to 29 years old. Their duration of stay in the shelter also ranged from one month up to three years. In terms of their relationship status, four of them were married while the other four were cohabiting with their partner and one was dating. The severity of the violence ranged from rape, denial battering to physical disability, including facial scar, bruise and medical stitch.

### **4.1 Intimate Partner Violence Experiences**

The theme experience emerged in line with the objective and was further divided in to sub- themes. Sub-themes under this cluster theme include physical violence, psychological violence and sexual violence. Unlike the other themes, this cluster theme depicts informant's direct experience of the violence. Women in abusive relationships experienced physical violence ranging from a slap, scar and bruise in the face to a physical disability. The violence left a permanent mark of the event and it was how the body remembered it was wronged. In relation with this, one of the in-depth interviewee (Fasika) explained that:

My husband would beat me repeatedly whether I made mistake or not. He beat me so hard that I was bruised and it was the cause of the scar on my face around my eye. It was really shameful to tell people what happened when they asked about the scar.

Lidet also recalled the physical violence like this:

We had an argument over a trivial matter and he hit me with a metal stick and broke my leg. From that day onwards I could not walk properly. I still limp.

Many women during the focus group discussion told stories about having been physically abused because their partner was substance abusers. They said most of the physical abuse (the beating) occurred when “he is drunk”.

Women in abusive relationships experienced psychological abuse and the abuse always came from those that were nearest and dearest to them, i.e., their intimate partners. The violence left its trace in their life, a scar that never healed, and a mark of lifelong remembrance. Consequently, they might forgive, but never forget, because the scar was too visible and represented a living memory of that traumatic relationship. The entire in-depth interview participants argued that they had felt disrespect, humiliation, depression, low self-esteem, suicidal temptation, regret, worry and desperation. For example, Selam recalled her suicidal temptation as follows:

When I was in the hospital, I wanted to commit suicide. I wanted to use whatever instrument I had to kill myself. I told the police women to take my children (twins) for adoption, because I did not want to live another day.

Others echoed her sense of desperation about the psychological abuse they suffered during their time in the relationship. Even in the aftermath, it had a toll on their state of mind. Regarding this issue Senait said:

As for me, I still feel the agony of his insult, how he disgracefully belittled me, and continued to asking myself, what evil did I do to deserve this? It is all a nasty feeling that never allows peaceful life.



Similar feelings were expressed during the focus group discussion. Participants described the impact of the abuse as far reaching, not only causing individual (psychological) problems, but also extending the length to cause social condemnation (shame and dishonour). For two reasons, people do not trust other people, first because they do not know them and second because they know them too well of what they are capable of. Regarding the issue of sexual violence, Hanna recalled that:

I have known him for a longtime. He portrayed himself as a good friend and we started dating. We began to walk together and spend time once he had promised not to touch me. Later, however, he began to drink and get intoxicated. He eventually forced me to sleep with him breaking his promise. The next morning, he said it was because he was drunk (Metet new yasasategne).

Marta also recited about her experiences as follows:

I had a fight with my partner. He forced me to sleep with him once or twice. One day we had a fight. He threw a glass at me and knocked me down. I shouted and left at night. That same night, I was raped by a stranger who appeared friendly, claimed to take me to the broker agency, [who was not licensed]. He convinced me that he would take me to the broker agency and gave me his number.... He forced me to sleep with him and the next morning he was gone. I did not even have money to pay for taxi. I simply stood in the middle of the street with grim face that clearly showed how worried I was. Looking at my strange face, one woman approached and asked me what happened, and I told her the whole story. She gave me money for transportation and I came to Addis Ababa where I was employed as a domestic worker. As months went by, I found out that I was pregnant. I called both of them (the partner and the friendly stranger who raped me) both of them denied it. Being raped by your partner is one thing but by a cunning stranger is something I will not forget.

Her opinion was also shared by most of the other informants during the focus group discussion. They said "all of us here, even though our story is different, we somehow experienced sexual violence, not only rape, but also denial of pregnancy".

## 4.2 Causes of the Violence and Abusive Relationship

Culture and tradition put men at higher status than women. Cultural conventions require women to be obedient and submissive, even to violence directed at them. A woman who does not conform to such abusive norm is considered as deviant and disloyal. Regarding this issue one of the in-depth interviewees, Dana, stated that:

It is possible for a man to marry more than one woman as long as he has the financial capabilities. A woman demanding to leave because her husband has extra-marital affair would be regarded as a woman of bad character (*Kenategna set*). That is why I endured all the suffering.

The other in-depth interviewee, Senait, said:

I used to work as a domestic worker once I came in Addis Ababa and started to live with him. He convinced me to stop working and cover all our expenses. So I stopped working. After a while, however, he stopped giving me the money. Then, I began to pay from my own account. However, my saving was so meagre that I could not continue to pay for a long period of time. Then I told him that I would leave him and do not want to continue living like that. Then, he and his family claimed that I had another man or else I would not have the guts to demand separation (*Yetemamenshewen temanneshe new alugn*).

