

Redress Opportunities and Challenges of Rural Women Facing Domestic Violence in Kono District, Eastern Sierra Leone

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Abstract: *Domestic violence or abuse has increasingly become one of the prevailing forms of violence that manifests within a relational context with dire consequences for the victims and their families. This study investigated redress opportunities and challenges rural women undergoing domestic violence face. The sample size consisted of 420 consenting rural women in Kono district who have been domestically abused. The findings of the study revealed that cases of domestic violence reported to relatives, traditional chiefs, and friends were rarely resolved satisfactorily. Although the women were generally not stigmatised for reporting incidents of domestic violence, they also did not receive advice or encouragement to leave their abusive husbands. The study further found that the major barriers preventing women from addressing domestic violence were that it was seen as personal and family-related. Many feared losing their children; they believed that reporting abuse would negatively impact or destroy their marriages, and therefore were accustomed to violence as part of their marriage. In view of the findings of the study, the following recommendations were suggested for future addressing of the situation: there is a need to sensitise the public to the challenges of women who suffer domestic violence, particularly in rural communities, as well as coordinated action to enhance their economic livelihoods and wellbeing.*

Keywords: domestic violence, redress opportunities, challenges in domestic violence, rural women

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is a significant social problem that manifest in homes with negative consequences for family members and the society at large. The United Nations (2005) define domestic abuse as any form of physical, verbal, sexual, psychological or financial abuse which might amount to criminal conduct and which takes place within the context of a relationship. Goldstein (2007) sees domestic violence as behaviour driven by a need to control another person or partner within an intimate relationship. The African Gender and Development Index of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (2017) states that women in Africa are subject to more lifetime partner violence (45.6%) and sexual assault (11.9%) than women anywhere in the world, with the

notable exception of high-income countries in the case of rape. In developing countries, it is often seen as an issue of the private sphere and explained as a private family matter. Sushami et al (2013) opined that in India, the official statistics for domestic violence are far lower than its occurrences. Official figures are 30%, but their research states that the figures may be as high as 60% in some states. Patriarchal attitudes which devalue women and maintain power in the hands of men perpetuate violence against women.

Intimate partner abuse and sexual assault occur early in the lives of many African women because they either enter marriage unions in their teenage years or mature sexual relationships early. For instance, in the Southern part of Africa, the majority of teens enter relationships with men more than 5 years their senior. Based on findings from a meta-analysis, Decker et al. (2015) found that teenage girls (aged 15–19 years) and young women (aged 20–24 years) in Southern Africa (e.g. South Africa, Botswana) disclose the highest prevalence of Domestic Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa. The most harrowing outcome of IPV is injury-related fatality, and IPV accounts for many of the homicides of women in South Africa. In a large-scale study of homicide records in several African countries, husbands or partners were responsible for 44.8% of all homicides against women, with only 4.4% of homicides against men being committed by women partners (UNECA, 2011).

Women's Aid, a non-governmental organization in the UK, has since 2010 been publishing annual reports on the status and challenges of eradicating domestic violence in the UK. Their reports persistently report that eradicating domestic violence, even in a country like the UK, is proving difficult. Some of the key challenges highlighted are inherent in the definition of domestic violence. Domestic violence is often equated with physical force that leaves some obvious marks or injury on the person. However, it is increasingly being revealed that domestic violence is about male perpetrators' power and control over women and involves not only physical and sexual violence, but also several behaviours such as intimidation, threats, isolation and humiliation (Women's Aid, 2018; Agwanwo & Badey 2022). The male abusers' desire for power and control over the female partners is mainly the cause of domestic violence, and it is gender-specific, such as most commonly experienced by women and perpetrated by men, regardless of race, ethnicity or religious group, class, disability or lifestyle (Women's Aid, 2010).

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2005) depict the challenges that women undergo when reporting an incident of domestic violence, as the onus is on them to prove some sort of evidence that domestic violence is present, which is almost impossible to do so. Other challenges include isolation from family members, being emotionally or financially abused, and just the willpower to go through the ordeal of reporting a family member. Furthermore, as stated by Burlae (2004), it takes time for female victims to realize that they are being abused, as the perpetrator can make sure that the victim is isolated and that she is limited in access to resources for help. These victims tend not to report the incident, as they fear that the Police would not believe them, and they may also not be able to prove their case, especially if they do not have visible physical injury.

