

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Domestic violence in Kenya: Why battered women stay

Tom Gesora Ondicho

Institute of Anthropology, Gender and African Studies, University of Nairobi, P. O Box 30197, Nairobi, Kenya.  
E-mail: [tondicho@uonbi.ac.ke](mailto:tondicho@uonbi.ac.ke), [tondicho@hotmail.com](mailto:tondicho@hotmail.com). Tel: +254726257303. Fax: +2542744123.

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**Domestic violence (DV) is a glaring social problem that occurs with impunity in many homes around the world. Though traditionally accepted as a normal cultural practice, today it has become less tolerable and is viewed as a crime. Despite this major change in social attitudes towards DV, the factors that hinder battered women's flight from violent relationships are not well understood. Using data from a study of 112 battered women in Kibera slums, this paper explores the factors that trap women in violent relationships. Findings from this study are consistent with previous findings. The paper offers very useful gendered insights into the reasons why battered women stay. The findings are central in ensuring adequate support for battered women to free themselves from the yoke of violence and violent relationships.**

**Key words:** Battered women, abusive relationships, Kibera slums, domestic violence, stay, leaving.

## INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is an endemic social problem in many countries around the globe. While the problem affects both genders, women represent a disproportionate number of the victims and men the perpetrators. Domestic violence is not by any chance a new phenomenon. Throughout history, violence against women has been a common feature of all known human societies (Davidson, 1977). In many countries and cultures around the world, women have traditionally been routinely subjected to unspeakable physical, sexual, and psychological cruelties and brutalities by men with whom they should enjoy the closest trust in places considered the 'safest', that is, their homes (Ondicho, 1997; UNIFEM, 2012). As the United Nations has aptly observed, the term 'family' suggests safety and security, a private haven or shelter from the pressures and difficulties of the world outside, a place where its members are able to co-exist in security and harmony. .... far from being a place of safety, the family can be a 'cradle of violence' and that much of the violence is directed at female members of the family (UN, 1989: 14).

Despite being a major cause of physical and emotional impairments among women, domestic violence remains an invisible social crisis. In many households, the problem is often disguised, ignored, denied, taken lightly and/or covered up under the guise of family privacy and cultural traditions. In most patriarchal societies, domestic

violence is still promoted and accepted as a normal way of disciplining and controlling women (Ondicho, 1997, 2000). Women are also socialized to accept, tolerate, and even rationalize the violence in the name of culture. Deeply entrenched cultural beliefs, feelings of guilt and embarrassment often discourage women from coming out to speak about their experiences publicly, complain or even to seek redress (Ngeno, 2010; Ondicho, 2000). Many cases of domestic violence are therefore unreported and unpunished.

Today, domestic violence has been widely acknowledged as a universal social problem that permeates women's lives irrespective of their age, class, colour or creed (UNICEF, 2000) and regardless of whether they live in a rich or a poor country. Increased awareness arising from a growing worldwide women's rights movement has transformed domestic violence from being a hidden problem to an issue that receives increased attention from researchers, policymakers, media, health, legal and other social welfare practitioners (UNCHS, 2002). Despite the raising levels of societal consciousness about the problem, very little research attention has been paid to the subject of domestic violence generally and the issue of why battered women remain in abusive relationships in particular. It is important to understand why abused women remain in violent relationships and why they do not simply leave the

abuser and free themselves from violence. Women's decision to continue living with their abusers or to leave them is affected by a myriad of complex and interrelated psychosocial, economic, and cultural factors. There is therefore an urgent need to isolate these factors and document their influence on the decisions of battered women to stay or leave abusive relationships. This paper is based on the findings of a larger study titled "Battered Women: A Socio-Legal Perspective of Their Experiences in Nairobi" (Ondicho, 1993). One of the study objectives was to find answers to the puzzle of why battered women remain in intimate relationships with their abusers, sometimes for many years after the violence begins and despite the pain and disruption of their lives. Findings presented in this paper identify the reasons behind battered women's decisions to stay with their abusers and offers a contextualized gendered understanding of why battered women stay.

