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Domestic Violence in a Developing Context: The Perspectives of Women in Northern Ethiopia

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Abstract

The World Health Organization's multicountry study of the prevalence rates of intimate partner violence found extremely high rates of violence against women in Ethiopia. This article seeks to enhance our understanding of this violence. By drawing on focus group research conducted with women in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, it explores the types of domestic violence experienced by these women, the impact of this violence, the reasons for it, and the multiple resistance strategies used by the women. The findings suggest a potentially important role for professional social work practice in the Ethiopian context.

Keywords

domestic violence, gender-based violence, international social work, qualitative research, Ethiopia

Domestic violence, or intimate partner violence, is a global issue, but the prevalence rates vary considerably among countries. A study by Heise and Garcia-Moreno (2002) reported that the prevalence rates for intimate partner violence found in 48 population-based surveys from around the world indicated that 10–69% of women experienced physical violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lives, and one third to one half of these abused women also experienced sexual abuse. The more recent World Health Organization (WHO) multicountry study (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006) reported the prevalence rates for 15 sites in 10 countries internationally. Of the women who reported experiencing either physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner, the highest rate, 71%, was found in Butajira, in the south of Ethiopia, and the lowest rate, 15%, was found in Japan. The only other African country in the WHO study was the United Republic of Tanzania whose rates were 41.3% in the cities and 55.9% in the rural provinces. Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, and Watts (2006) also suggested that these figures are

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[†] Sadly, Dr. Allen died in June 2013 prior to the publication of this article.

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likely to be underestimates, since women are commonly stigmatized and blamed for the abuse they receive. A number of studies from the sub-Saharan African region have found that violence against women is widespread (Mann & Takyi, 2009). These studies have found that approximately 50% of all married women in Zambia, 57% in Uganda, 60% in Tanzania, 42% in Kenya, 67% in Sierra Leone, and 81% in Nigeria have experienced some form of violence in their lives from partners or husbands (Heise, Elesberg, & Gottemoeller, 1999; Kishor & Johnson, 2004; Mann & Takyi, 2009; Speizer, 2010). A cross-sectional study in Ethiopia found that 45% had experienced physical violence at some point in their lives, 10% had experienced violence in the previous 3 months, and 53% of those who were abused experienced injuries (Deyessa, Kassaye, Demeke, & Taffa, 1998). The South African Police Service (cited in Boonzaier & de La Rey, 2003) estimated that 80% of women living in rural areas were victims of abuse.

As Garcia-Moreno et al. (2006) noted, most acts of physical violence against intimate partners are part of a pattern of continuing abuse. This violence against women by their intimate partners has been identified as a major cause of injury to women (Ellsberg, Jansen, Heise, Watts, & Garcia-Moreno, 2008). Epidemiological and clinical studies have demonstrated that physical and sexual abuse of women is consistently associated with a broad range of negative health outcomes, such as gynecological disorders, adverse pregnancy outcomes, gastrointestinal disorders, and chronic pain syndromes, as well as severe and ongoing mental health disorders (Ellsberg et al., 2008; Loxton, Schofield, & Hussein, 2006). The negative effects on children have also been well documented; Holt, Buckley, and Whelan's (2008) review of the literature suggested that domestic violence leads to cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social problems. In addition, witnessing and experiencing domestic violence in childhood can lead to the greater use or tolerance of violence in adulthood, thus suggesting that violence can be transmitted from one generation to the next (Markowitz, 2001). Although there has been considerable debate about the causes of such domestic violence, it is now widely accepted that while there is a range of risk factors, such as poverty (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002) and alcohol and drug use (Fals-Stewart, 2003), the primary underlying factors that facilitate such abuse are beliefs about gender and the respective roles of men and women in society and family life (Allen, 2013; Boonzaier, 2008; Speizer, 2010).

The qualitative study presented here enabled us to explore, in more depth, the reasons underlying the high level of abuse experienced by women in Ethiopia as reported in the WHO study (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006). Few qualitative studies of this nature have been conducted. As the findings indicate, women in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia experience a range of abuses, and there is a range of reasons why women experience such abuse. While the overall study focused on women's experiences of violence and oppression both within and outside intimate relationships, this article focuses on the theme of intimate partner violence or domestic violence.

Research Methodology

The study did not replicate the WHO study; it did not attempt to discover the prevalence rate of domestic violence in Tigray. Instead, it took the WHO findings from Butajira in southern Ethiopia as the starting point for exploring the experiences and rationale behind high levels of violence within Ethiopian society. The study used a qualitative research methodology, involving five focus groups with local women, three in an urban setting and two in a rural setting. The focus groups were divided into three age groups: 18–25, 25–35, and 35+. Purposive sampling was used whereby members of a local voluntary organization invited women they knew to participate in the groups. Thus, the participants were not representative of the broader population. In fact, given that they were known to this voluntary organization, which primarily offers services to the most marginalized members of the community, it is likely that the women who participated came from poorer backgrounds and may therefore have been more at risk of violence. In addition, some of the participants were known to

the organization because of the violence and oppression that they had experienced. These are important points to consider while reading the study's findings.

