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**Marital Rape Crisis: Lessons Learnt from the Survivors'
Perspectives and Experiences**



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Marital Rape Crisis: Lessons Learnt from the Survivors’ Perspectives and Experiences

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Abstract

Purpose: One area that has received scanty reporting worldwide and in developing countries particularly, is ‘marital rape’. Marital rape is the fastest growing violent crime in developing countries, yet it is one of the least studied phenomena. Zimbabwe is not spared of this phenomenon. The few country studies carried out on the phenomenon have pointed to the need for effective remediation. The focus of this study is on this call. In coming up with an informed remediation, this study started with an understanding of the survivors’ experiences and perspectives so as to unpack the intricacies surrounding marital rape.

Methodology: The study adopted a qualitative methodology in order to gain depth and detail in the phenomenon. A sample of 24 women, all formally employed, participated in the study. *Face to face* semi-structured interviews extracted the women’s experiences and perspectives of marital rape. Interviews were semi-structured so as not to be restricted to specific questions and the questions could also be rephrased. Face to face interviews had an added advantage of gaining nuances of the participants’ answers, which would have been lost had the interviews been telephonic or email. All the participants had confirmed cases of marital rape. Data were collected and analysed concurrently. The issue under study was highly sensitive and it is for this reason that ethical considerations were undertaken to protect and serve the participants, as their being and safety was of primary concern. Thematic analysis was employed in data analysis, and what was most important was to recognize what was important in the data and give it meaning.

Findings: Data disclosed that marital rape was devastating to the survivors as the wives registered hostile bedroom climates. The wives had convergent opinions and experiences of marital rape as a patriarchal ideology and a tactic by their husbands to uphold masculinity. Reporting of marital rape was undermined by an atmosphere of societal ridicule, blame, shaming and stigmatisation, highly attributable to culture and socialisation.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Different from other studies, this study proposes a comprehensive ‘think and change’ intervention as the most viable and effective route to rid the Zimbabwe community of the menace. The ‘think and change’ intervention shifts attention from the survivor solely to the abuser, abused, and social support networks.

Key words: *Marital Rape, Sexual Autonomy, Empowerment, Qualitative, Sexual Violence*

Introduction

One area that has received scanty reporting the world over, and in developing countries in particular is ‘marital rape.’ One of the developing countries engulfed by the crisis of marital rape is Zimbabwe. The most plausible reason for this could be what was espoused by Mbanje (2019) in a local Zimbabwe newspaper, which carries an article that purports that marital rape is grossly under reported in Zimbabwe most likely because of societal perceptions. This edition of the newspaper carries a story titled ‘spousal rape remains underreported’ in which a 27-year-old soldier tied his wife with a piece of wire and then brutally raped her. Tshili (2020) reported on spousal abuse being the most common form of gender-based violence in Zimbabwe, with mostly women on the receiving end, but at the same time being the least studied phenomena. Tshili (2020) was reporting on a research study carried out by the Zimbabwe Vulnerable Assessment Committee (ZimVac) in 2020 which had established marital rape as one of the common forms of spousal violence in Zimbabwe. Mutsvairo (2023), in another local newspaper, talks about a woman who reported to the police of having been raped by her husband after a domestic dispute.

From time immemorial, the Hale Doctrine invalidated marital rape as an impossibility until fairly recently when the exemption of the scourge was legally countered and nullified, (Bennice & Resick, 2003). The Hale Doctrine exempted marital rape as a crime arguing that “...the husband cannot be guilty of rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract,” (Russel, 1990, as cited in Bennice & Resick, 2003, p. 229). However, the Hale Doctrine was overturned, reviewed and redefined by emerging human rights associations, feminist movements, women groups, and other lobby groups who made heightened cries on morality, liberty, and integrity of women, thereby dragged marital rape from being a private trouble into being a public menace as these movements laid emphasis on the rights of women to control their bodies. With this, marital rape has become a non-contested concept and has been recognized as a crime. Thus then, in the contemporary world, there has been a tectonic shift from the redundant Hale doctrine’s perception of rape, declaring that rape is rape regardless of the survivor-perpetrator relationship and necessitating circumstances (Banerjee & Rao, 2022; Victoria, 2023). Recognition in the contemporary society is on the nature of the marital act itself as one of “non-consensual sexual intercourse by a spouse on a spouse without the other’s consent or where consent is obtained by force, threat, intimidation or any other means of false or fraudulent act” (Kolade- Faseyi, 2018, p. 112). Prima facie, contemporary view lays emphasis on the rights of an individual’s integrity and thus the need for everyone to achieve full legal personhood. None should be treated as a honey pot which can be mauled at will. The contemporary view of spousal rape influenced the recommendations proffered by this study.

