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HOW DIFFERENT FORMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHAPE MEN'S RESPONSES: UNPACKING THE HIDDEN DYNAMICS OF MALE VICTIMHOOD IN KIGAMBONI, TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

Domestic violence against men remains underreported, with male victims often lacking institutional support and facing barriers to disclosure. This paper examined how men in Kigamboni, Tanzania, respond to physical, sexual, financial, and psychological forms of domestic violence, and whether the type of abuse influences their specific responses. A cross-sectional design was employed utilizing a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from 133 male victims with qualitative data from focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Binary logistic regression was used to determine whether the type of violence predicted men's responses, including retaliation, secrecy, reporting, relationship termination, and seeking another partner. Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data. Results show that sexual violence significantly predicted relationship termination ($\beta = 0.292$, $p < 0.05$), infidelity ($\beta = 0.307$, $p < 0.01$), withholding financial support ($\beta = 0.288$, $p < 0.05$), and retaliatory violence ($\beta = 0.346$, $p < 0.01$). Verbal/psychological abuse reduced the likelihood of seeking another partner ($\beta = -0.13$, $p < 0.05$), while financial abuse increased help-seeking from religious leaders ($\beta = 0.205$, $p < 0.05$). Formal reporting to police or social welfare was rare. Qualitative findings revealed that men's responses were shaped by social expectations, emotional strain, and the need to preserve identity and control. The study concluded that men's responses to domestic violence vary depending on the form of abuse and are influenced by masculinity norms. The findings highlighted the importance of recognizing male victimization and developing context-specific support mechanisms.

Keywords: Male Victims, Domestic Violence, Responses, Help-Seeking Behaviour, Masculinity Norms.

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence against men (DVAM) is a pervasive global issue affecting individuals across various racial, socio-economic, religious, and cultural backgrounds (Khan & Ratele, 2020). Despite its widespread prevalence, male victimization within intimate partner relationships remains significantly underreported and marginalized in both academic research and policy discussions. While violence against women has gained significant attention in academic literature and legal frameworks, the experiences of male victims continue to be overlooked (Kolbe & Büttner, 2020). Consequently, male victims are often left without tailored services or legal frameworks that address their unique needs. This lack of institutional recognition and societal support leads to a situation where male victims not only suffer abuse

but also experience the added burden of social stigmatization for acknowledging their victimization (Enakele, 2019). As a result, men are subjected to a complex intersection of victimization and marginalization, making their experiences invisible in a discourse that predominantly focuses on female victims. Research has shown that domestic violence against men is a global issue and a growing concern that warrants more focused attention, particularly in diverse cultural contexts (Jayes, 2023; Machado *et al.*, 2017). However, male victimization is often minimized due to gendered perceptions of masculinity, where men are expected to be strong, dominant, and impervious to abuse (Khan & Arendse, 2021). These societal norms contribute significantly to the underreporting of male victimization; as societal attitudes generally perceive men as inherently less vulnerable to abuse. This framework diminishes the recognition of male experiences and contributes to victim-blaming, reinforcing stereotypes that invalidate their pain and suffering. As a result, men often endure psychological stigma, feeling isolated and unable to share their experiences due to the fear of ridicule, disbelief, or emasculation, further silencing their voices in discussions on domestic violence (Walker *et al.*, 2020).

The absence of a gender-inclusive legal framework in many countries exacerbates the challenges male victims face (Chiganga, 2020). Legal frameworks, such as the sexual offence act of 1998 in Tanzania, while offering protections to women and children, fail to address the specific needs of male victims. These laws primarily focus on protecting women and children, leaving male victims to navigate a legal landscape that does not recognize their vulnerability (Chiganga, 2020; Athumani & Munishi, 2022). On one hand, the National Gender Policy of 2023 outlines a commitment to eliminating gender-based violence but fails to acknowledge male victims within its implementation strategies (National Gender Policy, 2023). While on the other the National Plan of Action to End Violence Against Women and Children (NPA VAWC II 2024/25 – 2028/29) presents a framework aiming at addressing the critical issues of violence affecting women and children in Tanzania, the plan's scope predominantly centres on women and children. This focused approach is understandable, given the disproportionate burden of violence borne by women and children globally and within Tanzania. The plan effectively outlines strategies for prevention, protection, and response services tailored to these groups. However, a notable area for potential expansion lies in the explicit recognition and inclusion of male victims of domestic violence, particularly adult men, within the national response framework. Although the plan acknowledges boys as victims of violence, it does not specifically address adult men who may also experience domestic or intimate partner violence. Given emerging global evidence on the presence of male victims and the importance of inclusive support systems, future plans may benefit from integrating provisions that ensure all survivors of domestic violence, irrespective of gender, have access to appropriate services and support.