Three local women were employed to facilitate the focus groups. The women were chosen on the basis that they spoke both English and the local languages and had experience working with women in the area. The facilitators participated in 2 days of intensive training that we provided. The training focused on two primary topics: gender-based violence and conducting focus group research. Given the huge cultural differences between Ireland and Ethiopia, the training involved an important exchange of information between us and the facilitators, with the discussions informing the data collection and data analysis that subsequently occurred.

We obtained ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of University College Dublin. Since some participants were unable to read or write, oral consent for participation in the study was obtained.

In total, 39 women took part in the focus groups, all of whom were Christian. The discussions were tape recorded. The three groups that were held in the urban area were transcribed verbatim by one of the facilitators and were then subsequently translated by a professional translator in Ireland. Unfortunately, we were unable to find a professional translator for the discussions that took place in the rural area because the language was much less commonly spoken. However, since we had anticipated this difficulty, the group facilitator translated the discussion, and this translation was therefore used.

Findings and Discussion

Forms of Domestic Violence

The participants' accounts suggested that oppression and violence against women are common problems. The women recounted experiences of general oppression and inequality; they spoke about husbands having multiple sexual partners and about the unequal responsibility that women took for child rearing and household life (sometimes including forced labor). However, this article focuses on their more specific discussions about gender-based violence in intimate relationships. When asked about the forms of violence that women in both the urban and rural settings experienced, the participants mentioned many different types. Their accounts suggested that they or other members of the community frequently experienced physical violence, sexual violence, emotional abuse, and coercive control. Indeed, in the focus groups that took place in the rural area, the participants were unanimously of the belief that almost all women in the area experience violence. This article first discusses the main types of violence identified by the participants. It then discusses the participants' perspectives on the impact of this violence, its causes, and the strategies that women adopted to deal with it.

Sexual Violence. Sexual violence was the form of violence that the women spoke about in most depth. It was unclear why this was the case. It cannot be assumed that sexual violence was the most common form of violence the women experienced. However, the participants' stories suggested that sexual violence was, in fact, commonplace. Although many forms of sexual violence—both within and outside marriage—were discussed, the focus here is on sexual violence in intimate partner relationships, not stranger rape.

In Ethiopia, rape within marriage is not viewed as a crime, thus suggesting that what happens between husbands and wives is considered a private matter. This situation poses great risks for married women. In the focus groups, the women talked about the expectation that a wife would satisfy the sexual needs of her husband. For example, one participant told of her personal experience in this regard:

My husband likes sex too much; he is also older and more experienced than me. And he knew all sorts of sex acts. He was demanding much sex that I couldn't cope with. It was a tormenting experience Then I got divorced, for it was beyond what I can bear. Such types of offences do occur, but they are not known because they are not talked about.

Another participant stated:

Even if you give birth, even in this situation, they expect you to serve sexually.

The women's stories suggested that there was often little or no consideration for the woman's consent to engage in sexual intercourse with her husband. Instead, it was expected that sex would take place whenever the man wanted it. This was clearly a form of sexual violence, and it was recognized as such by the participants. It seemed that when women objected, force and violence were sometimes used, as one woman noted:

[T]he injustice among women is, they are forced to have illegal inappropriate sex. It happens during the night, there is a beating, it is dark, and what can they do? They have no choice but to give in, and then they end up with a womb disorder.

Related to the issue of being forced to have sex, the women felt that they had no control over how many children they had, with one participant stating that they had "less chance to manage the menstrual cycle." Another participant said:

There are many types of attacks that occur on women, such as underage marriage, raping, and forcing the wife to have many children. The husband decides for the wife whether to use birth control or not. In general, the woman is under total control of the husband. The men also consider women as servants of [men].

Physical Violence. It was evident that physical violence is also a common form of violence within the communities in which the research took place. One woman in the 25- to 35-year-old focus group succinctly stated:

Domination and attacks on women are common practice.

In contrast to the discussion of sexual violence, which was related to violence both within and outside marriage, physical violence was always discussed in relation to intimate partner relationships, particularly relationships between married couples. No reference was made to women being physically attacked by strangers or by people other than their husbands or boyfriends. It is interesting that in speaking about this form of violence, some of the women spoke of their own experiences, while in speaking about sexual violence, the women tended to speak about the experiences of friends or acquaintances.