### **Domestic violence in Kenya**

Kenya is a developing country in the East African region with an estimated population of 40 million people (KNBS, 2010). As in many developing countries, a large proportion of this population comprises women and young people. Domestic violence and its impact on women's physical, social and psychological well-being, has been recognized by the government of Kenya (Wamalwa, 1987; Johnston, 2002). The earliest government concern on the problem of domestic violence was voiced in 1968 when the Commission on Marriage and Divorce was set up. The Commission was charged with the responsibility of drawing up proposals for a new law on Marriage and Divorce which also included the problem of wife-beating. Wife-beating is the most common form of domestic violence in Kenya. When the Bill was presented in parliament for discussion and enactment, it was strongly opposed by male parliamentarians and thus never become law (Hansard, 1968). The bill had sought to outlaw wife-beating. However, recently the government has enacted a Sexual Offences Act and promulgated a new constitution both of which protect women from all forms of gender-based violence. The government has also published a Domestic Violence Bill which is waiting for parliamentary debate. If passed, it will lead to an Act of parliament that proscribes all forms of gender-based violence.

More than 80% of Kenya's population live in rural areas where they continue to follow customary laws under which men usually pay dowry for their wives. Upon payment of dowry, the father often surrenders absolute power over his daughter to the husband (Njau and Njeru, 1997). This also confers the man with the right to chastise his wife or wives, if he feels that she has not adequately fulfilled her obligations or for any other reason. While domestic violence in Kenya has been widely identified as persistent and glaring social, legal,

and health problem manifested in several ways and at several fronts, the magnitude of the problem is largely unknown. However, cases such as that of Piah Njoki whose husband gouged out both her eyes in 1983 for bearing him on female children (Kiboi, 1984) and Betty Kavata who died of severe injuries from a beating by her husband are vivid illustrations of how far male violence against women goes in the country (Parents, 1999). Many cases of domestic violence however do not catch public attention because the concern parties, usually the women, do not know what to do about it or are afraid to speak out. The few cases that capture media or public attention are often horrific in one way or another and/or involve high profile citizens. When such cases are reported to the relevant authorities or raised in public, there is a tendency for men to invoke African culture and shield behind it.

Though the actual number of Kenyan women who are victims of violence is unknown, snapshot studies, police, hospital, media and welfare records provide some clues on the extent of the problem in Kenya. A nationwide survey revealed that 49% of women had been abused at least once in their lifetime; with one in four having experienced violence in the previous 12 months (KDHS, 2003). Data obtained from the Gender Violence Recovery Center in Nairobi Women's Hospital show a drastic increase of numbers of abused women from around 299 in 2006 when the unit was opened to 412 and 400 in 2007 and 2008 respectively. According to the information obtained from Kenyatta National Hospital, it indicated that 60 to 70 women were monthly treated in 2009 for gender-based violence by UNIFEM (2012). A study by WHO in Kenya revealed that 42% of 612 women surveyed in one district were reported to have been beaten by a partner; of those, 58% reported that they were beaten often or sometimes (WHO, 1999 in UNICEF, 2000). Despite these studies, few studies have focused on the reasons why battered women remain in abusive relationships.

Domestic violence in Kenya manifests itself in the form of sexual assault, rape, physical and emotional abuse perpetrated by a man upon a woman within the domestic setting. Such violence is often viewed as a personal and private affair which is promoted and accepted by cultural norms and practices (Ondicho, 1997; 2000). Deeply-rooted patriarchal norms place men at the top and women at the bottom of the gender power hierarchy (Njau and Njeru, 1997; Njau and Kabira, 1989). Male dominance in all domains continues to play an important role in perpetuating these social structures of gender inequality wherein women are often encouraged to get married so that their husbands can provide them with accommodation, land to cultivate and other basic necessities (Njau and Kabira, 1989). Thus, domestic violence is both a product and a reflection of the broad structures of gender power and inequality that are deeply rooted in the patriarchal society. This paper discusses

some of the reasons why battered women remain in intimate relationships with their abusers. This is a question that many friends, relatives and neighbors frequently ask women in abusive relationships. The question often emanates from a lack of understanding about the complexities and risks of domestic violence against women. This paper will contribute to our pool of knowledge on why it is so difficult for women to free themselves from the yoke of violence.

