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The Influence of Economic Burden on the Prevalence of Domestic Violence in Egypt: Perspectives of Sudanese Male Refugees

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Abstract:

Purpose: The study aimed to investigate the causes of gender-based domestic violence, particularly focusing on how increased unemployment due to migration and displacement contributes to such violence. It also sought to understand the effects of this violence on the victims' lives, emphasizing the need to address underlying gender dynamics within refugee communities.

Methodology: The research was conducted among informal leaders of the Sudanese male community, who are UNHCR asylum seekers residing in Cairo's Ard El Lewa neighborhood of Giza. Twelve individuals were selected for two focus group discussions; nine participants had been registered for periods ranging from three to thirteen years and spoke Arabic and other Sudanese languages. Data collection involved a comprehensive questionnaire and a qualitative approach to explore the unnoticed and unreported causes of domestic violence.

Findings: The findings highlighted that excessive unemployment among refugee men significantly contributes to domestic violence, serving as a "trigger point" for violent situations at home. The study also identified an increase in violence due to reduced activity levels and psychological issues, which negatively affect emotional health. The results underscored the importance of understanding cultural and gender-specific factors influencing violence within this community.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of gender-based violence by emphasizing the role of economic and psychological stressors in refugee contexts. Practically, it recommends establishing ongoing discussions within the male refugee community either in single sex groups or demographically sensitive formations to clarify concepts of violence and identify culturally appropriate support services. Policy wise, there is a need for broader awareness and intervention strategies that address the latent gender dimensions of violence, promoting culturally sensitive approaches to prevent and respond to GBV among refugee populations.

Keywords: *Sudan, Egypt, Darfur, Refugees, Unemployment, UNHCR, Domestic Violence, Domestic Abuse, Male, Female, Gender-Based Violence, Economic Hardship.*

1. Background

According to UNHCR reports, in 2019, approximately 49.45% of Egypt's refugee population amounting to 47,763 individuals originated from Sudan's Darfur state. By August 31, 2020, the total number of Sudanese refugees had risen to 49,290 individuals. Additionally, UNHCR indicated that hundreds of thousands of them from Darfur are under highly challenging conditions. The result of the erupted armed conflict in April 2023 has driven many civilians to seek refuge in Egypt and other neighboring countries. Sudanese nationals have become the largest refugee group in the country. And with renewed conflicts and political instability, the population registered with UNHCR comprised 672,930 Sudanese by 31 March 2025, which indicates that the refugee population from Darfur will continue to increase.

The economic burden has far reached social and psychological consequences, contributing to increased rates of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and a general decline in cognitive and emotional well-being. It can also lead to behavioral problems and aggression, negatively impacting interpersonal relationships and social cohesion. Domestic violence encompassing physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse is a widespread global issue with serious implications for both mental and physical health. A rise in unemployment is strongly correlated with increased instances of violence, divorce, and social instability, all of which further undermine living standards and public health. Additionally, unemployment is linked to a host of complex social problems, including criminal behavior, substance abuse, and family breakdown (Nuha, 2022). Domestic abuse is commonly defined as a repeated pattern of harmful behavior used by one partner to assert or maintain control over another. It affects individuals across all socioeconomic and educational backgrounds (OVW, 2023).

Abulbasher and Yingling (2024) conducted a study on intimate partner violence within Sudanese refugee communities in the United States. Their research revealed that deeply ingrained cultural beliefs often normalize psychological and physical abuse by male partners as a means of maintaining control. Furthermore, financial conflicts such as expectations to remit money to family in Sudan and disputes over tax returns exacerbate marital tension. Due to a combination of mistrust, fear of social stigma, and reliance on traditional dispute resolution methods, couples often prefer seeking help from community leaders rather than involving formal legal systems.

Agaba (2024) similarly noted that men's inability to financially provide for their families may lead to frustration that manifests in violence against spouses and children. Congolese refugee women in Kampala reported that domestic violence among married couples was more common in their host country than in their country of origin, citing increased household stress related to economic hardship and foreigner status.