This study takes cognizance of related studies already carried out in Zimbabwe. Njovana and Watts (1996) carried out a related study in Zimbabwe but focussing on how the violence women suffer impacts on their reproductive health. Mutanana and Gasva (2015) researched into consequences reporters of marital rape face. Perhaps one of the latest published articles on

violence against women in Zimbabwe was carried out by Zengenene and Susanti (2019). While the duo's study was on violence on women and girls in the capital city of Zimbabwe from a largely political perspective, this study confined itself only to intimate sexual violence against women in the country's Midlands city of Gweru, from a social culture perspective. Results of the duo's study further strengthened the motivation for this study, for while attention on the phenomena of violence against women in Zimbabwe is receiving heightened attention, women and girls in Zimbabwe continue to suffer heightened gender-based violence and the government of Zimbabwe falls short on remediation, (Home Office, 2017; Mutanana & Gasva, 2015; Njovana & Watts, 1996; Zengenene & Susanti, 2019.). This is the gap this study attempts to fill by suggesting an intervention for the country that has not been suggested before.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

The epistemological lenses used in this study are a cocktail of adaptations from the gender role theory, and the feminism. The gender role theory (Coltrane, 2010; Abbott et al, 2005) underscores the role and impact of socialization in all facets of marital rape. The definition of socialization taken by this study is that advanced by Hurrelmann (1988, p. 2) who says socialization is:

The process of the emergence, formation, and development of the human personality is dependent on interaction with human organism, on the one hand, and the social and ecological living conditions that exist at a given time within the historical development of a society.

To the gender role theory, social conditions are fundamental in accounting for male and female behaviour through the interactions one has with his or her community. It is this environment that gives meaning to what husbands and wives do as they create reality of the society. To a great extent, this environment is responsible for the gender norms, values, beliefs, behaviour, and practices of the individual, as one learns to behave as the 'real man' or 'real woman' in accordance with one's assigned gender, and the men and women who do not conform to this 'real man/ real woman' category are often ostracised by society. These experiences thus constitute knowledge used by an individual to exist and survive in the community around him or her. "The environment provides the raw materials from which attitudes and knowledge of sex-typed behaviour and its consequences are drawn" (Fagot et al., 2000, p.65), even as the individual's capability is taken on board. Thus, to this theory society provides the ingredients of gender function. To this study the deduction made from the theory is that there seems to be no inherent truth about human behaviour and practices, it is all a culmination of constructions by society.

Feminism theorises that perpetration of marital rape is a means of social control and dominance of husbands over wives (Abbott et al., 2005; Russell, 2021). To this perspective, marital rape is patriarchy at work and is the worst version of husband cultural constructed domination and control over his wife. Feminism further posits that marital rape is "a grave wrong, often ignored and mischaracterized" socially and legally and one motivated by a quest for power and control

(Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2017, p.1) as men assert their dominance over their wives through despicable ways. Society tricks, cheats, and sometimes forces the wife into believing that that her duty is to sexually please the husband, and in so doing teaches the husband to be sexually aggressive and the wife submissive and passive. As the husband thus asserts his control over the wife, gender inequality and social stratification are brought on board. Of importance to this study is the deduction that can be drawn that in Zimbabwe, because of patriarchy, men and women are socialised into dichotomised gender specific behaviours that emphasize on male dominance and female invisibility especially in the bedroom.

Empirical review

Africa's Marital Rape Landscape

Marital rape is a choking societal menace which close to 15 per cent of married women experience (Martin et al., 2007) and worldwide is under reported (Banerjee & Rao 2022). Criminalization of marital rape started around 1970 in developed countries such as USA (Amnesty International, 2011; Martin et al, 2007) but in Africa it is a recent phenomenon. Roots of criminalization of marital rape in Africa can be traced to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights adopted in 1981 and entered into force in 1986. This instrument, which has overtones of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979), guarantees every woman the right to dignity and respect as a person, as well as protection from all forms of violence. Many African countries responded to this Charter by instituting new laws or amending existing laws to make explicit the forms of violence against women, marital rape included. Just to mention a few countries that criminalized marital rape: Sierra Leone through its Sexual Offences Amendment Act of 2019, Namibia through its law on Combating Rape, Lesotho in 2003 and South Africa in 1993 (Karimakwenda, 2020). However, other African countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, and Ethiopia (Awoniyi, 2011; Kolade-Faseyi, 2018; Ola & Ajayi, 2013) have out rightly maintained that marital rape occurs only out of wedlock as their cultural beliefs hold that a wife cannot withdraw consent for sex.