## METHODS

The data used in this paper were extracted from a larger research project titled "Battered Women: A socio-legal perspective of their experiences in Nairobi". The study was carried out in Kibera slums (Kianda and Makina villages) in the city of Nairobi. The data were collected from 112 battered women during the months of June and July 1992. The sample was conveniently selected and it involved women who revealed upon inquiry that they were currently living with or had previously lived with abusive men in a marriage like arrangement. Some of the women interviewed introduced/referred us to other women who had been victimized by their husbands and/or intimate male friends. These women were contacted and requested to participate in this study.

Potential participants were given impromptu visits by the researchers in their homes between 10 o'clock and 3 pm when the men in their lives were likely to be away from home. The author and his assistant knocked on any door in the study sites and inquired if the woman of the house was present and requested to talk to her. They (researchers) started by introducing themselves and briefing the-could-be respondent the purpose of their visit. The potential participant was then asked if she had experienced domestic violence from a man with whom she had an intimate relationship. If the response was in the affirmative, she was invited to participate in the study. Those who accepted to participate in the study were asked to choose the venue for the interview. This was meant to shield them from further victimization and to ensure that they were safe and comfortable to talk freely about their painful experiences. In some cases, women accepted to be interviewed immediately in their homes and in other cases, appointments were made for interviews to be conducted later. Most participants were interviewed in the absence of their partners, friends and relatives.

Prior to the interview, participants were verbally given some introductory information about the study by the author. They were also told that participation in the study was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable or for any other personal reasons. They were also told that the information they provided would be kept confidential and anonymous. They were assured that there were no risks in the study and that the research materials could be

destroyed after data analysis. The women were then given a chance to ask any questions or seek clarification on any issue that was not clear to them. Once all their questions and concerns were satisfactorily addressed, they were invited to participate in the study. Those women willing to participate in the study were asked for their informed consent. For some, the consent was verbally given and for others they appended their signatures to a consent form which the author had prepared in advance. It was after consent had been given that potential respondents were formally interviewed. During the interviews, the researchers were sensitive to the emotions of participants and every effort was made to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the participants throughout the study.

Only women who had been victimized by their partners were eligible for inclusion in the sample. Both quantitative and qualitative research techniques were used in this study to gather data from the participants. The principle method of primary data collection was a scheduled structured questionnaire constructed to provide for closed and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was administered by the author with the help of a trained research assistant. On average, the interviews lasted for one hour. The qualitative approach mainly comprised informal discussions and 20 key informants' interviews drawn from different community organisations and government departments with representation in the study sites. Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) while qualitative data were subjected to content analysis.

## RESULTS

The socio-demographic characteristics of the participants showed that they were all Africans and belonged to thirteen different ethnic groups (Luo, 29.5%; Abagusii, 11.9%; Abaluhya 18.8%; Agikuyu, 17.0%; Akamba, 9.8%; Ameru, 1.8%; Pokomo, 1.8%; Basoga, 0.9%; Nubian, 0.9%; Aduruma, 0.9%; Baganda, 0.9 % and Kalenjin, 0.9%). Nearly all women in this study's sample (95.5%) were either married or living with a male partner in a marriage like arrangement; 2.7% were married but separated and the remaining 1.8% were divorced. Of the total, 10% had no children; 20% reported to have one child, 30% indicated that they had two children and the remaining 40% had three or more children. In terms of age, they ranged from 18 to 40 years old and their mean age was 25 years. The largest proportion (75%) indicated that they had primary education or less (8 years or less of schooling), while 20% reported they had high school education and the remaining 5% of the sample had either college or university education.

Out of the 112 sample women, 87.8% were unemployed either because their husbands were unwilling to let them work outside the home or because they would not find work due to their generally low levels

of education. Out of these 87.8%, 24 women (21.6%) were engaged in small scale businesses such as vegetable vending. Of the total sample, 12.3% had worked at one time or another in their lives or were currently working in poorly paying low skilled, casual/part-time/permanent jobs. There was a significant range in the abused women's annual income. The largest proportion of women reported an average monthly income of Ksh. 2000 (or US\$40 according to 1992 exchange rates) a month which is quite low when compared with the cost of living.