Among asylum-seeking and refugee populations, two previous systematic reviews have explored the factors associated with both the perpetration and victimization of domestic violence. One review, which examined predictors of interpersonal violence in humanitarian settings, identified

key contributing factors to violence against women, including exposure to conflict, substance abuse (alcohol and drugs), low economic status, mental health challenges or poor coping mechanisms, and a lack of social support by Rubenstein, Lu, MacFarlane & Stark, L (2020) also highlighted economic status as a significant factor linked to both the perpetration and experience of domestic violence.

Additional studies have emphasized the relationship between male gender socialization and gender-based violence (GBV) among refugee populations in Sub-Saharan Africa. Harmful gender norms contribute to the perpetration of GBV by men, and the social and structural conditions of forced migration and camp resettlement further reinforce these problematic norms.

In low-income settings, gender stereotypes and perceptions surrounding GBV tend to be reinforced by social norms. Gender roles heavily influence sexual relationships, and violence against women is often socially tolerated (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010). This normalization of violence is considered one of the most significant drivers of GBV in Sub-Saharan Africa. Research by Gibbs, Willan, Misselhorn, & Mangoma (2012) suggests that men may adopt hegemonic masculine behaviors when traditional notions of masculinity are challenged or when they fail to meet culturally defined expectations of gendered success.

El-Moslemany, Mellon, Tully & McConkey (2022), note that while some research has examined GBV among refugee populations, there is still a limited understanding of the specific factors that contribute to GBV in these contexts. This gap highlights the need for further studies focusing on the unique social, cultural, and economic dynamics faced by refugees that may increase their vulnerability to gender-based violence.

Despite these concerning trends, there remains a significant gap in research addressing the underlying factors contributing to intimate partner violence among refugees. Empirical studies in this area are scarce, particularly those focusing on refugee communities in Cairo. This research aims to fill that gap by examining the relationship between economic hardship, particularly unemployment, and partner abuse among Sudanese refugees in Egypt. A descriptive analysis was employed to interpret and present the study's findings.

The study explores how economic hardship experienced by Sudanese male refugees in Egypt influences the occurrence of domestic violence within marital relationships. Both the theoretical framework and empirical data support the prevailing view that male unemployment plays a significant role in contributing to domestic abuse.

To investigate male refugees' perceptions of economic stress and its relation to their involvement in domestic violence, qualitative research methods were employed. Focus group discussions served as the primary data collection method. These discussions were guided by 12 structured questions and included 12 male participants (6 in each group) selected based on shared migration experiences and similar ethnic backgrounds. Cairo was chosen as the study site due to its status as

a primary first-asylum destination and the significant number of Sudanese refugees it hosts, particularly in Ardel-ELewa, Giza, one of the largest residential areas for this population. Data were analyzed using content analysis techniques.

2. Results

All participants were married males, ranging in age from 21 to 66. The participants consistently identified economic hardship as a central stress or influencing their family dynamics. The financial difficulties they described stemmed from a dramatic shift in living conditions after displacement, characterized by rising prices, decreased income, and limited access to stable employment. These economic pressures were compounded by cultural dissonance, difficulty adapting to new social norms, and a lack of institutional support. Several participants also cited racial discrimination and insecurity as ongoing sources of psychological distress.

Participants openly discussed various manifestations of domestic violence within their households. These included physical violence such as slapping and pushing, sexual coercion, emotional and psychological abuse marked by verbal degradation and threats, and financial control or neglect. Notably, the abuse was predominantly directed at their spouses, though some participants mentioned similar dynamics affecting their children.

The researcher attributed the participants' behavior to the compounding effects of past trauma, including experiences of war, persecution, and forced displacement, as well as the ongoing stressors of refugee life in Egypt. These unresolved trauma symptoms, such as anger, frustration, hopelessness, and emotional withdrawal, were identified as triggers for violent outbursts. Importantly, the study found that violence was not merely a reaction to present hardship but also a manifestation of deeper psychological wounds related to displacement, loss, and masculine identity crises.

The findings highlight the intersectional nature of violence within refugee households, where trauma, economic vulnerability, and disrupted gender roles converge. This underscores the need for integrated, trauma-informed mental health and social support services that address both the psychological and socioeconomic dimensions of refugee life. Such interventions could mitigate the cycle of violence and improve family wellbeing among refugee populations.