Regarding the physical abuse that she suffered, one woman simply stated: "Every time he came home, he just beat me." Another woman spoke in more depth. She described how she had been married with two children by the time she was 18 years old. She described herself as having come from a "poor family," but her story suggested that her husband was relatively wealthy. They built their own house and owned a number of businesses. However, she experienced various types of abuse and oppression within the marriage, including forced labor and physical violence. She had little freedom to make choices about her life. As she put it:

I was always living in fear. He frequently hit me and forced me to wash clothes the whole night I had no right to decide on my own life. It was the worst and painful repression period for me.

This woman described how she was eventually forced to leave her home with her children and how she subsequently built her own house and pursued a legal case against her husband. Others, however, were still enduring violence. One of the older focus group participants told of her experience of being married to a man who frequently left her to spend time with other women. She experienced various types of abuse and oppression throughout her marriage. For example, when she went into labor with her sixth child and started experiencing complications, her husband could not be found. When he was eventually found, he refused to sign the consent for her surgery to take place. The woman cried as she reflected on her situation:

So I have been through many sufferings, I still do While he still treats me badly, I am living with him until today. All my neighbors know my problems. Sometimes he beats me with a stick, accusing me of locking the house when I leave. When you are especially empty-handed, the abuse gets worse.

Her final comment—about being empty handed—suggests that she felt that there was a link between poverty and the violence she experienced, a point to which we will return later. Other participants spoke about the experiences of women whom they knew who were subjected to physical abuse or who were threatened by their partners. One woman stated:

I know one married women with four children, her husband is always quarreling [with her] and beating her. When she was waiting on him, preparing or drinking coffee, he would hit her on her eyes or anywhere on her face The husband is worthless; he always gets drunk and even sometimes stays outside overnight. He does not want to divorce her but is repeatedly harassing and beating her.

On several occasions, the participants drew attention to the fact that various types of violence often occur simultaneously. For example, sexual violence often involved physical violence:

If we consider these females who were raped, they are also physically abused.

Overall, the findings suggest that physical abuse was common, with many of the participants speaking about the abuse that they had experienced. The lack of in-depth discussion is likely to reflect a wider social acceptance that this form of violence happens frequently within the family home.

Emotional Abuse and Coercive Control. There was evidence that women in the area also experienced emotional abuse within intimate relationships. Emotional abuse included being denigrated, being blamed unfairly, being disrespected, and being humiliated. At times, this abuse amounted to coercive control (Stark, 2007), a term used to describe the limiting of women's freedom (e.g., to visit friends or family members, to work outside the home, and to have input into family finances). Being put down, ridiculed, or humiliated was mentioned by the participants. One woman told the story of a girl she knew who had been disowned by her parents when she became pregnant. At first, her boyfriend treated her well, and she began living with him and his parents. However, with time, his treatment of her changed:

While she was living with the boy, he changed his mind in the middle and started treating her differently. He was looking down and denigrating her. He was bothering and harassing her by saying, "You came to my house yourself, uninvited." Then she fell into a state of depression and worrying.

A similar story was told by another participant whose boyfriend started seeing different women and even brought some of them back to the house in which they lived. He became angry with her when she asked for her name to be put on his property. According to the participant, he responded by saying:

I brought you in as a housemaid, not as a wife, and there is no one as evidence.

There were also examples of emotional abuse in the form of blaming. According to the participants, wives were blamed for various family tragedies and difficulties, including children not being conceived, children dying, or teenage daughters who were perceived to be behaving inappropriately. In addition, the women recounted stories of being intimidated by men. One woman said that she had gone to court to obtain financial maintenance from her former husband and managed to secure the payment of a small amount of money, but after the court case, her former husband intimidated her and threatened that he would not pay the amount he was supposed to pay: "He was intimidating me that he would reduce the 300 Birr." Others told of threatening behavior from their husbands when they did not abide by the husbands' wishes. One woman told of a man who was in a large amount of debt. He told his wife to give him her jewelry. When she refused, he threatened her, saying:

Where is your jewelry? Otherwise, I am going to kill you.

These experiences of intimidation and threatening behavior suggest that men were attempting to control their wives. The participants told of how their husbands or boyfriends refused to put their names on property; refused to give them money; sold family possessions without consultation with them (including property or livestock belonging to the women); and, as has been described previously, took control of sexual relations within the relationship. In addition, in some instances, the men attempted to control their wives' movements. One woman talked about the coercive control she experienced from her husband even when he was out of the country. Her husband kept track of her movements and controlled financial matters by paying the rent in advance, rather than allowing his wife to pay it while he was away. Another participant made a general comment about the desire of men to be in control within their relationships:

Some few males tell [their wives] never to leave the house. It could be for good reason. But most of them do it because they believe that males should be worshipped. They want to be at the top and the female under male control, and they have the attitude of "she is to listen to what I say."