Although Shaw (2007) acknowledges that Domestic Violence is a global problem, research indicates that this problem is acute in Sierra Leone. UNDP (2010) and World Bank (2012) state that nearly all Sierra Leonean women suffer some form of domestic violence in their lifetime. Women in Sierra Leone are subjected to numerous kinds of violence, which are often interrelated. This includes domestic

violence (physical, economic and emotional/psychological), communal/cultural violence, sexual violence and structural violence. Under customary law, men have the right to discipline their wives as they see fit. The right of a husband to beat or physically discipline his wife is a well-known belief in the community. According to UNFPA (2010), at least one in three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused, usually by an intimate partner or family member. Women remain silent about the systematic violence against them for fear of being stigmatized in their communities if they were to report the abuse.

Although international conventions against domestic violence have been signed, Kono district of Sierra Leone has the highest incidence of domestic violence according to Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (SLDHS 2019). The statistics continue to reveal that rural women are more at risk than urban women; 53% of rural women agreed that wife beating is justified, compared with 44% of urban women. Despite the passing of the Gender laws, including the Domestic Violence Act, women continue to tolerate domestic violence in most households, especially rural households. Redress and justice chains for violence against women are: the formal legal system, customary justice system and alternative dispute resolution channels (Agwanwo & Esere, 2024; Onyige & Agwanwo, 2026). Women face several challenges in accessing justice along these three chains, including obstacles from the end user's perspective (such as accessibility, affordability, timeliness); political factors (such as the impact of policy decisions, the political environment and funding and resource shortages such as staffing, equipment and resources. Research reveals that compounding access problems to redress are other factors which decide whether and/or where to report violence against them. The nature of the crime, who the perpetrators are and the victim's perception of the available justice providers influence the redress mechanism women are likely to choose (Ajayi & Airewele, 2018). It is against this background that this study aims to find out the challenges faced in resolving domestic violence issues in some rural communities of Sierra Leone.

Statement of the problem

Domestic violence is one of the most pervasive and intractable challenges facing societies and continues to impact people's lives disproportionately, particularly for women living in rural communities in the Kono District of Sierra Leone. This form of violence is typically perpetuated within patriarchal family structures characterised by economic dependency, social isolation and adherence to culturally defined norms around acceptable treatment of spouses. According to the 2019 Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey, 5,248 women experienced controlling behaviour, emotional abuse and physical violence by intimate partners—such as humiliation, threats, insults, pushing, shaking, slapping and even being hit with objects—are alarmingly common in rural areas of Sierra Leone (Statistics Sierra Leone & ICF, 2020). The situation appears to be exacerbated in rural Kono due to heightened geographical and economic obstacles faced by these women when accessing vital services offered by police stations, courts, legal aid providers, health facilities and other institutional mechanisms designed to promote accountability and protect victims. The statistics are high in Sierra Leone. For instance, 53% of women residing in rural areas considered at least some aspects of wife beating to be justified; this signifies attitudes towards domestic violence rooted firmly in gendered conceptions of rights and roles between men and women

The implications of such a disturbing trend manifest themselves across several dimensions, ranging from immediate physical harm to longer-term psychological repercussions impacting both mental

health outcomes generally as well as specific sexual/ reproductive health complications arising out of repeated exposure. M'Cormack-Hale (2018), however, indicates that despite the presence of customary institutions which can act as crucial alternatives to formal justice provision in Sierra Leone, there exist key obstacles to accessing formal redress avenues that hinder the realization of women's rights. He attributes this to certain informal processes and structures that reflect deeply ingrained social norms in ways that undermine women's rights.

Further analysis from Schneider (2019) reveals that most Sierra Leonean women, especially married ones, do not consider existing domestic violence laws as sufficient protection. As much as some women might have reported physical abuse to the police or to women's support networks, they felt threatened with both social stigma and potential reduction in economic/family security if they did so. Some were even physically abused again when trying to get help. In contrast, others were discouraged by police authorities who urged them to seek solutions on their own without pursuing formal legal channels. Additionally, M'Cormack-Hale 2018 notes that accessibility issues arising from geographical distances, high cost of transport, inadequate funding and lack of institutional capacity contribute to low rates of justice seeking by women in general – especially those living in rural areas where such services are frequently out-of-reach. According to Meyer et al. (2016), awareness about one's legal rights plays an essential role towards understanding how best to react to incidences of domestic violence within local contexts. Leadership roles played by chiefs & women's organizations, involvement from families & neighbours alongside prevailing attitudes derived from cultural backgrounds coupled with flaws experienced at every stage of the country's criminal justice system are critical determinants affecting responses taken by victims toward spousal aggression incidents.