Zimbabwe Marital Rape Landscape

Zimbabwe went with the African states that criminalized marital rape. At sub regional level, Zimbabwe is signatory to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development which directs member states to review their laws to ensure justice and fairness of all. Zimbabwe reviewed its laws in apparent compliance with the African Charter and in direct response to the dictates of the SADC Protocol. This move was coupled by the general awakening, education, and knowledge about marital rape from human rights movements and feminist activism perspective. Zimbabwe criminalised marital rape when it passed the Sexual Offences Act in 2001 and further strengthened this by the passing of the Zimbabwe Domestic Violence Act in 2007, an Act that, among other things, set a standard setting framework for Zimbabwe through voiding all norms, traditions, values, customs and practices that infringe on the rights of women, married women included. The Zimbabwe

Domestic Violence Act is thus clearly a form of government participation and involvement in affecting and neutralising some archaic and gender discriminatory Zimbabwean practices. In that regard the Zimbabwe Domestic Violence Act and the subsequent setting up of an Anti-Domestic Violence Council to monitor implementation, although not exceptional, received its share of glory and hype. Zimbabwe has gone further to establish a section called Victim Friendly Unit within the Zimbabwe Republic Police to deal with issues of gender-based violence. However, even with all this, survivors of marital rape do not report (Tshili, 2020). Pursuant to this, the kernel of the current study is premised on providing significant insights into what could be done in Zimbabwe to alleviate the scourge of spousal rape because despite passing of laws that prohibit spousal rape, cases of this evil practice continue to escalate to unsustainably high levels (Zimbabwe Multiple Cluster Indicator Survey of 2019, as cited in Tshili, 2020)

Attitudes of the Zimbabwe Society to Marital Rape and its Criminalization.

Attitudes of Zimbabwe towards marital rape and its criminalization are similar to what prevails in most African countries (Chakamba, 2016; Home Office, 2017). These are attitudes of strong condemnation and opposition emanating from the African perceptions and opinions about marital rape. The Zimbabwe community holds views that by virtue of a wife agreeing to the marriage, the husband is entitled to sex throughout the marriage life, because the wife is now the husband's property. These attitudes are created, moulded, and nurtured by the cultural beliefs, values, norms, perceptions, and customary practices. This is why Home Office (2017) confidently posits that although the Zimbabwe law and human rights activists successfully advocated for the law on marital rape because of the devastating social and psychological effects, the attitudes of most Zimbabweans do not match the move. Because of this, even the law enforcement agents are not genuine about enforcement considering the crime as not 'real' rape (Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Monson 1998; Lambert 2022; Victoria 2023).

Status of Women in Zimbabwe

It is an undisputed fact that women in Zimbabwe are almost reaching parity levels with men in education and perform leading roles in industry and commerce, as well as participate favourably in government, civil society, health, and private sector. However, even as this progress has been registered, the social status of women remains critical (Home Office, 2017). Besides the rise in feminism and women's movement, black women as a group lag man in terms of status, prestige and cultural power and esteem. The ideology of patriarchy, tradition, and culture set the status of women at a low ebb despite their heightened education levels and quality. The nomenclature 'husband' is absolute power, not earned and respected power. This ideology has permeated the norms, values, and standard practices in Zimbabwe. It is this ideology that dictates wifely submission to husband. Even in this low social status, married women are generally regarded as more respectable and of higher cultural standing than the single, or divorced women.

Methodological framework

Research methodology

This is lived-experience research as twenty-four married women, whose full description is provided in this section, shared their lived experiences and perspectives of spousal rape. The researcher was the primary data gathering instrument as the study utilised the qualitative methodology of data collection and solicited data from the participants through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Eighteen women were interviewed from their offices, three from inside their parked cars, and the other three from inside the researcher's car. The women were formally employed for easy comparability, so interviews were conducted during their lunch break. The advantage of the semi structured interview was that it allowed room for probing to have a fuller story. In almost all the interviews, the wives only told their full story after probing. This instrument, thus, enabled extraction of the unique insider's view, perspective and understanding of the situation.