The essence of this comment was reflected in many of the participants' narratives, both in their accounts of personal experiences and in stories about friends or acquaintances. This desire for control was manifest in multiple ways as was outlined earlier. In addition, there were numerous implications of this violence. It is to these that we now turn.

Impact of Domestic Violence

The literature suggests that domestic violence has various effects on those who experience it, including those who are subjected to the abuse and family members who witness it (Mullender et al., 2002; Stanley, Miller, Richardson Foster, & Thomson, 2011). However, little of the research on this topic has been conducted in developing countries. The findings of our study suggest that the impact of domestic violence is significantly different in a context in which meeting basic needs is a priority and there is no social welfare system to act as a safety net. The findings are discussed under the themes of poverty and education and physical, emotional, and psychological effects.

Poverty and Education. Violence had a negative economic impact on the families, with experiences of poverty and the lack of education becoming even more acute. The women often began taking sole responsibility for their children because of domestic violence. Frequent reference was made to women who were struggling to feed their children, to send them to school, and to pay rent. In circumstances in which making ends meet was often a struggle even when husbands or partners were earning and providing for their families, a crisis could arise when the women were left on their own, whether through death, separation, or divorce, or when the men simply did not take any responsibility for their children. One woman recounted her own experiences:

I was married and had four children. I had disagreements with my husband, and he was going out a few times. Even if I have repressions, I gave priority to my children, tolerated the problems, and stayed with him. In between God took him. Now, I work as a hair braider, trying to look after my children myself. My children, they may eat today, they might not eat tomorrow.

At times, women who were struggling took desperate measures to provide for their children. One participant referred to women being forced into prostitution to bring up their children, as in this example:

It is true that the mother is in huge difficulty; she is torn apart between feeding one and looking after the other child. The mother is the most oppressed. Not only the deceased father, but the one who is alive is not as concerned and as caring as the mother. The mother has so many difficulties. She [takes out] loans to bring up her children. She even gets into prostitution; she becomes infected with a disease, suffers a lot, and dies.

It was evident that the women took huge risks to meet the basic needs of their children. Inevitably, such risks meant that they were exposed to more violence and oppression, thus creating a cycle from which it was difficult to escape.

Violence also had a strong impact on the education of both women and their children, which was often related to the poverty that the women experienced. Many of the participants mentioned that women frequently had to forgo their education after marrying or after becoming pregnant. At times, their husbands did not allow them to continue to pursue their education. In other instances, there was simply an expectation that they would care for their children:

In the area of education, if she has lots of children . . . raising the children . . . If we honestly look into the problem, the children belong to both the husband and wife, but the main one who takes care of the children is the mother. For the sake of rearing our children, there are occasions when we have to interrupt our education.

Often, it was simply not possible for the women to continue with their education because they needed to earn money to provide for their children. This was particularly the case if the father of the children was absent. Several participants told of university students becoming pregnant and leaving their education to be with their boyfriends and care for their children and then subsequently being left on their own with the babies. In one situation—referred to previously—a participant told of a university student who became pregnant and began living with her boyfriend. Over time the boyfriend became emotionally abusive.

When things got worse, she was forced to leave her child with her boyfriend and left the house to work in a café. Imagine, this girl was a bright student, and because of the boy, she interrupted her education and ended up in lots of trouble.

In addition to women's education being disrupted, violence and oppression had a severe impact on the children's education. At best, the children struggled with their education, perhaps because they found it difficult to concentrate in school because of the problems that were occurring at home. At worst, the children were unable to attend school, since their families could not afford the school fees or the children were needed to earn for their families or to care for their younger siblings. As one woman put it:

I struggle to raise my children, selling soaked beans and roasted grain. [The children] are not successful with their education. Three of my daughters failed at Grade 10. Now they are trading cactus fruit and other items.

To a large extent, it seemed that the impact that violence had on education—both of women and their children—meant that the cycle of poverty, violence, and oppression was able to continue.

Physical, Emotional, and Psychological Effects. While poverty and the educational effects of violence were discussed frequently and in depth, the physical, emotional, and psychological effects were mentioned less often, perhaps reflecting the women's focus on the basic needs of their families. The physical implications of violence and oppression were generally discussed in relation to sexual violence. Little reference was made to injuries that were sustained as a result of physical violence. The reasons for this omission are unclear, but reflected the general lack of discussion of physical abuse. In relation to the effects of sexual violence, several references were made to gynecological problems caused by rape—both stranger rape and marital rape—and occasional reference was made to physical problems resulting from female genital mutilation. The physical consequences of rape were described by one participant in relation to a woman she knew:

During the pregnancy period, she was getting sick frequently. Later on, she had a problem of miscarriage and became a fistula victim.

