

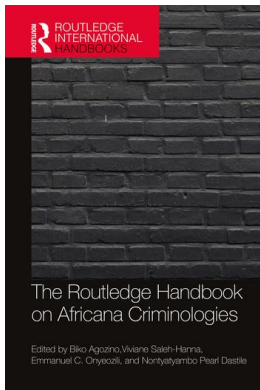
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Biko Agozino, Viviane Saleh-Hanna, Emmanuel C. Onyeozili,
Nontyatyambo Pearl Dastile

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Anita Kalunta-Crumpton

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7

IS PHYSICAL VIOLENCE NOT THE ONLY FORM OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV)?

A review of perspectives on IPV
among African women and men

Anita Kalunta-Crumpton

Introduction

Is physical violence not the only form of intimate partner violence? A few immigrant Nigerian women raised this question in February 2019 during an immigration outreach to members of the immigrant Nigerian community in Texas. The outreach, organized by a community-based organization in Texas, was a listening session geared towards providing undocumented immigrant Nigerian men and women with immigration-related assistance. As the facilitator of one of the breakout sessions, I was privy to some of the intimate partner accounts of a few undocumented Nigerian women who were unaware of the array of acts of abuse against women that not only constitute IPV, but also fall under the legislative protection available to undocumented victims of IPV.

The query in the title and in the first sentence of this chapter is not unique to Nigerian women. I have debated this line of questioning with a few women from other African countries who did not consider male perpetration of nonphysical abuse, such as verbal abuse, financial deprivation, and control of social movements, as an act of violence against women (VAW). As this chapter will show, the origin of this perspective of IPV among immigrant African women is traced to Africa. Even though many African countries are signatories to international conventions to protect women against violence, including IPV (see Kalunta-Crumpton, 2019), perceptions of VAW among Africans do not draw from international definitions and mandates. Rather, they bear on the patriarchal culture into which Africans are socialized. Under

patriarchy, African girls and women are socialized to tolerate VAW (and girls) in intimate relationships, of which physical violence and sexual violence have drawn the most attention internationally.

The salience of physical violence in matters of VAW is illustrated in the work of multilateral organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations [UN] (see WHO, 2005, 2013; UN, 2015). Like physical VAW, sexual VAW is hardly forbidden in Africa, and it tends to intersect with physical violence in the victimization of women in IPV situations (Matunhu, Matunhu, and Kalunta-Crumpton, 2019; UN, 2015). Physical IPV is pervasive in Africa (UN, 2015; International Rescue Committee [IRC], 2012) to the extent that many women have normalized and internalized the occurrence of such violent victimization. For some women, the use of physical violence in IPV symbolizes an expression of love (Matunhu, Matunhu, and Kalunta-Crumpton, 2019; Barnes and Appiahene-Gyamfi, 2019).

Such attitude toward physical IPV is perhaps understandable when one considers that there are societies that give legislative approval to physical VAW in intimate relationships. For example, in Nigeria, the use of corporal punishment by a husband on a wife as a corrective measure is permitted in the northern states of Nigeria. In Section 55(1)(d) of the Penal Code, “native law” or customary practices supersede statutory law when it comes to physical violence by a husband on a wife so long as the violence is meant to correct the wife and that the harm caused does not rise to the level of grievous bodily harm. However, what constitutes grievous bodily harm is debatable.

Against this background, the title of this chapter encapsulates the implications of IPV, particularly for the many victims whose definitions of IPV are restricted to the perpetration of physical violence: e.g., beating, slapping, pushing, and similar behaviors that are intended to cause bodily harm. With this narrow interpretation of IPV, abuse that does not involve an attack on the body, even when the abuse involves emotional/psychological or economic violence, is not considered an act of IPV. In effect, seeking help for nonphysical IPV is unlikely among African women in the U.S. and in Africa due to their limited knowledge and awareness of practices that constitute IPV.