### **Why battered women stay**

The major assumption of this study was that when a woman is battered by a partner, naturally she cannot seek refuge and safety in her home because the abuse is likely to recur. She must therefore decide whether to leave or stay with the abuser knowing the risks entailed. When directly asked: "Why do you continue to stay with your barterer?" The women in this sample offered the following reasons: sympathy and need for their spouses; self-blame; lack of alternatives (house or job etc.); fear and shame of being called a divorcee; no safe place to go; children or financial constraints; isolation and lack of support from family members. Responses were subjected to content analysis and grouped according to the following sub-themes: responsibility for children, family pressures that it is better to stay for the sake of the children, financial dependency, lack of family support, sacrificing self for the sake of the children, adverse social consequences of separation and divorce, promises of reform, social background and feelings of guilt.

### **Financial dependency**

Financial dependence was repeatedly cited as a major problem that made it difficult for women in this study to leave violent relationships. Both working and non-working women indicated that they were entirely dependent economically on the men in their lives. Traditionally, in many Kenyan communities, the man is the breadwinner for the family and has a responsibility to cater for the social and economic needs of his wife/wives and children. In this study, an overall picture emerged in which men controlled all the finances and spending at the household level. Men's control over finances and other family resources at the household level is an important indicator of gender power disparities at the household level. These unequal gender power relations not only render women powerless and vulnerable to male violence but also make it difficult for women to leave their abusers. This study reveals that with no job, no house and no independent income, battered women find it exceedingly difficult to leave their abusers and start a new life on their own. In a nutshell, financial dependency traps battered women in abusive relationships.

### **For the sake of the children**

Women in this study reported that they had opted to remain in intimate relationships with their abusive husbands for the sake of their children. This study's women stated that they were willing to accept and tolerate any amount of abuse in order to protect themselves from stigma and any harm. Women identified two explanations for sacrificing self and tolerating their situation, including the fact that if they separated or divorced leaving children with their fathers, the children will suffer as there will be no one to cook and look after them. Women also stated that it was extremely difficult to find friends or relatives willing to accept them and their children indefinitely due to the difficult living arrangements in the city which include lack of adequate accommodation and poverty. As one respondent aptly stated, "in this city it is very rare to get a person who can accommodate you and your children indefinitely".

### **Self-blame and stigma**

Women in this study reported that they failed to leave their abusers because they employ self-blame more than they blame their victimizers. Self-blame often leads to low-esteem, depression and feelings of helplessness, which in turn traps those battered women in abusive relationships. Some women even suggested that the longer they experienced the abuse, the more helpless they felt. Despite the hurt and indignities that the sampled women suffered, they felt a sense of responsibility for their partners. Strong feelings of duty, guilt and a sense of failure on the part of the women were often cited as factors that militate negatively against leaving their abusers. Sometimes these feelings are so strong that women finally accept the battering as a normal aspect of their lives. The fear of the shame and dishonour reduces the likelihood of extricating themselves from abusive relationships. One respondent noted, "it has become a normal aspect of my life, and I have to accept it". Many women stated that they were afraid to leave their husbands for fear of losing whatever image of a good married life they want to project. "Any woman who makes her problems public than necessary should be ashamed of herself because she should know how to handle such problems without resorting to embarrassing and shameful situations".

Further, women indicated fear of the social stigma and consequences associated with the label divorced/battered woman in the Kenya society was a major cultural reason for remaining in an abusive relationship. Women in this study explained that if domestic violence were a condition of receiving any help at all in order to leave a relationship, then they would be forced to the invidious position of having to define themselves both to themselves and to the outside world as battered women which makes them look disreputable.

The label “battered women” reinforces the negative self-image already engendered by the stigma attached to the status of a divorcee or single mother. Thus, women in this study were willing to live in the shadow of their violent husbands in order to maintain the social status and positive image attached to a successful marriage. Women considered the negative effects of divorce which included losing their children, living under the mercy of their unsupported families and facing financial problems. Thus, women felt that by leaving they will be embarrassing themselves and their spouses.