Another physical implication of sexual violence was HIV, which was discussed frequently in the focus groups. Many participants talked about contracting HIV from their husbands or boyfriends, and they often attributed this situation to the fact that their husbands or boyfriends had multiple sexual partners. In addition, a number of participants told stories about men who were aware that they were HIV positive but did not inform their wives. One woman, who was separated from her second husband, recounted the following experience:

When I was seriously sick, I decided to take medical treatment and went to a hospital. I was told I am HIV positive. The first time I heard, I was contemplating hanging myself When I was under great pressure and anxiety, I met my husband by chance and told him I was found HIV positive. He said: "I am also HIV positive, which is why I preferred to stay away from you." He continued to say: "Your husband died before I met you. So it is you who passed the disease to me." . . . We women are extremely wronged. Now I do not really know from whom I contracted the disease—whether it is from the first or second husband. Men do not consider themselves as the transmitters of the disease; they always blame the woman.

This participant's reference to her suicidal thoughts suggests the emotional implications of an HIV diagnosis. More generally, the emotional and psychological implications of violence were usually discussed in relation to children, with the participants paying less attention to the implications for women themselves. However, at times the effects on women were mentioned, which included feelings of shame, hopelessness, and distrust of men. Regarding shame, while many of the women

cried out for help when violence occurred, others remained quiet because of the shame that they would feel. Perhaps stemming from this shame, there were a number of references to women feeling hopeless and killing themselves or attempting to take their own lives as a result, particularly after they contracted HIV. In addition, previous experiences of violence meant that the women found it difficult to trust men. One participant, who saw how her mother was treated by her second husband, stated:

Until now, I do not know the face of any man and have not had any relationship with anybody . . . because I still feel the pain of my mother.

The primary emotional effect of intimate partner violence on the women was manifested in feelings of worry in relation to their children. In addition to being concerned about how children would be fed and educated, the participants were conscious of the more direct psychological impact of violence and oppression on children. While they occasionally gave examples of children being abused as well as their mothers, little was said about this abuse in general. However, the participants talked about children feeling fear and worry as a result of the violence that their mothers experienced. At times, they remembered these feelings from their own childhoods (Stanley et al., 2011). In other instances, they spoke about their own children and how they felt. Sometimes children questioned why their mothers stayed with abusive fathers:

As for me, its effect on my children is very bad. For instance, my daughter, because she hears that he is a curse, she would ask me, every now and then, why I couldn't live on my own. She would ask me why I got married to her callous father.

Another participant felt that if children grow up listening to fighting between their parents, they “won't have a healthy mind.” Another participant talked about the type of conversations she had with her 6-year-old daughter. The dialogue shows the efforts she made to protect her child and reassure her:

She said: “I am afraid he might come. I am afraid he might even kill us by car if he met us on the street.” . . . In general, violence affects not only the mother but the children. It has also a psychological impact on the children.

Causes of Violence and Oppression

Given the devastating effects of the violence, understanding the root causes is essential if violence is to be prevented in generations to come. Although various causes of the violence that occurred were suggested, three were particularly prominent: poverty, the lack of education, and the lack of equality.

Poverty. In the literature, poverty and financial problems are cited as reasons why women do not leave abusive relationships (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002), despite the fact that most of the literature is based on research in Western countries, where social welfare systems can act as safety nets for women who decide to leave. However, in Ethiopia, no such system exists, and, as a result, poverty is an even greater barrier to women leaving abusive situations. In addition, it is evident that many of the women believed that poverty was actually the cause of the abuse taking place. Again and again, throughout the focus groups, the participants spoke about women entering relationships or getting married because they thought they would have a better life with a husband or boyfriend, since a man would provide for them and ease the burden on their families of origin. Thus, relationships with men were often viewed as a way out of poverty. The participants made frequent reference to girls and

young women entering relationships for this reason, with little attention paid to the character of the men. In talking about the need for financial security, the participants often said that women showed a lack of foresight. They said that women did not think ahead and instead were attracted by what a man could offer them in the short term. One participant simply stated:

The point is there is deception; we women are easily deceived. We fall into the trap of temporary success without thinking of the long-term consequences. We women are mostly misled for money.

In addition, financial security seemed to be a particularly important lure for women whose first marriages had broken down or who were widowed. As was discussed earlier, these women usually had several dependent children whom they struggled to feed, clothe, and send to school. One participant was particularly strong in her views that this was the sole reason for the violence that occurs in a second marriage. As one participant put it:

Once they are face to face with problems and are asked for marriage by another man, they do not hesitate to accept the request and get married again.

Thus, a sense of dependence on men was evident and was mentioned by many participants. The lack of property rights meant that this sense of dependence was exacerbated. Several participants described how property was usually in the name of the man and sometimes in the name of the man and other members of his family. Thus, the women felt they had little choice but to stay in abusive relationships, given that they would have no rights to their homes if they left or if they forced their husbands to leave.