3.1 Economic Challenges Faced by Male Sudanese Refugees:

Financial hardship arises from significant changes in their living circumstances, including rising costs of living, decreased income, and limited access to suitable employment. These factors have placed increased pressure on their families. The different kinds of support that are provided by organizations and relevant authorities are insufficient to alleviate their burdens. As well, employment opportunities are scarce, often forcing them into physically demanding and dangerous jobs, such as heavy lifting and handling hazardous materials, frequently without proper safety precautions, especially for refugees. Many of them reported working in informal or illegal sectors,

devoid of any labor protections or rights. At the end, all participants agreed that their income is inadequate to meet their families' basic needs. This persistent financial strain frequently results in marital tensions and, in some cases, leads to domestic.

3.2 Challenges Arising from Lifestyle Changes

Participants articulated their experiences of lifestyle shifts, citing several key challenges. These include difficulty adapting to cultural differences, particularly regarding customs and traditions, as well as living in an insecure environment marked by racial discrimination, limited safe spaces for children and families, and widespread sexual harassment affecting both male and female adolescents. Additionally, there appears to be a growing societal tolerance toward harassment targeting foreigners and refugees. Participants indicated that fear and shame often prevent them from reporting these issues to their families or the relevant authorities.

One participant expressed:

“These challenges significantly hinder our ability to function effectively in our families.”

Further participant statements elaborated on the emotional and social toll of these changes:

“My situation within my family has evolved and become more challenging.”

“As a refugee in Egypt, my family obligations have intensified, particularly in managing household matters.”

“As men, we are facing lifestyle challenges that present unique psychological and social strains.”

“Many of these challenges differ from those we experienced during the conflict in Darfur.”

“This situation and the accompanying challenges cause significant stress for both us and our partners.”

Another participant highlighted how the surrounding environment has led to feelings of depression and, at times, hopelessness.

In addition, three participants jointly stated:

“Our status as asylum seekers has led to insecurity and exploitation, which has adversely impacted our family members, further complicated our circumstances, and heightened the stress within our families.”

Four others added:

“This ongoing pressure, which has affected both us and our families during the migration journey and after arriving in Egypt, has contributed to feelings of depression and despair.”

3.3 Various Forms of Violence Imposed on Women

3.3.1 Perspectives on Intimate Partner Violence

Participants shared reflections on their behavior toward their partners, offering insight into how violence manifests within the family context:

- One participant admitted to contemplating leaving his family due to the extent of his violent behavior. He acknowledged losing the respect of both his wife and daughters.
- Another explained that he becomes "a different person" when physically assaulting his wife. He has observed her increasing indifference to both physical and verbal abuse. He recognized this behavior as socially unacceptable and noted his growing anger.
- A third participant expressed confusion about his own violent actions toward his wife and children. Despite acknowledging the severity of his behavior, he described a troubling sense of emotional release after these incidents.
- One man reflected on feelings of emasculation due to his wife being the family's primary earner. In an attempt to reassert control and authority, he resorted to physical violence to reinforce his position as head of the household.
- Another participant shared how, after escaping life-threatening conditions in Darfur, he initially experienced relief upon arriving in Egypt. However, those feelings were soon replaced by anxiety and uncertainty, which culminated in an act of violence where he broke his partner's hand. He later regretted this action, which ultimately led to the dissolution of their relationship.

3.3.2 Types of Violence as Identified by Participants

The following are direct statements from participants describing the types of violence they perpetrated against their spouses:

"I decided to leave my family due to violent behaviors and the loss of mutual respect. I don't feel like a different person when I hit my partner, but I know it's unacceptable. I've noticed that I've become more irritable, and my partner no longer reacts when I insult her. This behavior is not acceptable in our society."

"I feel like I lost my manhood because my wife is the only one who works and provides for the family." He added, "I am the man in the house and the decision-maker, even if she is the one who brings the money."

The same participant confirmed that he maintains control over his partner's income and financial decisions through intimidation and manipulation.

"I don't know why I beat my children and partner, but it helps me release my anger. Although I know it's a serious mistake, I feel relieved afterward."