The issue of culture was also raised during the focus group discussion as a significant barrier decreasing the chance of breaking free from the relationship. According to one of the participants, she was forced to marriage by her family. She said "It was difficult to leave the marriage because it was arranged; I had to endure all the beating. It was a state of no love-no peace and it was all because of culture since both of us were forced into the marriage and I was continuously pressured to stay, especially since I became pregnant". The entire in-depth interview participants argued that they could not leave the relationship because of fear of facing financial difficulties. In relation to this, one of the in-depth interview participants, Kalkidan, explained: "I thought of leaving him many times, but I was not

confident of supporting my children and myself". Regarding the financial barriers, one of the in-depth interviewees, Fasika, said:

As I told you earlier, my partner travelled back and forth to Saudi Arabia for work. I used the money he sent me to support myself and my parents. Thus, breaking free from him meant a discontinuity of the financial flow which was against my interest and the interest of my parents.

Her opinion was also shared by most of the other informants during the focus group discussion. According to the participants, it was because of lack of money that they were forced to stay in the relationship despite its abusive nature.

Most of the participants during the in-depth interview admitted that they were afraid of the consequences of trying to leave the relationship. They described the violence as extremely powerful, preventing and paralyzing them from making the decision to leave. Fiker explained about her fear:

I wanted to leave but I was afraid that I would get caught trying to escape. Instead of getting caught I would rather prefer to die.

Her opinion was also shared by most of the other informants during the focus group discussion. According to the participants, it was because of fear of the consequences that they stayed in the relationship for a long time. One of the participants (Senait) added that if she had the support from others, it would have been possible to leave earlier than facing all of these things but she had no one to talk to, let alone plan an escape. Even though the abuse was severe and they were battered cruelly, some of the interviewees and also the focus group discussion participants described that they were convinced that it was lover's spat (Selam, Fasika and Kalkidan). And others like Dana believed it was jealousy and was an indication of love. She said:

I did not want to leave because I told myself that anyone could fight and things might get physical at some point, but I thought it was because he loved me and all he did was out of love (*Lejenete new engeende adergew*).

Likewise, Fasika also recalled why she stayed:

I had fallen for his lies. I wanted to believe that he acted the way he did because of alcohol and that was what he told me when he came to my uncle's house to ask for my forgiveness. I stayed with him because I was persuaded by him and that he had changed and he will try to be a better person. However, through time, his wrong actions were revealed.

Lidet's and, Fasika's ideas were also shared by most of the other informants during the focus group discussion. According to the participants, it was because they had believed that their relationship could be fixed through patience, and the violence was out of jealousy, which was a good sign since it indicated love.

The study participants pointed out awakening and helping factors as possible reasons for breaking free from the abusive relationship. Most of the participants admitted that, before becoming aware of what was going on, they wanted to stay in those intimate relationships. However, once they understood the severity of the issue, they started to think about how they could get rid of such abusive partnership. It was just like waking up from a nightmare. They reiterated how the things they had accepted or ignored in the past were becoming uncomfortable or painful physically or mentally.

Marta also explained that:

Once upon a time, he threatened me with a knife saying that he would kill me. That was a moment when I realized, if I stay with him, I might not even get a chance to wake up the next morning because no one knows what he will do.

This idea was also described during the focus group discussion. According to the participants, it was because the numbness they had adopted as coping mechanism, slowly-or suddenly stopped working, and exposed them to the reality which they wished would not happen.

While facing numerous barriers before, during and after the exit from the relationship, there were also factors that facilitated and supported participants exit. The presence of the supportive relationships facilitated the exit from the abusive relationship. Nearly all participants in this study spoke

about the important connection with parents, friends, neighbours, law enforcement officers who demonstrated care, concern and provided the accountability for the victims to successfully exit the violent relationship.

In relation to this Fasika said:

He was drunk when he came home. Then he began arguing with me and started beating me. The situation was so unbearable that I shouted and called for help. Hearing my screaming voice, the neighbours came over and I was able to escape from him. The next day, when I told him that I wanted to leave, he nervously replied that I wouldn't dare and that I did not have the right to do so. He further reiterated that he would not let me abandon him. It was at this moment that the neighbours intervened. They told him that I had a right to leave him and live my own life in peace with my children. They further told him that, if behaved otherwise, they would not tolerate. They will legally charge him with violence.

During the focus group discussion, other participants also echoed Fasika's idea. According to them, there were circumstances when they were also rescued by their neighbours, the law enforcement bodies or even strangers who just wanted to help.