The links between poverty and working in the sex industry were clear. As was stated previously, girls and women were often forced to engage in sex work because of poverty. Sometimes, they entered the industry having previously experienced violence and oppression. In their work as sex workers, their dependence on their male clients was again evident and acted as a cause of further violence and oppression. For example, one participant described the situation of a girl who was offered money to have oral sex with man who had returned to Ethiopia from abroad. This man was described as “well respected”:

The girl lived in a rented house and had four months unpaid rent Imagine this girl has four months unpaid house rent and wants money urgently. When he first asked her, she was shocked; it was a strange experience. But later she agreed to do what she was asked and went with him. When they started, how could she handle it? She went because she is already in the business, and the 1,000 Birr [1 Birr equals approximately €17] was too big money. She thought she would manage.

Lack of Education and Awareness. The lack of education and awareness was viewed as another cause of violence and oppression. As one woman stated: “Why violence against women takes place is, first, that because of the lack of education, they are not educated. Second, women are under the hands of men; they are dependent.” Illiteracy and the lack of education were particularly mentioned by the participants in the focus group attended by the older women and by the women from rural areas. These women were acutely aware of how their own lack of education had disadvantaged them. In their eyes, it was unlikely that educated women would experience violence and abuse. In general, the women were not specific about how the lack of education caused violence:

We, it is because we are illiterate and because we have no awareness that we have to face violence. I myself am angry because of my illiteracy But the educated women who happen to be abused are few and a rare incident.

Others made a link between the lack of education and awareness and the lack of farsightedness, suggesting that the lack of education and awareness meant that women did not think ahead in relation to the implications of their decisions. In addition, frequent reference was made to the lack of knowledge and awareness of legal rights. One participant talked about a woman she knew who got married “when she was a little child,” and her husband transferred her property into his siblings’ names. She discovered this only when she later had to go to court following the breakdown of her marriage:

Then she was told she has no possessions from her marriage and that she is a complete dependent. She was a mother of four, and she was told that she owns no portion of property . . . The decision that passed was that she has no possessions. Hence, the problem here is about the lack of awareness of the legal system. The government doesn’t give any lessons to raise legal awareness.

While this lack of awareness may not have caused violence to occur, it inevitably led to the oppression of this woman, who was then left without any possessions and was forced into continued poverty, thus putting her at a further risk of violence and oppression. Similarly, another participant, who regretted her own lack of education, stated:

Had I known that education was so useful, I would have attended school. Why? I am now being disadvantaged. When you go to court, in order for you to be confused, they tell you to go here and there. You then will be puzzled and quit the court process. Therefore, if we are to talk truly, it is women who are ill treated. Nothing happens to the men.

This comment suggests that perhaps education informs people about the legal system and that it provides them with confidence in engaging in the legal process. Without this education and awareness, the participants felt that women were more at risk of domestic violence.

Inequality and the Role of Women and Men in Society. As was mentioned earlier, the participants’ accounts of the types of violence experienced by women suggested that male partners had a desire to be in control. This desire for control was evident in the various forms of violence that were described, but particularly the forms of coercive control that the women experienced. In essence, this desire to be in control reflects a more general discourse of inequality between women and men in Ethiopian society. Men were frequently seen to be superior to women. When asked about the cause of violence against women, one participant stated:

The attitude of the community doesn’t consider the woman to be fully human.

Arising from this inequality and the inferior status of women, men and women perform different roles, particularly within the family. One participant was clear that the lack of respect attributed to these roles results in violence: “Violence is because they are females. This is because of her sex, she has to be pregnant, to lactate, and take care of children, and in this process, she does not get respect.”

Some simply suggested that one received less recognition for being a woman, and, as a result, women could be demeaned. Several participants suggested that as mothers, they had a part to play in causing the violence and oppression that their daughters later suffered. In raising their children, they treated boys and girls differently. Girls were devalued. According to one participant, this situation started at birth:

The problem starts at home with the mother and family. We have different expectations for boys and girls. When we give birth, we acclaim the birth of boys five times, for girls only three times.

Although the participants recognized that this type of treatment was not as common now as it had been in the past, it is likely that much of its legacy remains. Frequent reference was made to men believing that they are superior, and one woman said that “male superiority” is the first cause of violence. For example, it is clear from the discussion that men view themselves as being in control of sexual relationships and women feel obliged to serve their male partners. To some extent, beliefs about male superiority meant that women are taught to behave as inferiors from an early age, even in their interactions with their brothers. Some participants suggested that inequality is culture related:

The first reason is [that] it has been there for long, and it is still part of us. We females ourselves believed and accepted that we are under the male. Had we asked ourselves what makes me less than male, had we challenged him, he would have changed. If we had courage to show him that I can also work equally, he would respect me.