The 24 interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes each, and participation was voluntary via pre invitation. Interviews were held with the wives who had confirmed cases of marital rape. Eleven of these had reported their cases to a local social service non- governmental organisation which deals with gender-based violence in the Midlands city of Gweru, Zimbabwe, while thirteen were identified through snowballing,

Ethical Considerations

The issue under study was highly sensitive and it is for this reason that the following ethical considerations were undertaken to protect and serve the participants, as their being and safety was of primary concern (Kapp, 2006). Having acquired the members' contact details from the non-governmental organisation and accomplices, informed consent was sort, through telephoning. This was done to respect the autonomy of the participants. Consent was of participating in the study and to having the information published as a research article. Security concerns about the participants were considered and when contacting them during setting up appointments, care was taken to ascertain that researcher was speaking to the right person. The purpose of the study and the sort of questions to be asked were shared with the participants to avoid any deception about their involvement. Informing them about the sort of questions to be asked was taking care of possible cultural difference between the researcher and the participants. As the matter engaged in was so painfully and inflammatory intimate, privacy was of paramount importance, and for that, the interviews took place in safe, secure, and private environments. The pre-interview invitation considered the issue of the interview venue. Even as the participants were not anonymous to me, I had to protect their identities and personal information. Hence all names used in this study are pseudo. The anonymity was even from other participants in the same study and that's why even focus group interviews were never considered an option. The one-on-one interviews made the participants feel confident and comfortable as the information they were sharing remained confidential. This was critical for their safely and validity of the data.

Data Analysis Process

Views of Strauss and Corbin (1990) and McMillan and Schumacher (2006) on steps to follow when analysing qualitative data guided the analysis process. Data were collected and analysed concurrently. The first step on the journey of data analysis was the researcher transcribing the data audios. Independent thematic content collaboration analysis was employed in analyzing the data (Nowell et al, 2017). Independently, the researcher and another person who was well versed in qualitative data analysis, coded the collected data, and developed frames of analysis or categories from the coded data. The researcher and the data analysis collaborator formed categories which demarcated the data into segments. The two then compared, discussed, and agreed on the themes formed. The last step was establishing relationships between the formed themes and the research questions as all data that pertained to the same research question was knitted together. Hence, findings are presented according to the sub research questions.

Research findings and discussion

Situating the sample

All the 24 wives were gainfully employed, and none relied on the husband as sole bread winner (this also indicated that the husbands were all gainfully engaged) so the economy was not considered a significant factor. On this score this study denounces the claim made by the Chronicle of 14 November 2019 that economic factors are the major causes of marital rape in Zimbabwe. Again, all the women were practising Christians, so religion was not considered a factor. It is also important to point out that even though many Zimbabweans claim to be Christians, most still practise the African Traditional Religion (ATR) even as they claim to be Christians. It is also important to point out that neither the ATR nor Christianity in the least preaches gender equality.

In almost all the interviews, episodes of marital rape started at different durations in the women's marriages. The duration ranged from one month to 20 years. One reported rape encounter from day one of marriage, two after a month, two after two years, one after three years, three after three years, three after four years, three after five years, two after six years, one after seven years, two after 10 years, one after 13 years, two after 15 years and one after 20 years. Since the cases invariably covered these durations, duration in marriage when rape started was not considered a significant factor. The wives grew up from varied background locations within Zimbabwe -rural, growth point, small town and big town. Eight grew up in rural locations, six at growth point, five in small towns and five in big towns. The locations were not considered a factor as cases invariably covered all of them. None of the wives had not attained a descent level of education and so level of education was not considered a likely influencing factor. The age range of the wives was from 22 to 58 years. Four were aged within 20 to 29 years, eight within 30-39, a further eight within 40-49 and the last four within 50 – 59 years. Since cases covered all age ranges, age was not considered a significant factor.

Wives' views, of marital rape.

All the participants displayed a clear understanding of what marital rape is, intimating on the essential elements that consent is lost when the wife says 'no', and the husband uses his authority to have sex with her (Lambert 2022; Martin et al., 2007; Victoria 2023)

The wives described the quality of their marital sexual life as terrorising (23/24), stinking (12/24), traumatising (24/24), frightening (20/24) and toxic (22/24). They further described their psycho-emotional experiences as frustrating (18/24), depressing (24/24), stressful (16/24), hurting (19/24) and hateful (8/24). Mildred said:

To say the least my sexual life is disgusting, traumatizing, frustrating as I feel helpless. To the outside world it looks okay, but we are strangers in the bedroom. I am a prisoner in this marriage. I feel suffocated and overwhelmingly terrorised. I cannot breathe. [Mildred, 30 years in marriage, rural bred]

Even as she (Mildred) tried to put up a brave face, her voice betrayed the pain of her experiences. Mandy held the same feeling about her sexual life in marriage.