Customary/family-based approaches commonly seen among rural populations prioritize settling disputes via marital resolutions instead of focusing on ensuring personal security & upholding human rights through judicial processes. Such contradictions result into large scale under reporting hence enabling continued violations against females without facing appropriate consequences imposed upon offenders. It is against this background that the study investigates redress opportunities and challenges of rural women facing domestic violence in Kono District, Eastern Sierra Leone.

Objectives

The specific objectives are:

1. To determine rural women's information on redress mechanisms for domestic violence.
2. To find out the challenges faced in resolving domestic violence issues in rural communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of domestic violence

Scholars have explicated domestic violence as a multidimensional manifestation of violence that can manifest between various individuals, including those married to each other, those who live together, ex-partners, parents/children, siblings, etc., as long as their relationship is familial or domestic in nature. The behaviours range from hitting/slapping/kicking/forced sexual activity, threatening/intimidating/injuring, insulting/humiliating/harassing, emotional manipulation, isolation, deprivation of financial resources, destroying/control of property, etc. Furthermore, some experts have argued that it's best characterized by coercive control rather than violent acts (United Nations, 1993;

WHO, 2021). According to Stark (2007), domestic abuse cannot be comprehended merely based on occurrence frequency and severity of single violent events. Instead, it reflects a continuous cycle of domination limiting people's freedoms and capacity for making important life choices. According to Hester et al (2017), domestic violence is multifaceted, involving distinct types of abuse that may occur either singly or conjointly. Thus, domestic violence becomes more than mere arguments between two family members, physical aggression, or simple wrongdoings; rather, it's considered as prolonged violations towards people's safety, dignity, autonomy and basic rights inside their close interpersonal circles called 'domestic'.

World Health Organisation estimates that about 736 million women (around 1 in 3 women) have suffered physical and/or sexual violence, predominantly by an intimate partner (WHO, 2021). Recent global research suggests the situation persists: approximately 840 million women are estimated to have suffered from domestic violence in their lifetime (WHO, 2025). Domestic violence is one of the most egregious forms of violence currently being practiced against women - is most extreme in Africa, being one of the highest lifetime prevalence rates among all regions in the world; and where the social acceptability of male authority, economic dependence, underreporting and limited access to justice remain a problem, and thus may lead to a misconception of the true magnitude of the situation (WHO, 2021; UN Women, 2023). The problem is equally apparent in Sierra Leone through the continued existence of physical, emotional and sexual violence against women, especially rural women, who are particularly vulnerable due to poverty, poor access to public support services and cultures that tolerate and/or condone wife beating (Statistics Sierra Leone & ICF, 2020).

In this paper, domestic violence is considered a widespread pattern of repeated abuse—physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, verbal, economic, and/or controlling—that occurs within domestic and family settings, potentially undermining the safety and well-being of those affected and creating critical challenges in terms of disclosure, access to legal redress, and effective resolutions. It encompasses serious physical, psychological, and socio-economic repercussions and is also a great obstacle to achieving gender equality

Challenges in Resolving Domestic Violence

There are several factors impeding people subjected to abuse from effectively reporting and/or bringing their case to a satisfactory resolution through mediation/other means. Felson et al. (2002) assert that victims' choices regarding whether to report domestic violence depend on both the severity of the event and their perceptions about potential outcomes given their particular relationship dynamics and anticipated police/justice system reactions. According to Goodmark (2018), even legal action might fail to successfully conclude incidents due to interrelated victim concerns involving financial dependency, housing conditions, child-rearing duties, and fears of experiencing more severe forms of physical aggression post-notification. As noted by (Stark) 2007, coercion mechanisms designed to manipulate individual autonomy can also impede full-scale resolution since those committing abuse often impose controls over victim movement patterns, electronic communications, monetary resources, and community contact options. WHO (2021) cites shortcomings within existing infrastructure networks, including insufficient services provided, ineffective referral systems, lack of qualified personnel and failure to coordinate efforts among others, as critical hindrances preventing adequate attention being afforded to all facets associated with gender-based violence incidents experienced by females.

There may be various reasons why victims do not bring forward charges against perpetrators, owing to economic dependency or lack of motivation due to delay and apparent apathy towards domestic violence victims within the judicial process (Agwanwo & Esere, 2024; Agwanwo & Badey, 2023). For instance, a woman reporting her husband to the police might subsequently decide not to proceed further with the case if she becomes dependent on his income for basic needs such as food, shelter, and education for her children's schooling. Similarly, family members or community leaders might urge her to reconcile even though this does not address the issue of the abuse committed nor guarantee future protection. These complexities have particular significance in Kono District, Eastern Sierra Leone. While Sierra Leonean women might approach different points for seeking justice – e.g., via the police, courts, legal aid institutions, health facilities, chiefs, family elders, religious leaders amongst others - their accessibility may differ significantly.