In contrast to the abusive experiences they underwent at home, all of the in-depth interviewees described that the reception at the Shelter for abused women where they were admitted was beyond their expectation. They were welcomed warmly, given care and respect and treated with dignity. According to the in-depth interviewees and the FGD discussants, the Shelter's staff, not only warmly welcomed them, but also treated them like a family, and offered safety and protection. This way, they managed to adjust themselves to the unfamiliar environment.

Dana, described the good treatment she received in the Safe Shelter like this:

I just came to the shelter because I had nowhere else to go. My plan was to stay a few days and leave, but after I entered and was warmly welcomed and given all this assistance (Shelter, food, clothes, counselling and education.) I found more reasons to stay.

In relation to this issue, the other in-depth interviewee, Kalkidan, stated:

For me, it was good because I was abandoned by my family after I runaway. They even hold a funeral disowning me and I knew no one when I came to Addis Ababa. Fortunately, as soon as I was admitted to the shelter for the abused women, I realized that there were other people like me and there were also people who were willing to help and care for others. That made me feel better.

### **4.3 Impacts**

Many of the barriers discussed above left the victims with low self-esteem. As the survivors began their life in the shelter, many began to experience feelings of empowerment, becoming aware of their new found competence, skill and ability. Regarding this theme, all of the in-depth interviewees and the focus group discussion participants described that they had gotten the necessary support from the shelter.

In relation to this, one of the in-depth interviewees, Selam, said:

After I entered this shelter, I have received medical treatment and psychological counselling. And I was also able to take different trainings such as cooking lessons and hairdressing course. After receiving counselling for the first time in my life, I realized that I was valued and that my opinion counts and as result I began to accept what happened to me.

Hanna told a story of regaining hope:

When I compare my life to other girls, I never thought I would end up like this. When I saw other girls went to school and worked, you would not understand how I felt, but after residing here, I have the hope that I can raise my baby and I can have better life for myself as well.

The views of in-depth interviewees were corroborated by the responses of FGD participants. They testified about the holistic support they got and how it gave them hope and courage to keep on living. Most of the informants in the in-depth interview had future plans like continuing their education, whereas three of the others wanted to earn a decent living so they could

support their children even after exiting the shelter. Hanna, Marta and Mesert were planning to continue their education when the time was right. Two of the others, Lidet and Senait, argued that they had already taken a number of trainings in order to support themselves and their children.

Senait further added that:

I am currently waiting to exit the Shelter. After I am assigned a job and all my living expenses, including the rent for six months, is paid, I will leave the Shelter, and that means I am independent.

#### **4.4 Coping Strategies**

During the focus group discussion, it became clear that the majority of the participants hoped to be economically independent and had no plans to return to their families in the rural area after exiting the shelter. For example, one of the participants said that:

Even if I must go to my family, I would feel sad. Because I joined the Shelter due to lack of support from anyone in the family. As a child, I grew up under a step-mother and was treated badly. I was deprived of all the rights a normal child should have. Childhood trauma, memory of forced marriage and all that happened to me in the aftermath have their toll on my life. Thus, I do not even want to think about going back. I will just continue living here in the Shelter until I am ready to stand by myself and support my child.

All of the interviewees and the focus group discussion participants stated that they hoped for a better future. "All of us here lead a different life, are hurt in a different way but we have realized that we are capable and are worthy of healing and we want nothing but violence to stop and other women to learn from us".

### **3. Conclusion and Recommendation**

Instead of showing the overall prevalence of gender based violence in the country, this study focused to explore the experiences of women who were the victims of intimate partner violence. The findings clearly indicated that cultural barriers, economic deprivation, fear of consequences and emotional attachment coerced women to stay in the abusive relationship. The study

further revealed that the victims suffered from multiple physical and psychological abuses including rape, battering, denial of fatherhood at pregnancy, and visible facial scars, which the victims were forced to bear throughout their life, symbolizing their traumatic experience. Much more enduring post-traumatic psychological stresses were also revealed during the study. Finally, against all odds, most of the victims showed resilience through adoption of various coping strategies to withstand their traumatic experiences. The suffering they sustained at the hands of close friends and intimate partners did not totally break their drive for successful life. Instead they emboldened them to seek financial independence and self-reliance as a way out. Such a strong resolve and resilience notwithstanding, these victims still needed support to start new life upon release from the facilities.

**Strengthening existing interventions and initiatives targeting individuals affected by IPV** and develop community level interventions to identify culturally appropriate strategies to combat IPV is suggested. Furthermore, exploring for sustainable financing is crucial to augment the support mechanism, victims' steady recovery and victims' efforts to build sustainable livelihood after leaving the Shelter. Devising mechanisms to follow-up the experience of survivors after they leave the shelter is also strongly recommended. The study also recommends that both international and local NGOs as well as concerned government agencies to pay attention to the needs of victims and provide targeted (need based) support that would enhance victim's self-reliance.

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