Unlike their Western counterparts, African women are exposed to societies that are riddled with abusive practices that are not directly associated with physical violence but are sheltered under the framework of traditional or cultural practices. In intimate partner relationships, these include polygamy, (male) spousal infidelity, widowhood rites, and property disinheritance. Despite their harmful effects on women – psychologically/emotionally or economically – such acts of nonphysical violence are relatively marginalized in international discourses on IPV against African women.

Drawing primarily from existing literatures on IPV among African women in Africa, this chapter will briefly review popular perceptions of IPV against African women in Africa with a view to understanding why diaspora African women would think that nonphysical abuse of women in an intimate partner relationship is not IPV. Further, the chapter discusses some practices of nonphysical IPV that still hold African women hostage to male patriarchal abuse. The chapter concludes with a reflection on

how attitudes toward IPV in Africa shape immigrant African women's perspectives of IPV in the U.S.

Why nonphysical violence is relatively insignificant: Perspectives from Africa

In line with their obligation to international agreements, many African societies have legislation that not only protects women against battering and sexual violence, but also prohibits various traditional acts of nonphysical IPV, such as harmful widowhood rites. Most women may not be aware of the existence of legislation against such acts of nonphysical violence in intimate partner relationships. However, it seems clear that in parts of Africa, legislative protection of women against cultural practices of nonphysical IPV exists more in principle and less in practice, given that the enforcement of such legislation is minimal or absent, largely due to the widespread cultural support for such practices. The customary approval of acts of nonphysical IPV, including their endorsement by women, is an obstacle to women's awareness of existing laws against them (see Kalunta-Crumpton, 2019). This malign neglect of harmful acts of nonphysical IPV is sustained by the pervasiveness of physical IPV. Although they coexist, physical IPV has drawn the most attention due to the visibility of its occurrence and impact, thereby overshadowing the ramifications of nonphysical IPV.

Globally, women's violent victimization experiences are mostly attributed to IPV, and physical violence and/or sexual violence accounts for most of the victimizations in intimate partner relationships. However, women in Africa have been known to record the highest prevalence of physical and/or sexual IPV victimization in their lifetime (see UN, 2015). The pervasiveness of physical IPV in Africa is illustrated in the following statement by the IRC (2012, p. 3):

Across Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone, years after the official end of these countries' brutal wars, women are being intimidated, threatened and beaten with shocking frequency. And even though the focus of the humanitarian community has often been on armed groups, the primary threat to women in West Africa is not a man with a gun or a stranger. It is their husbands.

The victims of IPV whom the IRC engaged with comprised over 60% of assault survivors in the three West African countries. The IRC reported the following examples of physical IPV against women in West Africa, besides punching and pushing: "knocked into a body of water," "beaten while pregnant," "suffered head wounds and lost fingers from machete strike," and "locked inside house which was then set on fire" (2012, p. 10). The images in these examples of physical IPV and in the earlier quote are not unique to these West African countries; rather, they reflect the pattern of IPV across African countries, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa (see WHO, 2005; Hindin, Kishor, and Ansara, 2008).

In Africa, physical VAW in general endures largely due to the high level of abuse tolerance in the region. The UN (2015) identifies Africa as one of the regions with

the highest tolerance for wife-beating, and this reality is deeply connected to the patriarchal character of African societies. Patriarchy in Africa dictates that wife-beating is acceptable (see Kalunta-Crumpton, 2019). Its deep-seated presence in the socialization process of boys/girls and men/women has not only normalized the endorsement of physical IPV among men, but also ingrained in women a sense of acceptance of their own victimization. Perhaps this explains why women in many African countries are more likely than men to support the physical abuse of women in intimate partner relationships, specifically marital.