My bedroom experiences are stinking, depressing, and frightening. I have learnt to keep my mouth shut in these deep waters; else I will say what I shouldn't say. I let it go and say no more because he doesn't see how annoying his bedroom behaviour is. I choose to hurt myself, but I do not think this is going to last. [Mandy, three years in marriage, growth point bred,]

Feelings expressed by these 2 women affirm the observation by Victoria (2023) that the pain and agony caused by marital rape when one is raped by husband is equally severe. From the studied women, the pain appeared even worse. Some of the wives seemed to have given up on themselves as evidenced by some of their expressions such as "I am a prisoner in this marriage". More self-defeating were expressions such as "I let it go and say no mor". Mandy's stance of 'keeping her mouth shut' to maintain peace revealed that she did not actually have peace within herself as evidenced by her teary eyes and emotions that choked her voice. Possibly she kept quiet and accepted all that was on her path with passivity and non-violence to avoid or avert further trouble. As observed by Home Office (2017) with situations such as Mandy found herself in, the cost of reaction and confrontation maybe heavier than compliance. This could be the reason Mandy complied. In keeping peace, it turns out that the woman was starting a war inside herself as she latter declared "I chose to hurt myself," affirming what Filip (2021) and Agarwal et al. (2022) said that rape whether by a stranger or a spouse has negative psycho-social impact.

Two wives reported physical pain that resulted in cracking of their private parts. None of the two considered seeking clinical treatment as they feared stigma. The stigma is a culmination of cultural expectations. Culture here provided the raw materials for stigma (Fagot et al., 2000). What Armstrong (1990) observed is still valid more than 20 years later that rape is a way that men express their power over their wives, a power that stems from the unequal social status of men and women.

Asked whether they thought their husbands took encounters of coerced sex as rape, two of the women said “no” while the other 22 were of the feeling that their husbands were in full knowledge that they were committing an act of rape. Why the husbands took pleasure in their wives’ pain resonate with feminist thought about patriarchy. Men denigrate and degrade their wives as a way of asserting their dominance even through despicable ways (Victoria 2023). The portrayal here is that sex is not something to be enjoyed but as Victoria (2023) says, it is something just to put with. The two who said “no” pointed to culture having no room for rape in marriage. Both these women went further to cite how their Christian religion considered the wife’s prime duty as that of providing sexual services to her husband and so were convinced that their husbands did not consider it rape but ‘enjoying an entitlement’.

On why they thought their husbands raped them, all the 22 women believed that culture, religion, and socialisation had a fair share of the blame, pointing to how the three have naturalised and normalised the wrongful invasion of the wives’ dignity, through manipulating and turning the women into sex slaves in the guise of ‘real and cultured wives’.

Factors hindering or favouring wives sharing of their predicament.

Choked with their experiences of marital rape 16/24 of the wives shared their problem with others, two shared with their husbands’ relatives, 10 shared with their own relatives, while four shared with their friends. These sixteen wives expressed mixed feelings and reactions from their confidants. Three of them reported of sympathetic ears. These had confided in their friends. They reported that their friends had counselled them and advised them to seek help from a local non-governmental organisation that deals with gender-based violence. One of these three was further advised to report the violence to the police. This wife who was advised to report to the police admitted to being physically battered for resisting by her husband. The other 13 reported that they did not receive support from their confidants but were instead castigated and their complaints dismissed as petty and unwarranted. This lot included those who had confided in their husbands’ uncles and in their aunts. One of them had this to say:

She told me that I had no issue as my body is owned and inhibited by my husband. She further my refusal would force my husband into extra marital affairs. There are women out there who never say no. Leave the matrimonial home. Where on earth have you heard of a wife complaining of rape by a husband who paid lobola? Did he not say to “To have and to hold from this day forward” and we clapped hands. What culture is that one?’ That’s the first and last I brought my bedroom challenges to her. (Lina, urban bred, five years in marriage and had rape encounters from a year in marriage.)

Another respondent who had confided in her aunt reported an almost similar response. The aunt sounded shell-shocked to hear of intentions to report own husband for rape.

My aunt held a dismissive attitude to my plight and complaint of rape. She viewed me as unfit of society’s framework of moral wife when I told her that I wanted to report my husband to the police. She would hear none of that. She declared that she was going to disown me. I am trapped as I am now a prisoner in this marriage. Coerced sex is all

what I know. (Leah, rural bred, two years in marriage and had rape encounters from first month of marriage)