According to Meyer et al.'s research published in 2016, women's reactions to intimate partner violence in Sierra Leone depend upon knowledge about their rights, culturally defined ideas of what appropriate gender relations entail, availability of family and community networks assisting during times of need, influence exerted by local authorities who hold authority based on tradition rather than law, and impressions formed regarding efficacy of the formalized criminal justice system. As M'Cormack-Hale (2018) notes, "institutional capacity, resource limitations, and the availability of justice mechanisms" are factors that influence whether women can access justice services in Sierra Leone. For example, victims living in remote areas such as those in rural parts of Kono may face significant challenges in accessing support from local police, court systems, healthcare facilities, or other institutions due to geographic distances and high transport costs. Women without economic independence may face additional challenges based on financial factors, particularly where their livelihoods are dependent on their partners' income. They may face specific risks related to returning to the offender's home/community post-report. Systemic gaps and shortcomings regarding mechanisms of protection and response being provided to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Sierra Leone exist at all levels (institutional/resource), as revealed from findings of the Sierra Leone Human Rights Commission as stated in their 2023 report.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

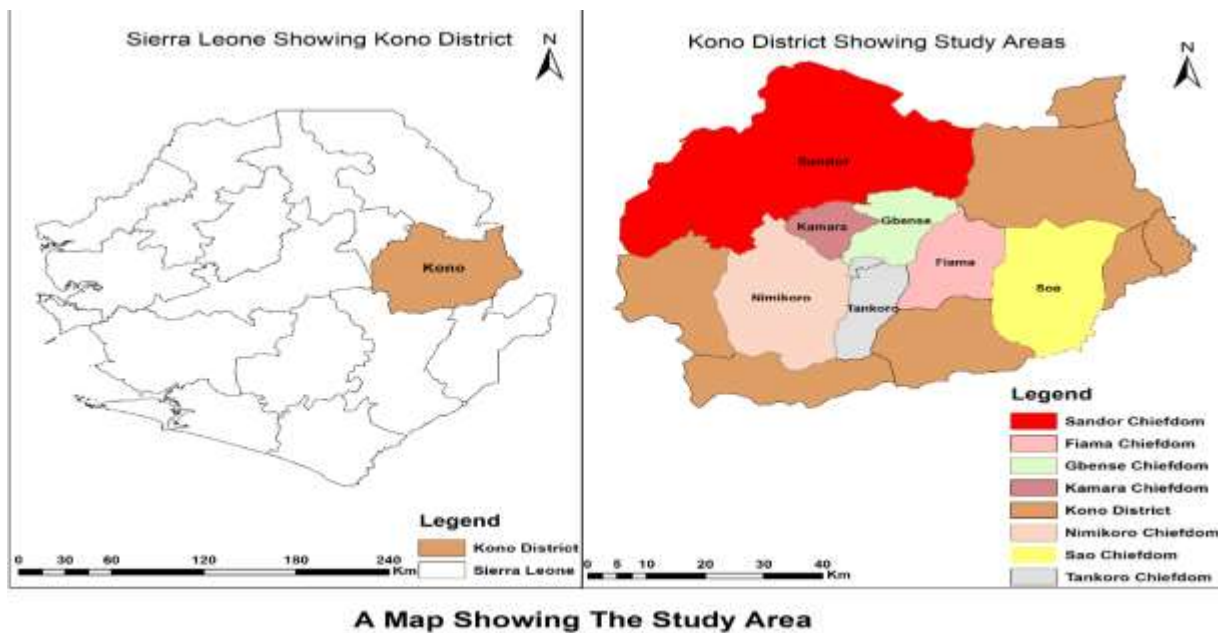


Figure 1: Map of Sierra Leone with Kono District and Chiefdoms of Enumeration

Kono district is in the Eastern Province, and borders Kenema district to the South-West, the Republic of Guinea to the East, Koinadugu district to the North-East and Kailahun district to the South-East. Nearly 67% of the district population resides in rural areas. The average family size is 5.6. Kono district is the largest diamond producer in Sierra Leone; gold and alluvial diamond mining are important economic activities of the residents. According to the Emergency Food Security Assessment (2015) report, 44% of the district population falls under severe (10%) and moderate (34%) food insecurity. The population of the research comprised women in rural areas of each chiefdom in Kono District. The women population of the selected chiefdoms in the district is shown in the table below:

Table 1: Chiefdoms and Populations of Rural Women in Kono District

Chiefdom	Population (Rural women)	Sample size of women enumerated from the selected chiefdoms
Fama	7892	28
Gbense	8010	28
Nimikoro	29307	102
Kamara	9194	32
Sandor	45630	159
Tankoro	4168	15
Soa	20163	70
Total	124364	434

Source: Population and Housing Census 2015

The research was cross-sectional in nature. In selecting the respondents for the study, both probability and non-probability sampling techniques were used. In selecting the chiefdoms for inclusion, the simple random technique was used to select seven (7) chiefdoms as shown on the map. The major

criterion for selection was that the women should have experienced domestic violence. Hence, women who admitted to experiencing domestic violence in the affirmative were eligible for selection. This process yielded over six hundred women. The ethical guidelines determined the final four hundred and thirty-four, which were based on their willingness to be part of the research. During the period of enumeration, however, those who were not found in the assigned locations were interviewed where they were met by the enumerators at their convenience. Data for this study were derived from two sources, namely: primary and secondary sources. The primary data were obtained when enumerators administered the research instruments to the respondents using questionnaires developed for the study. The secondary data sources were obtained from archived data in the Ministry of Social Welfare, Police, Non-governmental organizations, local courts, and community chiefs with records of DV.

FINDINGS

Table 1

Channels of reporting domestic violence	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Chief	189	27
Women Leaders	170	24.3
Relatives	258	36.8
Police	84	12
Total	434	100.0

The table shows the distribution based on channels of reporting domestic violence by rural women who are faced with domestic violence. According to the findings, 36.8% said they report domestic violence to relatives, 27% said domestic violence is reported to a traditional leader, the chief; 24.3% said through a female leader, and the remaining 12% of them said they report domestic violence through the police.

Table 2: Challenges to the Different Provisions for Domestic Violence.

Different provisions for DV	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
It involves a lot of money	218	24.2
It involves time	177	19.6
There is a lack of counselling for partners	124	13.7
There is no confidentiality	123	13.6
Police are not trained	92	10.2
The Family Support Unit is not near the home	89	9.8
The clinic is not near the home	82	9.1
Total	905	100.0

Table 2 shows the responses of respondents on challenges with the different provisions for domestic violence. From the findings, 24.2% said the provisions involve a lot of money; 19.6% said it involves a lot of time; 13.7% said that there is a lack of counselling for both the victim and the perpetrator of domestic violence; another 13.6% said there is no confidentiality when reporting domestic violence. A further 10.2% said the Police are not well trained to handle domestic violence cases; 9.8% said the

FSU has to be near their house, and 9.1% said the clinic is not near the home. This finding clearly indicates that there are major problems affecting the provisions for the reporting of domestic violence and eradication of this menace in society.

Table 3: Biggest Personal Obstacles to Addressing Domestic Violence

Biggest obstacle to re-address DV	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
My children will be separated from me	227	52.3
It will hurt my marriage	53	12.2
I love my husband	48	11.1
I have learnt to accept domestic violence	41	9.4
My relatives will not allow me to leave	26	6.0
I cannot improve myself to achieve my goals	16	3.7
I cannot live alone	15	3.5
My in-laws will hate me	8	1.8
Total	434	100.0

The findings in Table 3 revealed that 52.3% of the respondents agreed that the biggest personal obstacle to addressing domestic violence is that their children will be separated from them; 12.2% said it will hurt their marriage; 11.1% said the love they have for their husband prevents them from addressing domestic violence; 9.4% said they have learnt to accept their situation of domestic violence; 6.0% said their relatives will not allow them to address the issue of domestic violence; 3.7% said because they cannot improve themselves to achieve their independence and therefore make little effort to address the situation; 3.5% of said they cannot live alone; and the remaining 1.8% of them said their in-laws will hate them. This table clearly explains that most rural women have many personal reasons why they tolerate the domestic violence they are going through.

Table 4: Order of Difficulties in Redressing Domestic Violence.