According to the UN (2015), data on feelings towards wife-beating among men and women aged 15 to 49, drawn from a variety of international surveys for the period 1995 through 2014, show that of the 30 African countries where the attitudes of men and women toward wife-battering were compared for specific justifications, women ranked higher than men in their support for wife-beating in 27 of them. In line with the ideology and practice of patriarchy, women's acceptance of wife-beating, based on certain justifications, was symbolic of their cultural understanding of ascribed gender roles in marital relationships. They believe that the violations of traditional gender roles are deserving of punishment: hence, their support for the beating of wives who contravene their gender responsibilities. As reported in several demographic and health surveys in which wife-beating in African countries was measured, women show significant support for wife-beating in a situation in which, for example, the woman "goes out without telling" the husband, "argues with him," "neglects the children," or "refuses to have sexual intercourse with him" (see, for example, Central Statistical Agency [CSA] and the International Coach Foundation [ICF], 2017; National Population Commission and ICF, 2014; Namibia Ministry of Health and Social Services [MoHSS] and ICF, 2014).

Women's support for the perpetration of gender-based violence on other women in spousal relations demonstrates the extent to which women in Africa have been socialized into embracing, enforcing, and reinforcing patriarchal ideologies and practices. There are examples in many African countries to illustrate this point. In Nigeria, some women view IPV as a symbol of affection; some do not view forced sex as rape (Ilika, 2005). In Ghana, women approve and consent to physical and sexual abuse in marital relationships based on their cultural beliefs that men have the patriarchal right to have sexual intercourse with their wives whenever they want and to physically discipline wives who transgress their gender roles, including refusal of sexual intimacy with their husbands (Zakari-Saa, 2007; Adjei, 2015; Issahaku, 2017 – all cited in Barnes and Appiahene-Gyamfi, 2019). Also with reference to Ghana, Barnes and Appiahene-Gyamfi, 2019, p. 82) state:

Since tradition in each of the several ethnic groups grants a man access to a woman's body in the conjugal home without the expectation of objection by the woman, there is no such thing as forced sex or spousal rape, even if such phrases have lately been introduced by law.

Wife-beating is normalized in Ghana to a point at which wives in parts of the country enjoy their experiences of violent victimization – an interaction they believe

has corrective benefits in a marriage (Zakari-Saa, 2007 cited in Barnes and Appiahene-Gyamfi, 2019).

Evidence from Zimbabwe adds to these examples of abuse tolerance in patriarchal African culture where wife-beating and marital sexual assault often intersect, and both are internalized by the perpetrator and the victim as normal. Findings from a 2017–2018 qualitative research study of violence against young women in Zimbabwe (see Matunhu, Matunhu, and Kalunta-Crumpton, 2019) provide original accounts of the acceptance of physical violence in marital relationships. The following are the respective views of two young women who were interviewed during the research (Matunhu, Matunhu, and Kalunta-Crumpton, 2019, p. 61):

Our tradition holds that men who do not batter their young wives are not real men. . . . [M]ost of these women marry in the late teens and early twenties and so will be immature. Battering them frequently stamps the man's authority.

In our tradition men are advised by their elders to beat their young wives starting from early in marriage so that the wife knows from the offset that he is in charge of the family and that he will beat her each time she misbehaves. . . . [M]en own their wives; [wives] have price tags that went in the form of pride price.

Likewise, marital rape is condoned in Zimbabwe, and despite its criminalization, women are guided by the cultural patriarchal ideologies that mandate a husband's unrestricted right of sexual intercourse with his wife. The following respective accounts by two young women exemplify this point (Matunhu, Matunhu, and Kalunta-Crumpton, 2019, p. 59):

[C]ultural practices perpetuate the objectification of young women by men. For example, sex is seen as a man's right, which a married woman should always comply with. It is un-cultural for a married woman to negotiate safe sex or decide how to have sex with her husband.

As young women, we were socialized into believing that every woman wishing to keep her marriage must satisfy her husband's sexual desires at all times.

Against the overarching patriarchal influence on gender relations, of which spousal relations constitute an important component, reporting experiences of physical and sexual IPV in an official capacity is a response that victims in Africa do not normally contemplate. Because it is un-cultural to seek outside intervention, such as police assistance, victims who disclose physical abuse typically do so with family members and friends. Normally, these significant others act as mediators between the couple, and often, they advise the victim to stay in the relationship despite the abuse (IRC, 2012; Kalunta-Crumpton, 2019). In this vicious cycle of interactions, IPV continues unabated.