The reactions of the aunts resonate well with Kolade-Faseyi (2018)'s observation that women who do not fit society's framework of moral wives are demonised even by their own people. From the excerpt, Leah's aunt considered it culturally irreconcilable and morally improper for a woman to report her husband to the police, resonates with what Ola and Ajayi (2013) observed that wives who violated the expected norms are found not to be malleable with the definition of 'a real wife'. Furthermore, the responses of the aunts show the depth of patriarchal perceptions of women from whom counsel is often sort. This could be the sort of cases and situations referred to by Home Office (2017) where patriarchy recruits other women as honorary members whose task is to convey patriarchal demands and decisions to fellow women. Judging from the oral reports given by the wives, their aunts held rigid views of masculinity, an indication of how patriarchy has reasserted itself in Zimbabwe. The aunts' responses showed that the wives were considered not to have sexual autonomy. The aunt's remark resonates with the cultural expectation of feeding the husband at his demand. With such attitudes husbands are turned into sex masters almost the very same way the behaviourist psychologists such as Ivan Pavlov, Edward Thorndike, John Watson, and Burrhus F. Skinner talk of behaviour acquisition through conscious and unconscious conditioning (Hambulo et al., 2012) who view their wives not as partners but sex slaves. Observably, the aunts' expectations deprived the wives of their assertiveness and intelligence. Culture, as seen from the aunts' responses, has it that the wife should meet her husband's sexual needs regardless of her own feelings. It thus can be argued that while the law validates marital rape, culture invalidated the experiences of marital rape. Within Zimbabwe, marriage is perceived as an achievement and pride, not only by the married woman, but to her whole clan, (Chireshe & Chireshe, 2010) which enjoys the lobola (bride price), (Chabata, 2012). It is the lobola practice that gives the husband unlimited rights over the wife (Chiweshe, 2016). Hence, this system of patriarchy, through its gatekeepers, incapacitated the wives' capabilities and agency. Such support systems feel that marital rape can become a phenomenon that destabilises the marriage institution.

The eight wives who did not confide, said they felt shy (two), embarrassed (three), and feared the stigma (three). The feelings as experienced by the wives in this study concur with what Kilpatrick et al., (1992) established when they were reporting about rape in America to the nation. Their study revealed that feelings of shame, and stigma more than anything prevented married women from reporting, let alone sharing with others. The 'shame' emanated from the prohibitive environment when it comes to tolerance of marital rape. The conversation with teary-eyed Maidei confirms this.

As a woman you are always told that you should not discuss your bedroom issues with people, but at the end, it comes back to you. Darn it! I will share my story, not for myself but for other women. And even though I am crying, (she wiped off tears as she continued with her narration) it is the truth that brings me to tears. It is not a weakness that I am crying, but the weakness is what I have been, when I was not sharing and talking. My tears are my liquid prayer. Those that are married and have a sexual

relationship such as mine are finished. It is only these who can understand how I am feeling in my heart. Only those going through what you are going through know how you feel. The taste of the pudding is in the eating. Who feels it knows it. [Maidei, urban bred, 12 years in marriage and had rape encounters from the fourth year of her marriage.]

This interview took place at the centre where she had just reported her husband. The tears, I believe were part of her release project, as she was evacuating all her anger, pain, and hurtful feelings as she was seemingly opening her mouth amid what one could call fire.

Why wives stayed put in sex-coerced marriages.

Conversations with the wives revealed that they stayed put in the sex coerced marriages mainly because of wanting to belong and fearing being rejected by society.

Tongues wage if you report your hub and that makes me ashamed to speak out. Don't you know that leaving your marriage or reporting your husband brings dishonour to self and family? But a time always come when enough is enough. (Chipo, urban-bred, 18 years in marriage and had endured marital rape for almost 10years]

These were exactly the feelings expressed by Tineyi who said:

Those around you make you feel an awkward and inferior type of a wife; clearly doubting your mental correctness and sanity if you complain about the husband's bedroom habits. [Tineyi, growth point bred, seven years in marriage and had rape encounters for the past two years.]

Almost corroborating Chipo and Tineyi's experiences, Mavis spoke about her aunt who referred her to the biblical Proverbs 14:1. Said Mavis:

When I shared my rape encounter experiences and resultantly my intention to leave the marriage, my aunt looked me in the face as if I had said blasphemy. After a big sigh she only said I am the foolish woman referred to in Proverbs 14:1 who tears her own home down. She ended with a question where on earth have you heard about a woman who claims that she is raped by her matrimonial husband? Does he not have authority over you? [Mavis, rural bred, 19 years in marriage, and had endured marital rape for the past 10years]

Tarisai shared the same rebuke from her aunt and friend when she mooted the idea of wanting to report her husband to the church elders.

Weighing in on the same issue, Miriam had this to say.

Society makes one believe that women who are not married or deprive their husbands of sexual favours are incomplete. When you leave marriage for this reason even your close relatives distance themselves from you. You are treated as those with leprosy during Jesus's time. They make you question the moral rights of your action. You are exiled from them. In the end I forced myself to assimilate to marital rape which my

conscience was rejecting. I am here now sitting next to myself and not as myself. I need a break. I need a rest. [Miriam, rural bred, 36years marriage]

Miriam's comments are a revelation of the silent aspects of marital rape. When issues get to the point that Miriam has reached, marital rape will now be beyond societal menace but escalated to a health issue as psychological pain is imminent (Victoria, 2023). Responding to a question- 'Do you feel safe in your marriage?' Miriam declared: "Physically yes but mentally no. The mind is never safe, but who sees the mind. That is the beauty of it because even my children don't sense anything."

