

RESEARCH BRIEF:

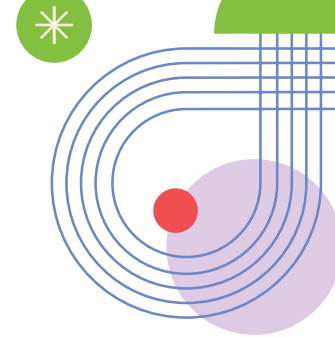
“... how are you going to survive if you leave...”

Understanding how motherhood shapes women’s decisions to stay in or leave abusive relationships in Botswana

Botswana Gender Based Violence Prevention and Support Centre

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BACKGROUND

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pervasive global problem, with serious public health implications, that disproportionately affects women and girls. The World Health Organization defines IPV as any behaviour by a partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours.¹

In Botswana, IPV is a significant concern, with studies showing high prevalence rates among women, and a high number of men admitting to being perpetrators of such violence. In a nationwide study conducted across Botswana in 2018, at least one in three women reported experiencing IPV.²

Research has examined the factors that shape survivors' decisions to remain in or leave abusive relationships.³⁻⁴ These decisions are often complex, and made more difficult when children are involved, as the survivor often balances her own safety with that of her children.⁵ Motherhood may serve as a source of empowerment, helping survivors endure and protect their children, or a constraining factor that pressures them to stay in harmful situations.⁶⁻⁷⁻⁸ Fear of interventions by child protection services further complicates informed decision-making,⁹⁻¹⁰ underscoring the need for greater support mechanisms.

Despite the global body of evidence, there is a notable lack of empirical data from Botswana regarding the role of motherhood in survivors' decisions to stay or leave abusive relationships. Furthermore, limited research exists on community perspectives – the views and social norms of family members, neighbours, traditional, and religious leaders, and other local actors – regarding the factors that influence women's decisions in such contexts.

AIM

This study examines community perceptions on the role of children in influencing a mother's decision to remain or leave an abusive intimate relationship. Specifically, it seeks to understand how motherhood status shapes survivors' decision-making processes and the extent to which the presence of children contributes to these choices. The findings will contribute to strengthening evidence-based policymaking and programming on gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response in Botswana and in the broader region.

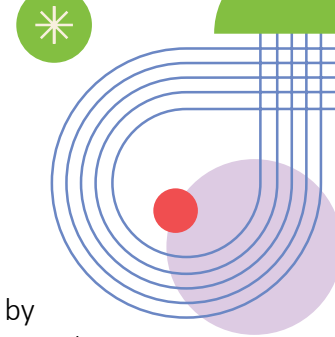
METHODS

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by strength theory which speaks to the resilience of the survivors and their inherent strengths and capacity to overcome adversity, in this instance IPV. Applied to this study, strength theory provides a lens for examining how women with young children in Botswana exercise agency within the constraints of abusive relationships. It informs the analysis of how motherhood interacts with broader social norms and contextual factors.

Design

This study employed a secondary qualitative data analysis method. The data were drawn from a recent study conducted in Botswana titled "Intimate Partner Violence Stigma and Help-seeking Behaviour". The study examined perceptions among both IPV survivors and the larger community regarding how mothers experiencing IPV respond to various social and situational pressures. The original dataset was recoded and thematically analysed for this study.



Data analysis

In the initial study, interviews were analysed using principles of thematic analysis,¹¹ guided by six phases: 1) familiarisation with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. A secondary analysis of semi-structured qualitative data with both IPV survivors and the general community then explored their perceptions of IPV and child abuse. The coding was conducted by a team of eight, half of whom were part of the data collection process. This was designed to ensure that the coding scheme and interpretations were illustrative of the data.

RESULTS

Analysis of the data produced three main themes: 1) protecting children from consequences of IPV, 2) children being used as a “weapon to detain” mothers in abusive relationships, and 3) concerns around the upkeep and wellbeing of children.

Theme 1: Protect children from consequences of IPV

Women expressed deep concern about the impact of abusive environments on their children. These concerns centred on how children perceive violence and the fear that exposure to IPV might normalise abuse, increasing the likelihood of its continuation across future generations. Participants also worried that such exposure could hinder children’s moral and emotional development, impact their values and lead to negative behaviours.

Community members further noted that witnessing IPV might erode children’s respect for their parents, seeing the perpetrator parent as a “monster”, while the survivor is “weak” for enduring the violence. Exposing children to abusive environments was perceived by the community as “toxic” and clearly detrimental to the child’s mental health, potentially affecting their academic performance and overall development.

“The moment the man abuses her, the abuse indirectly affects the children. The abuse really does affect them. My children were performing poorly in school. Abuse in the home often times makes the children to be absent minded and lose focus in the classroom. It is really not good.”