Thus, if the most obvious type of IPV – physical violence – is culturally acceptable, despite international pressure on African countries to control it, where does this leave the many nonphysical acts of victimization that impact women negatively: for example, emotionally or psychologically? In citing the psychological impact of abuse as one of the most damaging effects of IPV, the IRC (2012, p. 10) notes that

more than cuts and bruises, women say the deepest scar of domestic violence are often the least visible. Shame, humiliation, degradation, alienation and the fear of being judged as a bad mother or bad wife were some of the main concerns women expressed.

Therefore, in concert with the patriarchal culture of female submissiveness to male domination, women's feelings of shame may affect them more than the physical abuse itself. This attitude seems to be premised on the patriarchal culture of self-blame imposed on women whereby the victim blames herself or believes that others blame her for her victimization. However, despite the array of acts of nonphysical IPV with nonphysical consequences, there has remained the tendency in societies in Africa to view abuse as worthy of discussion only when it is physical (see, for example, Kalunta-Crumpton, 2017).

Nonphysical violence: Ranging from polygamy and male infidelity to widowhood rites and property disinheritance

Notwithstanding the relative neglect of nonphysical violence in international discourses on IPV, Africa is recognized for its high levels of psychological violence, which, according to the UN (2015, p. 152), include the following behaviors:

Emotional abuse – insulting or making a woman feel bad about herself, belittling or humiliating her in front of others, deliberately scaring or intimidating her, threatening to hurt her or others she cares about.

Controlling behaviour – isolating a woman by preventing her from seeing family or friends, monitoring her whereabouts and social interactions, ignoring her or treating her indifferently, getting angry if she speaks with other men, making unwarranted accusations of infidelity, controlling her access to health care, education or the labour market.

These are common examples of nonphysical psychological or emotional VAW found in IPV literature in general. They often interact with physical and/or sexual violence (UN, 2015), both of which are commonly experienced by victims of IPV across the globe, irrespective of regional or societal differences.

However, the context in which such behaviors are expressed can differ across regions and societies, and contextual differences are likely to introduce regional and societal differences in expressions of IPV. For Africa, its patriarchal structure and ideology provide a central context for a variety of practices that qualify as IPV

and that impact the victims psychologically/emotionally and economically. Such practices, Bowman (2003, p. 852) appropriately observes, are outcomes of institutionalized gender inequality “in African customary law.” It is under the customary legal system in many African societies that harmful practices of nonphysical violence are perpetrated and condoned. Yet many do not see IPV through the lens of such practices and vice versa. Bowman provides some examples: “[W]omen have no right to inherit from their husbands, are not regarded as sharing ownership of marital property, are excluded from ownership of land, and are almost without remedy upon divorce” (ibid).

Polygamy, male infidelity, and widowhood rites are also among the myriad of practices of nonphysical IPV permitted under customary law or Sharia/Islamic law in parts of Africa. These practices place psychological or emotional and economic burdens on women. Kenya’s official legalization of polygamy in 2014 is indicative of the legitimization of various forms of nonphysical violence that women in polygamous relationships are likely to endure (for some of the ramifications of polygamy, see Mabaso, Malope, and Simbayi, 2018). Sometimes, polygamy is tied to the patrilineal preference for boys over girls. In this situation, the first wife is blamed for not bearing a son in the marriage, and she is subjected to IPV as a result, despite the fact that, biologically, the man controls the sex of a child. The family structure in many African societies is patrilineal. Thus, a male child stands to inherit his father’s estate under customary law.

Unlike polygamy, which allows men to marry multiple wives at the same time, polyandry – i.e., the simultaneous marriage of a woman to more than one husband – is prohibited in Africa. Even women in a statutory marriage are not shielded from the threat of polygamy, in that patriarchy promotes customary law and practices as supreme. Unlike male infidelity, which is widely tolerated, female infidelity is abhorred and can be a major trigger for IPV (see Fawole, Aderonmu, and Fawole, 2005; Kiemo, Kinoto, and Munene, 2019). Note the following observation about adultery in Ghana (Barnes and Appiahene-Gyamfi, 2019, pp. 83–84), although the observation is not unique to this sub-Saharan African country:

Male infidelity is heralded as a mark of traditional masculinity. . . . Society scorns women who cheat on their husbands, but not men who do the same. Indeed, at custom, a husband is entitled to damages (*ayefare*) from a third party with whom his wife commits adultery, but a wife has no such cause of action if her husband commits adultery. Most men in Ghana seek outright divorce of their cheating wives, but women hardly do the same because of the culture of female tolerance of male infidelity, and in some cases exacerbated by women’s socioeconomic predicament.