Indeed, the views of Miriam were the views of 21 others who felt the same insecurity but were comforted by the fact that their husbands were "not violent on other things." (Marian). Marian narrated how her once very romantic husband had turned into a cold-blooded rapist and how she too had become a good hider of the negative feelings.

My husband does not resemble the deranged sociopath depicted in horror films. He is very liked by my family members and even by his family and relatives. He has a very pleasant outward appearance but a very cold bedroom one. In a way this has also taught me to have a divorced public and private life. Publicly I have become a good hider of negative feelings as I have now become accustomed to marital rape. I am trapped with nowhere to go at my age [Marian, rural bred, 22 years in marriage and enduring rape for the past 15years]

They thought that their situation might turn around and recover.

Interventions proffered by the wives.

Responding directly to what they thought could be done to alleviate the menace of marital rape, the sexually battered wives were all of the view that the whole community's vision, core values and passion need to be in alignment in the way they approach marital rape.

Observation was that most of the wives apparently looked to social intervention rather than protection from the law, even as all of them were aware that there is a law on marital rape. It would appear that this had to do with cultural reasons. Conversations with them revealed that they did so mainly out of the knowledge that the rapist was husband to them and also father of the children. (All the 24 wives were mothers). All put together this could have an impact on the children, the family name, and the relationship, not to forget the social stigma, societal ridicule, and blame. To these wives, recourse to social intervention would bring better results than the legal system. However, this is one of the reasons, probably the greatest one, which makes dealing with the issue of marital rape tricky in Zimbabwe. A law can only be applied if the reporting side takes the initiative. This is why this study is strongly of the view that formal law cannot on its own and by its own create changes to the menace of marital rape. What is of critical importance is a transformation of social attitudes, norms and practices. Without this social transformation, the legislative framework may not meaningfully and significantly change the status grid for the wives.

Again, the wives were calling for setting up of close-by counselling and healing centres. The women all claimed not to have such structures within their residential locations, so had to travel to the city centre for the services.

Conclusion

Unreservedly, conversations with the wives registered hostile bedroom climates. The general conclusion supported by the study was that the wives had convergent opinions and experiences of marital rape as a patriarchal ideology and a tactic by their husbands to uphold masculinity. Reporting of marital rape was undermined by an atmosphere of shaming and stigmatisation, highly attributable to culture and socialisation.

Recommendations

Based on the experiences of the 24 wives, the study provides portable recommendations for combating the menace of marital rape. Zengenene and Susanti (2019) suggest that the government of Zimbabwe gets committed to the cause, while Njovana and Watts (1996) felt that a solution lies on collaboration between the government and non-governmental organisation but both studies centre on a victim focused intervention. This is where this study makes a departure. While the researcher agrees that it is prudent to prioritize the more marginalized sex groups, it is not only the women that need fixing, but the “deeply entrenched systems of gender inequality that structure... society more broadly” (Ryan 2008, p.15), hence what is required are structural solutions because the women are “responding to very real cultural and normative barriers that exclude them” (ibid). Focus should squarely be tilted on the perpetrator and the community in which the victim and perpetrator reside, thus disputing what Robertson (2019) expresses that by empowering married women, social norms surrounding gender-bade violence will change. The view of this study is that it takes the whole community to fight GBV and marital rape. The community is the grassroot and its influence cannot be ignored or neglected. A men will not rape his wife not because the Zimbabwe law precludes but because the community precludes him. The approach of only empowering women maybe the reason why we are where we are. In view of this, this researcher recommends a value re-examining intervention in the form of a comprehensive three-pronged empowerment package as the best way forward to ameliorate the challenge of marital rape in Zimbabwe. The three prongs are targeted towards the husbands, wives, and community at large. The aim is to move the human conscience of the husbands (as perpetrators), the wives (as the survivors of violence) and every member the community so that the normality of doing things is changed. These three groups of people need to re-think and change in order to build a new frame of a wife, a husband and a community which is not tolerant of marital rape.