Order of difficulty in re-dressing DV	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Disruption in the day's activities	217	26.4
Chiefs are not honest	142	17.3
Police are not honest	140	17.0
Language barrier	130	15.8
Lack of physical Access to Official Bodies	117	14.2
Obtaining a Medical Report	76	9.2
Total	822	100.0

Table 4 shows the distribution based on order of difficulty in re-dressing domestic violence that rural women faced. From the finding, 26.4% said there is disruption in normal day's activities to address domestic violence, 17.3% said chiefs are crooks and therefore whenever they report any domestic violence that they have suffered from, the chiefs will not take it serious, 17.0% said dishonesty of Police is another difficulty that they are faced with to re-address domestic violence, 15.8% said Language barrier prevents the redress of domestic violence, 14.2% said lack of physical access is preventing the re-dress of domestic violence and only 9.2% of the respondents said difficulty in

obtaining medical report is a hindering the re- address of domestic violence. This study clearly pointed out that the most difficult obstacle in re-addressing the issue of domestic violence is that it disrupts their normal day-to-day activities.

Table 5: Feeling Pressurized to Resolve Cases of Domestic Violence

Feel pressurized to resolve cases of DV	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	178	41.0
No	256	59.0
Total	434	100.0

Table 5 shows the responses of rural women who are faced with domestic violence on whether they feel pressurized to resolve domestic violence. From the findings, 59% said they are not pressurized to resolve domestic violence, and 41.0% said they feel pressurized to resolve domestic violence. This implies that many rural women are not under pressure to resolve domestic violence.

DISCUSSION

Miller and Meloy (2010) state that an overreliance on the criminal justice system to protect women from domestic violence fails to address the gendered nature of the violence. Okorji (1999) found that there is a tendency to remain silent about domestic violence in Nigeria; 82% of crimes go unreported in Nigeria. The aforementioned culture of wife-beating in combination with the culture of silence leaves domestic violence victims with no option for seeking justice. Another reason for continued domestic violence is that there is no support from the family of a woman who is considering leaving her husband. Parents and in-laws urge women to drop charges against a violent husband so that the family does not suffer shame and to ensure that the children remain part of the family. Without external support, women are unable to leave abusive relationships.

Where women cannot separate love from violence and wish to continue a relationship, they do not turn to the Police. Rather, they report to their household or to community elders who try to mediate between the partners. Igbolekwu (2021) note that women who report to official channels face enormous stigma and the risk of losing security for themselves and their children. Finally, the State legal system and the police do not prioritize cases involving married women; they often advise women to resolve the matter privately rather than going through the courts.

The study found that married older women are not a priority and are encouraged to settle their matter privately through community or family mediation. Going to the Police is stigmatized as risky behaviour and is seen as wanting to lose your home and even your children. It is not surprising that in a climate of difficult redress for offences against women in domestic violence, the majority of victims do not leave abusive partners. The fact that many victims do not leave instantly has been used against them as “proof” that they are masochistic. However, Rani and Bonu (2009) reveal that it is often emotionally difficult for the victim to leave a loved one, especially when he is apologetic and swears to never hurt her again. Women generally try to preserve relationships and will go to great lengths to make things better, especially if there are children involved. It may also be financially difficult for a victim to leave, since the abuser is usually very controlling of the victim’s finances and social/familial relationships. With no money or supportive relationships, a woman may have nowhere to go. In addition, the culture sees it as a disgrace for a woman to leave; a woman separated from her husband

has no status in the community. Most are prompted only if the violence escalates, becomes more public, or is inflicted on the children.

Recommendations

A general recommendation proffered is that the

- i. Government has to concentrate its efforts on decreasing poverty in the country. Specific focus is concentrated on how the community and family members can help to facilitate the detachment of women from damaging influences in the homes to a more attractive and positive climate in these environments.
- ii. The NGOs, CBOs and FSUs have to continue their strategies of sensitization of domestic violence and its criminalization.
- iii. The Government has to institute positive discriminatory policies to get more trained and qualified females, especially in rural areas, especially the magistrates, court officials and the FSUs. Family and marriage counsellors should be stationed in every rural community to work with families to prevent domestic violence.
- iv. More Social Welfare workers have to be recruited to monitor reports, and help prosecute men who go against the law. The Government, both national and at the local level, have to be more proactive to solve this problem. The Local Government Councils have to come up with bye-laws. More police officers should be recruited to pursue cases that affect girls and women.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the resolution of domestic violence faces various interrelated problems ranging from the lack of adequate information and access to justice institutions among victims to issues such as lack of money/affordability, location, fear of stigma and retaliation, belief in patriarchy, dependency on perpetrators, lack of adequate resource availability at institutions level, evidential problems, victims withdrawing/non-attendance in court, as well as the intimate nature between victims/perpetrators.

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