It is not uncommon for women to tolerate physical and sexual violence in marriage in order to avoid divorce, polygamy, or male infidelity (see Matunhu, Matunhu, and Kalunta-Crumpton, 2019). A divorced woman is susceptible to stigmatization, and in line with the mandates of the customary legal system, the woman loses custody of the children and her rights to the marital property (ibid). These harmful traditional

practices are reminiscent of IPV against widows upon the death of their husbands. Widowhood rituals, such as hair-shaving and strict regulations on what to wear and when and how to eat, bathe, and cry are dehumanizing gendered practices in Africa that are almost exclusive to widows (see Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2015). In addition, custom is normally structured to disinherit widows of their husbands' estates, particularly if a widow did not bear a male child or is childless. These practices not only embody psychological or emotional violence, but also express economic violence, considering the resultant economic deprivation from the loss of property (for a brief description of economic violence, see UN, 2015; for instances of economic violence, see IRC, 2012; Boutkhil, 2019).

Women play a significant role in the preservation of harmful practices of nonphysical violence against fellow women. Such practices impose psychological/emotional strain on the victims. For example, in Nigeria, women participate in the perpetration of violence on married women (see Kalunta-Crumpton, 2017), and this tends to be apparent when it comes to their role in carrying out traditional practices, such as widowhood rites. In reference to Ghana, Barnes and Appiahene-Gyamfi (2019, p. 82) observe that women often "spearhead, tacitly support and defend the traditional beliefs and practices that make them subservient and candidates for VAW, especially FGM, and widow/witch isolation and mistreatment." The involvement of women in their own victimization is worthy of attention.

Conclusion

Patriarchy has a strong hold on African cultural ideologies and practices. Within this stronghold, the abuse of women in marital relationships is embraced and reinforced by men and women alike. Against this background, it is not surprising that immigrant African women in the U.S. would perceive IPV in ways that IPV is perceived in Africa. The few studies of IPV in immigrant African communities in the U.S. have shown that immigrant African women who are victims of IPV tolerate and endure abuse in a manner that resonates with the way victims respond to IPV in Africa (see, for example, L'aigle, 2009; Ting, 2010; Akinsulure-Smith, Chu, Keatley, and Rasmussen, 2013). Sexual violence, including rape, is significant in immigrant African marriages, and so is physical violence, including the deadly type (see Kalunta-Crumpton and Onyeozili, 2011; Kalunta-Crumpton, 2013).

Due to cultural shame, there are victims who operate under a cultural obligation not to report IPV to outside formal agencies for fear of ostracism not only within the immigrant community, but also in Africa (see Akinsulure-Smith et al., 2013; L'aigle, 2009). There are many others who have limited or no knowledge of what constitutes IPV and are therefore wholly or significantly unaware of the illegality of acts of IPV in the U.S. (see Kalunta-Crumpton, 2017). Both situations pose major barriers to access to services that are available to victims of IPV under the Violence Against Women Act 1994 (reauthorized in 2000, 2005, and 2013). Going forward, there is the urgent need to educate African women in Africa and immigrant African women in the U.S. about the various facets of IPV, the role of patriarchy in the perpetuation of IPV, and the statutory protection against various acts of IPV. Emphasis must be placed on the

nonphysical expressions of IPV, which are illustrated in practices, such as polygamy, adultery, widowhood rites, and property disinheritance. A dedicated awareness initiative is the first step towards dismantling the patriarchal ideology and system that keep women blind to their own violent victimization in intimate partner relationships.

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