### ***Lack of support and isolation***

Informal discussions often centred on the topic of assistance from family and friends. Women in this study revealed that without support from family and friends, they find themselves locked into their situations. Responding to the open-ended questions, many sample women reported that though their families were aware of the violence, they were reluctant to offer nothing more than sympathy. In addition, it was explained that even if some family members were willing to offer some help, geographical distance would not permit them to do so. Many sample women explained during interviews that distance from relatives was often responsible not only for the sense of isolation they often felt but also for remaining in abusive relationships.

In the absence of family support, many sample women explained that friends and neighbours were a useful source of short-term respite, comfort and support during crises, especially when victims did not have family help. Many of those interviewed indicated that their friends were also neighbours. However, a large majority of the sample women stated that it was difficult for them to seek assistance from their neighbours because of their own shame and embarrassment or because of reluctance to get involved. Some sample women indicated that it was not appropriate to discuss with neighbours private matters concerning their marital relationships. “I was reluctant to involve strangers in my problem” was a common remark from sample women. This sense of failure and shame however was removed when friends and neighbours were also victims of violence from their partners. “There was one I didn’t mind telling because she had problems with her husband”.

Women in this sample explained that friends and neighbours were often willing to offer a wide range of help, some unasked for, including accommodation when locked outside by their abusers. While proximity and availability makes friends and neighbours a good potential source of help, sometimes such help is refused because they are known to the partners of the victims. “I went to my friend/neighbour’s house and he followed me there” was a common remark made by respondents. This was often cited as a reason for some battered women refusing proffered accommodation and help because they

did not want to create problems for their neighbours and friends. On the other hand, neighbours and friends were also sometimes reluctant to offer help or befriend wives with violent spouses for fear of endangering their lives. As one woman aptly put it “I have no relative to assist me and a place to escape to. My neighbours don’t want to offer any help. My neighbours fear to get involved in our domestic affairs because they are afraid of my husband”. This kind of attitude not only created more difficulty in asking for help from neighbours and friends but also added to their social isolation and loneliness. “You really feel isolated in the situation because they (neighbours and friends) just turn away – they do not want to know about you and your problem”.

### ***Traditional beliefs***

During discussions, the idea of temporal separation or women running away from their matrimonial homes and abandoning children as the only weapon to discipline their husbands was discussed. A large majority of women stated that at one point or another they had run away and returned to their husbands after the men came for them and promised to reform. Sample women explained that they held a strong belief that marriage is a sacrosanct social institution that should be preserved at all costs and these forces women to remain in violent relationships. As one Kikuyu woman stated: “Most of our traditions hold marriage as being for keeps, and that is why parents give their daughter a bed as a gift on the wedding day”. This means that after marriage, a girl is not allowed to return to her natal home. She is expected to resolve all her marital problems in her neonatal home. “After all marriage is not a bed of roses”.

## **DISCUSSION**

Findings of this study indicate that many battered women remained in abusive relationships for a variety of reasons: they were financially dependent on their partners, isolation and lack of support from their families, for the sake of their children, stigma and fear of the social consequences of divorce. Running away to their natal homes was commonly reported by women who had experienced severe and repeated life-threatening episodes of domestic violence. It is significant that battered women imagine that when they run-away, and only agree to come back after their husbands have come for them and parents from both sides have had discussions. During the discussion, women are persuaded to reconcile and return after their partners’ repentance and promises to reform. While such run-away missions provide short-term respite for the victims, this study’s data do not suggest that they accomplish much in terms of ending the violence. The interest and desire of many women in the study was to end the violence in their lives and not the marriage/relationship itself.