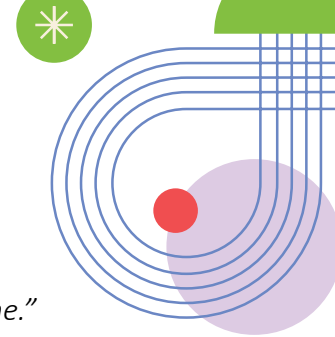
“If the children were abused as well, it would make the woman lose her dignity. She would have really failed her children. The children will also view their mother as a failure; as she would have failed to fight for them.”

Theme 2: Children used as “weapon to detain” mothers in abusive relationships

Some women indicated that perpetrators often displayed affection towards their children as a tactic to keep the mother in the abusive relationship. Participants described how survivors tended to avoid seeking help to maintain the appearance of a two-parent household for the sake of their children, even at the expense of their own safety.

Respondents also reported that perpetrators sometimes used children as leverage by denying mothers custody, coercing survivors who had fled abuse to return home to ensure their children’s wellbeing. In such contexts, in the view of some respondents, a mother who leaves a marriage because of IPV is often stigmatised for “failing at marriage” and labelled selfish for seeking help.

However, not all community members interviewed shared this view. Some considered women who left abusive relationships to be acting responsibly, prioritising their safety and that of their children, while regarding staying in such circumstances as irresponsible.



“There are some that may commend the man for taking care of the children, despite him abusing their mother...they will judge her because they will say that she left behind a fortune.”

Theme 3: Concerns around the upkeep and wellbeing of children

Findings suggest that women often prioritise their children’s needs above their own health and safety. Participants noted that many mothers, particularly those of young children, choose to remain in abusive relationships to ensure that their children are adequately provided for.

In Botswana, as in many developing contexts, men are traditionally viewed as the primary breadwinners, leaving women financially dependent and with limited options for providing for their children independently. This economic reliance often compels mothers to stay, as the perpetrator, whether a biological father or stepfather, is typically responsible for the family’s financial stability and the children’s upkeep.

“We live in times where most women feel it is fine to stay in the relationship just because the man is the father of her children.”

“As a woman, you always wonder what you are going to do, or how you are going to survive if you leave the relationship.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay between motherhood, community perceptions, and women’s decision-making in the context of IPV. These insights underscore the need for deeper empirical exploration, more responsive policy frameworks, and strengthened practitioner interventions.

For research:

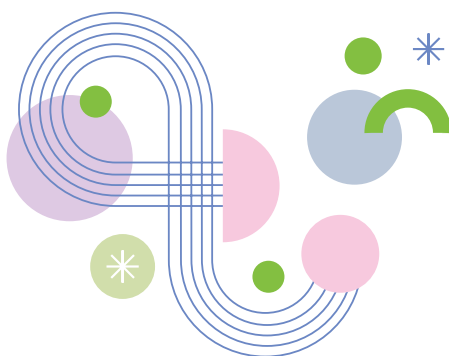
- **Compare experiences by motherhood status:** Future studies should explore differences in decision-making between mothers and childless women experiencing IPV, to better understand how motherhood shapes resilience, exit strategies and help-seeking behaviour.
- **Examine intersecting factors:** Additional research is needed to explore the multiple and overlapping motivations that influence mothers’ decisions to stay or leave abusive relationships, including cultural and religious pressures.
- **Investigate children’s perspectives:** There is scope for research that focuses on how children themselves experience and interpret IPV within the household, particularly at different developmental stages of their life, and how this impacts their well-being.

For policy:

- **Strengthen child- and mother-centred policy design:** Policymakers should recognise the pivotal role children play in shaping mothers’ decisions about abusive relationships and ensure both child protection and maternal support are integrated into IPV responses.
- **Enhance coordination across sectors:** Effective IPV policy should prioritise collaboration between social services, child protection, health, and justice sectors to create holistic, family-sensitive interventions.
- **Expand economic empowerment initiatives for women:** The government should strengthen social protection and livelihood programmes aimed at reducing women’s financial dependence on abusive partners, including through vocational training and income-generating opportunities.

For practice:

- **Adopt trauma- and family-informed approaches:** Practitioners working in GBV and IPV contexts, including social workers and law enforcement officers, should acknowledge the complex emotional and moral dilemmas faced by mothers deciding whether to leave abusive environments.
- **Integrate mental health and economic support:** Interventions should include counselling, livelihood support, and stress management components to help survivors make safer, more sustainable decisions for themselves and their children.
- **Address stigma and social judgement:** Community-based initiatives should work to reduce the stigma attached to mothers who remain in or leave abusive relationships and raise awareness of the risks posed to both women and children in violent households.



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