Participants’ Resistance to Violence

The use of the concept of resistance to describe women’s responses to their victimization has been evident in the literature for more than 20 years (Allen, 2012). In their influential study in the United States, in which they challenged the then prevailing theory of learned helplessness, Gondolf and Fisher (1988, p. 3) concluded that “battered women demonstrate tremendous resilience, persistence, and strengths which press for a less pathological orientation to ‘victims.’” They suggested that “their experience points to an alternate characterization—one that considers battered women fundamentally as ‘survivors.’” Wade (1997, p. 25) rejected the traditional Western view that what counts as resistance is usually based on the model of “male-to-male combat” in which people fight back physically. This view excludes most forms of resistance. Wade’s understanding of resistance is that it includes “any attempt to imagine or establish a life based on respect and equality.” It was evident that the women who participated in the study adopted various strategies of resistance.

In particular, many of the women used “placating” strategies (Goodman, Dutton, Weinfurt, & Cook, 2003, p. 169) that aimed to change their abuser’s behavior “without challenging . . . his sense of control.” For example, one woman described how being calm with her husband reduces the level of violence to which she may be exposed:

When he comes in . . . if you wait for them with complaint, they won’t like it. Therefore, how the wife should behave is, when he comes in, even though she is burning inside, she has to calm down as much as possible. Even if he comes too late, she has to welcome him with peace. However, if she shows anger, it will lead him to rebellion. Therefore, I would say it is better if the wife stays calm.

Many people may view this as a form of subservience. However, it is, as Wade (1997) noted, a clever form of resistance because the woman knows that if she is not calm and peaceful, it will lead him to beat her. Other women described similar strategies, of remaining calm so as not to anger the man. Others described their toleration of abuse, stating that they did not shout out or tell anyone about it:

He comes home drunk . . . He would many times beat me. I would keep silent and be submissive to him. This shows you that it is the female who endures violence.

The efforts of others to avoid the abuse were different. Some talked about staying out of their husbands’ way. For example, one participant described the advice she received from her mother:

For example, when he is to beat her, she stays outside until he goes to bed and he is calmed down.

Another woman, however, took a different approach, pretending to be sick in order to prevent the violence:

There was one man who every time he came home, he just beat her, so she used this way: When he approached the house, she pretended to be sick, and the children looked after her; then he did not beat her Women use different means to protect themselves.

Others spent periods living with friends or family members or ensured that they shouted out when abuse was occurring to alert the neighbors. Some women discussed the need to stand up to husbands who are drinking away their income or not earning enough to support their families. This approach took a number of forms. For example, one participant stated:

What I would say is, they have to resolve and bring up their children together. The wife should not be dependent on the husband. Based on my experience, we should not be selective of jobs, but keep working.

This strategy addresses the woman's poverty and her struggle to feed and educate her family and helps to maintain her independence and reclaim some control over her life. Other participants talked about the need to reduce their dependence on men by engaging in capacity-building and income-generating projects:

But if women organize themselves to form an association, the [local voluntary organization] would provide loans to the needy interest-free. The repayment process starts three months after the business is activated and then it continues every month. So, if you grab the opportunity, the female can rear her children.

Seeking support through the formal legal system is a strategy used by many women who experience violence and abuse. It was evident that this was the case for women in this region too. There were numerous examples of women bringing cases to court or to local authorities. Through these systems, they sought maintenance for their children, financial settlements for businesses that were jointly owned with their husbands, and property rights. One participant stated: "I went to the court and filed a charge against him, and they gave me a letter to deliver to him, and that was for him to appear before the police." While some participants recounted situations in which the legal system was used successfully, they also gave many accounts of women making efforts to use the legal system but not experiencing favorable outcomes. Dissatisfaction with the legal system was a prominent theme throughout the focus groups, with many women expressing the view that the legal system was not fair or helpful to women. Barriers to accessing the legal system included not being able to afford a lawyer, being unaware of legal rights and entitlements, or being confused (often because of poor educational levels) by the complexities of the legal system. However, even when these barriers were overcome, the participants thought that the legal system was unfair. They had little or no faith in the system and did not expect to receive equal or fair treatment. In many ways, the women thought that using the legal system resulted in further oppression. Frequent reference was made to unfair verdicts, as is evident in the following comment:

However, even if you go before the court, there is no justice. I have to pay five months' house rent. His salary is 2,000 Birr. It was decided that he would give only 50 Birr to each of his daughters.

Despite the negative experiences of the legal system, the women recognized the need to continue to attempt to bring their abusers to justice. This is evident from the following comment:

[W]e have to be clever and smart to make use of [the justice system]. What makes it worse is that the right of women to put in papers is not there. And the society needs to have the mentality [that] a maltreatment that happened to one can happen to me.