“Despite feeling relief after escaping the civil wars in Darfur, where we lived in life-threatening conditions, our arrival in Egypt was quickly followed by feelings of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. I became violent and broke my partner’s hand. After that, she left me.”

“Throughout my life, this is the first time I have ever hit my partner.”

3. Discussion:

Refugees are individuals who have been forcibly displaced from their countries due to war, persecution, or natural disasters. Such circumstances are inherently traumatic and often result in severe emotional and psychological consequences. Trauma arises from the profound psychological impact of exposure to violence, conflict, and other adverse events, and it frequently leads to long-term mental health issues. These may include chronic stress responses, anxiety, depression, intrusive memories, difficulty functioning in daily life, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Silove, Ventevogel, & Rees (2017); Miller & Rasmussen, 2010).

PTSD is a serious mental health condition that can develop following the experience or witnessing of a traumatic event. A wide range of experiences may trigger PTSD, including armed conflict, natural catastrophes, human rights violations, and other forms of violence. The disorder is characterized by symptoms such as re-experiencing the traumatic event through flashbacks and nightmares, avoidance of trauma-related cues, and negative alterations in mood and cognition. These may include persistent negative thoughts about oneself, others, or the world; enduring emotions such as fear, guilt, or anger; and a diminished ability to feel positive emotions (American Psychiatric Association, 2025; WHO, 2022).

This study reveals alarming levels of psychological distress experienced by refugee men who are unable to fulfill their traditional cultural, social, and economic roles. This perceived failure often results in aggressive behaviors toward women. Many of these men report feeling disrespected by their communities, spouses, and even by themselves due to their inability to provide or protect. These pressures frequently culminate in domestic violence, depression, family abandonment, and other adverse outcomes. As previously established, such symptoms and behaviors are closely linked to trauma.

A 2008 study by Meffert and Marmar in Cairo explored the experiences of Darfuri refugees, the same group targeted by this study. It documented severe psychological distress among individuals who had fled genocide in Sudan. This distress persisted after their displacement, exacerbating their psychological and social pressures. It was characterized by acute symptoms, including psychosis and suicidal ideation, which hindered their ability to participate in community-based recovery programs offered by non-profit organizations. Community leaders reported facing immense pressure due to the increased demand for intensive, individualized mental health care. Participants described a wide range of depressive symptoms, including hopelessness, frequent crying, apathy,

difficulty concentrating, sleep and appetite disturbances, weight loss, persistent sadness, fatigue, and guilt (Meffert and Marmar, 2008).

Another study, which also confirms the findings of this study, conducted among refugees in Egypt, highlighted the prevalence of domestic violence perpetrated by male partners, particularly in the context of war and displacement, which constitutes their painful past, and the exacerbation of these pressures leading to domestic violence and depression (Nawyn, Reosti, & Gjokaj (2009).; Stark & Ager, 2011).

Findings also indicate that the resettlement process introduces stressors into marital and familial relationships, especially as family members adjust to life in Egypt at different rates. Changes in gendered family roles, as part of the acculturation process, are frequently interpreted as a loss of cultural identity. This is consistent with research on South Sudanese refugees in Australia, which found that marital conflicts often arose during resettlement. Men were more resistant than women to adopting new cultural values, particularly those related to shifting gender roles and changing power dynamics within the household and society (Khawaja & Milner, 2012). Conversely, women tended to be more accepting of their newly acquired rights and financial independence, further straining relationships within refugee families.

The economic challenges of displacement have also contributed to increased gender-based violence, particularly perpetrated by men. This conclusion is supported by several studies (El-Moslemany, Mellon & McConkey (2020); Palmer & Smith, 2001; Mansour, 2019; Meffert & Marmar, 2008), all of which document the impact of poverty and disempowerment on the eruption of violence within the household.

Scholars have identified concepts of masculinity as central to understanding this trend. The notion of “heightened male vulnerability” refers to the psychological impact experienced by men who have witnessed or been subjected to torture, violence, or rape. These experiences often result in a deep sense of powerlessness and social isolation. As a result, many men experience a decline in self-worth and, in response, may express a distorted form of masculinity through aggression towards women and other family members (El Masri, Harvey, & Garwood, 2013).