The question is: who can work with these groups of the population? There are several organisations in Zimbabwe with capacity to protect and take care of the needs of the raped women that can be lobbied to kickstart developing and delivering strategies that can combat spousal sexual abuse and provide life-saving post violence services to survivors of the violence in the country. The ones most relevant to this study include:

- a) Women Action Group, a non-governmental organisation whose focus is on empowering women and girls to enjoy their rights and runs programs on prevention of women abuse.
- b) Musasa Project, an organisation which works towards eradication of gender-based violence and changing harmful attitudes, beliefs, behaviours.
- c) Zimbabwe women lawyers' association, which focuses on creation of an equitable justice system.
- d) Zimbabwe lawyers for human rights, which fosters a culture of human rights, their growth and enhancement.
- e) Katswe Sisterhood, which fights for attainment of sexual and reproductive rights.
- f) Padare- Enkundleni, a men's forum on gender which offers support with economic empowerment and other interventions to survivors of gender-based violence.
- g) Men Engage Country Network, which fights for the rights of all groups.
- h) Zimbabwe #HeForShe Campaign Group which provides a range of services such as counselling, medical and legal help.

The mentioned groups operate in the city covered by the study. These organisations can communicate with policy makers and implementers for change to take place.

Areas of empowerment focus with the groups.

The wives: It is clear from the findings that the wives found treatment by their husbands in the bedroom degrading, callous and servitude. It was also observed that the wives were raised to hide their true emotions as some spoke with forced smiles on their faces yet admitting that behind the scenes, they experienced bedroom difficulties. To this group, the empowerment package should be in the form of psycho-social support that at the same time acts as knowledge and political information necessary for personal empowerment. The psycho-social support is needed given the traumatic impact of sexual violence some wives reported to have experienced. The personal empowerment should rid the wives of their timidity and reduced confidence levels thus enabling them to stand their ground, exercise their right and increase their capacity to bargain. Once they are empowered to know that they have a voice, they will report (Robertson 2019). The knowledge gained should enable the wives to live their deepest hearts' desires. The confidence of these women needs to be tilted from facing down to facing up.

The husbands: Indeed, much of the studies on rape have concentrated on the abused only, but the view of the raped wives, which this researcher also tags on, is coming up with the batterer mediation intervention program, hence the recommendation for husbands' empowerment. The empowerment package should stimulate self-introspection of the husbands, leading to their discarding of archaic behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs of viewing wives' duty as to sexually please the husband on his time and demand. The empowerment package should end up with the husbands seeing a new direction in the bedroom, a move from imposition to proposition and from coercion to consensus. There must be creation of new mind-set in the husbands. Mind-set is the city of one's conscience, and the conscience is the mother of one's basic values, knowledge, and beliefs of what one regards as good or bad, appropriate, or

inappropriate, proper, or improper, fitting or unfitting, right or wrong, acceptable, or unacceptable. The behaviour is a derivative of one's conscience.

To these two groups, empowerment is self-consciousness. It is important for these two groups to domesticate the empowerment gained so that they realise self-worth and self-belief and looking inwards so that when they look outwards to the community, they will not be a vacuous state of nothingness. but supplementing a stable solid foundation.

Community: The community is central to any recovery and preventative strategy. Husbands and wives stay with people around and it is these that weave invisible nets in them. To this group of people, the package should be in the form of increased public education, aimed at shifting societal reasoning and ridding the communities of archaic cultural beliefs and attitudes regarding wives as less worthy protection. It is this group of people who should reconfigure thinking. There must be heightened advocacy, training and knowledge of sexual rights and statues so that community members reconfigure their thinking. For there to be universal intolerance to marital rape, the training should encourage reporting marital rape because the law can only be applied if people report. For any law to be implemented, the demand side should not mute. It takes time for a change of culture, but the time to act is now.

Related to this is the need to set up satellite gender-based-violence offices in the urban suburbs so that wives do not travel long distances to access the reporting and counselling services. At these satellite offices, the consultation room should offer privacy required in receiving complaints of marital rape. Lack of such offices in the suburbs in which the wives stayed made them travel to the 'one-stop-centre' in the central business district. Setting up of satellite centres cannot happen accidentally, it needs to and has to be invested into by the government, non-governmental organizations and well-wishers. It is also advisable to have a lawyer readily available to provide free legal advice and legal assistance. Also, when reports by the wives or any other community member are made, the wives and the community members need the assurance that their voices are listened to.

From the study findings

Limitations and future directions

Although the study comprised voices of only 24 wives in a city in Zimbabwe (hence cannot be generalised to other areas), it is indeed a window towards further understanding how women in Zimbabwe enduring marital rape feel about their situation. Understandably there is no way intricacies of marriage can be fully and wholly captured through the 45 - 60 minutes' interviews, but notwithstanding this, the time was enough to perfectly capture the participants' views, emotions, insecurities, distress, pains, burdens, hopelessness, helplessness, hopes and dreams were captured.

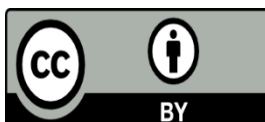
The study concentrated only on urban women. There may be need to duplicate the study in rural areas.

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