These data support the strongly held cultural belief that it is better for a woman to live with a violent husband than to stay without one. In addition, decisions on weighty matters such as marriage and divorce are often discussed with family. In Kenya, when women get married they are expected to be submissive and to follow their husbands' orders, needs and demands. Those who had attempted to leave violent husbands stated that they were prevailed upon by their families to return. These women said that they had been reminded that they should be submissive to their husbands and conform to the patriarchal social norms. The reactions of the family often echo and reinforce the woman's own doubts that she 'unwisely' chose her mate or that a few slaps are part of marriage and that things would be fine if she would stop provoking her husband. Such attitudes enhance possible feelings of shame, isolation and helplessness which significantly complicate a battered woman's decision to leave an abusive relationship. This was compounded by the fear of stigma attached by society to label "divorced woman" and children from single parent families. Such stigma often affects the self-confidence of battered women and the growth and development of their children. In the prevailing circumstances, battered women are prepared to accept and stomach male violence in order to protect their children from harm. This finding was not unique given that Kenyan women, like other African women, consider the welfare and identity of their children as priority number one. They believe that they are living for their children and everything they do they do for the sake of their children. Battered women commonly report feelings of fear, guilt, embarrassment and helplessness after a battering episode. Information obtained from informal discussions and open-ended questions further revealed that battered women's decision to leave abusive relationships was further complicated by the high rate of unemployment and severe poverty amongst slum women in particular. Without employment and any other source of income to enable them start life independent of men, many abused women are forced by circumstances to accept and tolerate male violence. Furthermore, the fear of the stigma associated with the label 'divorced woman' and the fear that their children will be stigmatized in the community render women powerless against male violence. This finding is not unique given the value Africans attach to the institution of the family and stable marriage. Perhaps, the uniqueness of the findings lies in the power of socio-cultural factors in explaining battered women's choices and decisions to either leave or remain in abusive relationships.

Given the small sample size and the fact that the study was not based on a representative sample of all battered women in a certain geographical locale, the findings may not be generalized to the total population of abused women. It would have been desirable to take a larger and representative sample of battered women from all social

and economic classes in society. The researchers were also unable to compare the characteristics of women who had already left abusive relationships with those who were still trapped in violent relationships. Among battered women who may not have been included in this study but would be in abusive relationships, they do not define them as characterized by violence, women who were frightened by the repercussions of participating in the study, or those who were out of the relationship and were determined to forget their experiences. Nonetheless, it is believed that the methods employed in this study are beneficial for enhancing the understanding of the choices battered women have to make and how those choices influence their decision to leave or remain in an abusive relationship. The most important finding is that domestic violence is a practice that needs to be eliminated from our society as it negatively affects women physically, emotionally and socially.

There are several policy implications in this research. Public educational programs on domestic violence should attempt to increase awareness on avenues of redress available to battered women. Education might help battered women to make informed decisions whether to stay or leave their abusers after the initial episode of abuse. Persons responsible for health, legal, and social services might also be encouraged to establish procedures to improve service delivery to abused women within and between their agencies. Finally, there is dearth of research on how and where battered women who want to end their violent relationships can seek help, the challenges battered women face when they want to end violent relationships, and the effects of divorce and separation on the present and future wellbeing of battered women.

## Conclusion

Domestic violence in Kenya is an old habit that has survived the process of social change. While many harmful traditional practices are slowly dying with the advent of modern ways of life, wife beating seems to have defied this process. The recent emergence of urbanization in developing countries, such as Kenya, have helped perpetuate this practice. In traditional African society, domestic violence especially wife beating was condoned and sanctioned by cultural norms. Despite the fact that domestic violence has become less acceptable in modern times and legislation put in place to curb the vice, cultural norms structures still allow violence to occur if the wife is seen to overstep her traditional role. Running through all the interrelated reasons for remaining in abusive relationships provided by the women in this study is the concept of powerlessness. In the final analysis, it is best perhaps to conclude that women are trapped in a vicious circle of violence arising from deeply rooted patriarchal power structures within the family that push them into positions of dependency on men generally and

husbands in particular for survival.

It is apparently clear that women in this study carefully considered their options and calculated the costs and benefits of leaving their husbands before arriving at the decision to remain in intimate relationships with their abusers. That men are superior to women and that the women they live with are their possession which they can treat as they wish and consider appropriate. Even in those communities where there are no such overt indications of the subordination, the social framework relegates the woman, almost to the level of a chattel. Here, structures place her in a position of dependence on the man and predict that she will fulfil certain roles. This combines with the isolation of the family as an institution and the respect that is offered by agents within the society, to allow violence to occur if the wife is seen to overstep her traditional role.

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