Gender-based violence in refugee contexts represents a global crisis. Latif and Nadia (2012) notes that the rise in domestic and sexual violence within refugee settlements is not unique to Sudanese communities. With women and girls making up over 18 million of the global refugee population, the escalation of gender-based violence in such environments is a critical international concern. Despite its severity, the needs of refugee women and girls and their pursuit of safety often remain underrepresented in both research and policy (Latif and Nadia, 2012).

Violence is a grave human rights violation that often results in a prolonged pattern of maladaptive behaviors and negative outcomes, impacting both the individual and those around them. In general, and particularly in the context of domestic and gender-based violence, such acts are frequently the

consequence of prior exposure to traumatic events. Individuals who have experienced one or more violent incidents often develop trauma-related symptoms; in this sense, violence is not only a product of trauma but also a catalyst for further trauma. Victims of domestic violence commonly exhibit signs of psychological distress and emotional instability, which are indicative of underlying trauma.

Refugees, by virtue of their displacement and exposure to armed conflict, persecution, or disaster, frequently suffer from trauma-related symptoms as a direct result of the crises they have fled. Without access to appropriate psychological or psychiatric interventions, these unresolved emotional disturbances, manifesting as intrusive thoughts, nightmares, flashbacks, depression, and chronic anxiety can be redirected toward those closest to them. Refugee men, in particular, may externalize these symptoms through violent behavior, often directed at family members.

Acts of violence within refugee households are frequently perpetrated by male partners, fathers, or brothers against women and children, or even among siblings themselves, many of whom are also suffering from the effects of trauma. Consequently, women and children remain in a continuous state of exposure to both past and ongoing trauma, placing them at heightened risk for developing severe mental health disorders, including major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and in extreme cases, psychosis or suicidal ideation.

4. Conclusion:

The factors contributing to male partner violence in refugee communities stem from a complex interplay of social, cultural, psychological, and structural elements that both fuel and sustain violence against women. These challenges are intensified by the diverse legal frameworks in host countries, which create additional barriers to justice and protection. At the same time, ongoing tensions are worsened by unclear asylum procedures, insecurity regarding family well-being, systematic exploitation in accessing basic services, and the gradual erosion of refugees' rights. In this context, refugee men, women, and children endure continuous suffering rooted in traumatic experiences from their displacement and the hardships of exile. Over time, the stress and trauma associated with these pressures can lead to serious mental health issues, including clinical depression and suicidal ideation, further compounding their vulnerability and the cycle of violence.

5. Recommendations:

Access to services and comprehensive, trauma-sensitive care through advocacy across various media platforms is an effective approach to supporting individuals from refugee backgrounds based on their lived experiences, thereby raising their awareness. This is particularly important in addressing women's experiences of domestic violence while respecting cultural sensitivities. Such care is essential for addressing complex trauma, prioritizing the safety of the target group, and focusing on empowering them through practices that build on their strengths, in collaboration with relevant authorities. In addition to providing services, enforcing laws and regulations that prevent domestic violence and imposing appropriate penalties on perpetrators is crucial to avoid the serious

and devastating effects of domestic violence on individuals, families, and society. Therefore, the findings of this study should be shared with agencies and organizations that provide therapeutic, psychosocial, and support programs. Then, specialized workshops should be developed to help identify the various forms of domestic violence against women and children and assess the needs of families. Efforts should also be made to encourage governmental and non-governmental organizations to promote values that reject violence against women and children, and to foster positive mental health values and supportive family dynamics, particularly among men in leadership or caregiving roles. It is also essential to support Sudanese organizations and individuals within the local community, who are currently the primary providers of assistance. In addition, the Egyptian government should review the laws enacted in December 2024 to allow Sudanese refugees registered with UNHCR to obtain work permits. This includes removing restrictive conditions, such as passport and visa requirements, and making the security check process more transparent and accessible. Allowing refugees to work legally will significantly help them cope with the rising costs of housing and living. Finally, further research is needed to study the long-term psychological effects of trauma and life stressors on refugees, as well as the coping mechanisms they employ. Researchers and students should be encouraged to explore this area, as gender-based violence within refugee families remains a largely hidden crisis that requires in-depth study and informed interventions.

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