Overall, these examples demonstrate the range of resistance strategies that the women used to minimize the abuse they experienced from their partners. However, the most extreme and final strategy is to end the relationship and get a divorce. While the women's narratives suggested that there are many complications attached to this strategy, many women discussed the need to divorce their abusive husbands: "Just divorce. I said to myself, if I still have to suffer anyway, it is better to be on my own." Similarly, another woman, who thought that divorce was not advisable in general, recognized the need for divorce if the abuse gets worse:

If their problem gets worse, in order to save the woman from beatings and abuses, let her be divorced.

However, not all the women felt able to leave the relationship because of poverty, fear, or social and family pressures or religious beliefs. Many women remained in abusive relationships to maintain a home for their children, which is a universal experience for mothers. As one woman said:

The wife has to be enduring, and the husband needs to be tolerant. We should not be divorced—for the sake of our children, to bring them to a better life.

Although women in Western societies are encouraged to leave their violent husbands even if only for the emotional and psychological welfare of their children, in Ethiopia doing so was often not possible. In essence, the women in our study had to consider the basic needs of their children for food and shelter first, and then, if possible, education. As was mentioned previously, divorcing one's husband often meant that these basic needs could not be met. Therefore, leaving to protect the emotional welfare of children was a luxury that often could not be afforded. Ethiopian women are also confused (often because of poor educational levels) by the complexities of the legal system. However, even when these barriers were overcome, the participants felt that the legal system was unfair. They had little or no faith in the system and did not expect to receive equality or fairness. In many ways, the women thought that using the legal system resulted in further oppression. Yet, the women recognized the need to take a stance against violence, in an effort to improve the situation of women in the community. As one participant stated: "How we can help females who experienced violence, is, first, they have to believe in themselves." another stated: "Women need to be bold."

Concluding Comments

The findings of our study suggest the range of abuses experienced by Ethiopian women within intimate relationships. The women experience sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, as well as coercive control. The high levels of domestic violence reported by these participants reflect the earlier findings from the WHO study that showed that Ethiopia had the highest recorded level of intimate partner violence among the countries that were studied (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006). In addition to the obvious implications of this violence for physical, sexual, and emotional health, these abuses serve to heighten the already challenging circumstances of poverty and the lack of education. In fact, the participants named poverty and the lack of education as both the causes and the consequences of violence, thus suggesting that many women are caught in a vicious cycle of abuse from which it is difficult to escape. Inequality and the superior status of men within society also contribute to this cycle. Yet, the participants' narratives clearly indicated that rather than simply passively accepting this abuse, women use various innovative forms of resistance to protect themselves.

Overcoming these high levels of violence requires a multifaceted approach, in which social work can play a vital role. To begin with, while extremely valuable social services are often run by untrained social workers, professionalizing social work throughout Ethiopia would result in a more skilled workforce who could draw on research evidence and best practices in working in the complex area of intimate partner violence. The provision of services must emphasize equality and women's rights, opportunities for women to remain in school, opportunities for them to support themselves without recourse to prostitution, and access to legal systems in which they have confidence. Social and economic empowerment of women is essential. Indeed, in a study in South Africa, Kim et al. (2007) found that by combining a microfinance project with participatory training on such issues as domestic violence and gender norms, intimate partner violence was reduced. In Ethiopia, awareness raising and educational programs with men, women, boys, and girls are crucial if gender inequality is to be challenged and domestic violence is to be prevented. There appear to be few services in Ethiopia that explicitly focus on domestic violence. A range of services is required, such as refuges, counseling services, free legal aid, income-generating projects, back-to-education services, and helplines. As Zosky (2011) pointed out, the consequences of not having such services will result in women remaining in abusive relationships. In addition, the mental health consequences include fear, hopelessness, depression, and self-blame, as well as the negative effects on children. In essence, the consequences may literally be a matter of life and death (Zosky, 2011).

However, the huge range of problems that Ethiopian society faces and the poor infrastructure that is present mean that opportunities for the development of services are limited. This is particularly the case in a context in which social services are generally delivered by voluntary and religious organizations that rely on international donors, many of whom are donating less because of the global financial crisis. Yet small but significant services can be established on a low budget. In the focus groups, the women spoke openly about their personal experiences of intimate partner violence and expressed gratitude to us for this opportunity. Their doing so suggests the powerful impact of simply being allowed to talk about these difficult experiences. It suggests that in terms of beginning to develop services, support groups for women experiencing violence and abuse may be beneficial. Such groups, facilitated by appropriately trained individuals, would empower women to provide emotional support for each other and would encourage a more open discussion of and dialogue about a problem that appears to be common in Ethiopian society. Such groups would also galvanize women to take action and to challenge the deeply patriarchal society in which they live, where men appear to be viewed as superior to women. These elements of Ethiopian life must be addressed if true equality, including equality in intimate relationships, is to progress and violence is to be prevented. In the words of one participant:

We just have to believe in ourselves; we should stand up and say to ourselves 'I am special.

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