This legal oversight reflects the broader societal reluctance to acknowledge men as victims of domestic violence and highlights the enduring influence of traditional masculinity ideals that frame men as perpetrators rather than victims of domestic violence (Hines *et al.*, 2022; Karystianis *et al.*, 2024; Mligo, 2021). The lack of legal recognition further marginalizes male victims, reinforcing their invisibility and disempowerment in seeking justice and support. Despite growing recognition of DVAM in the global discourse, there remains a significant gap in research on how male victims cope with domestic violence and respond to victimization, particularly in the absence of institutional support and tailored services. Existing literature often overlooks the psychological and sociocultural barriers that prevent men from seeking help or reporting abuse (Mligo, 2021; Garro *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, the practical challenges male victims face, particularly in the absence of gender-sensitive services and legal protections, remain poorly understood. The existing body of research fails to adequately capture how men navigate these challenges, especially when there is a lack of tailored services or institutional

support. The inadequacy of research on help-seeking behaviours further complicates the problem, as male victims are often left to deal with the trauma in silence, unable to access the resources they need to heal and recover (Brooks *et al.*, 2020).

Men's help-seeking behaviours in response to domestic violence have been shaped by a wide array of internal and external factors, including societal perceptions of masculinity, institutional barriers, and personal coping mechanisms. A significant body of literature reveals that male victims are more likely to seek informal help from family and friends, rather than from formal support systems such as law enforcement or social service organizations (Bates, 2019; Hines *et al.*, 2022). This preference for informal support is often driven by the stigma surrounding male victimhood, whereby men internalize societal norms that equate masculinity with strength and emotional resilience, making it difficult for them to acknowledge their victimization publicly. Studies have found that the fear of being disbelieved, ridiculed, or emasculated discourages men from seeking professional help, particularly when they perceive formal support systems to be unsympathetic or biased toward female victims (Huntley *et al.*, 2020; Tsui, 2020). Men may also feel isolated in their experiences, as they often believe no other men are facing similar challenges, compounding feelings of embarrassment and shame (Bates, 2019; Moore, 2021). This isolation leads male victims to endure their abuse in silence, either because they feel there is no available support or because they fear the social consequences of seeking help (Dixon *et al.*, 2020; Machado *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, male victims often believe that there are no resources available to help them or that the resources that do exist are primarily designed for female and children victims (Machado *et al.*, 2017; Huntley *et al.*, 2019). Despite this belief, men experiencing high-severity abuse may still attempt to reach out for support, even if they doubt the ability of services to offer a fully supportive response. However, when men face unsupportive responses from service providers, it often leads to a further reluctance to seek help in the future, reinforcing cycles of isolation, silence and underreporting (Douglas & Hines, 2011; Huntley *et al.*, 2020). This is particularly concerning in contexts like Tanzania where existing domestic violence support services are predominantly designed for female and child victims, further marginalizing male victims who may be unaware of available services or reluctant to use them (Mligo, 2021).

Although domestic violence perpetrated by women against men has significant social and real-life consequences, it remains largely under recognized in the discourse surrounding domestic violence. Legislative frameworks, criminal justice professionals, social service agencies, policymakers, and community workers worldwide have predominantly framed domestic violence as a phenomenon in which men are the sole perpetrators and women the sole victims. Consequently, interventions have primarily been structured and promoted to support and protect women, often neglecting the needs and experiences of male victims (Khan & Arendse, 2021). Despite existing evidence of male victimization in domestic violence, Tanzania, like many other countries, lacks formal institutional support systems tailored to male victims of domestic violence perpetrated by women. As a result, men experiencing domestic violence are left to cope with their abuse independently, without access to the necessary resources or assistance. It is against this background that this paper was written to fill in the critical understanding gap through addressing the following research questions: What do male victims of female perpetrated domestic violence do when they face abuse? How do men respond to victimization in the face of societal stigma and the absence of legal and policy protections? The paper also analyses the coping strategies employed by male victims in Kigamboni Municipality, focusing on how they respond to various forms of violence, particularly physical, sexual, financial, and verbal/psychological violence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: GENDER ROLE STRAIN THEORY (GRST)

The Gender Role Strain Theory (GRST), developed by Joseph H. Pleck in the early 1980s, offers a framework to understand the psychological distress men experience when they fail to meet societal expectations of masculinity. According to GRST, masculinity is not an inherent trait but a socially constructed set of norms that dictate how men should behave, think, and feel. These expectations encompass traits such as dominance, emotional stoicism, financial independence, and sexual competence (Pleck, 1995). GRST argues that when men cannot fulfil these prescribed roles due to various life circumstances, such as financial dependence, emotional neglect, or sexual rejection, they experience gender role strain. This strain can manifest in psychological distress, frustration, stress, and lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms such as aggression, emotional suppression, or dysfunctional relationship behaviours (Pleck, 1995). GRST has been instrumental in understanding how rigid gender norms can adversely affect men's mental health and behaviour, often exacerbating their vulnerability in domestic violence contexts. Acosta *et al.* (2020) expanded on Pleck's foundational work by examining how these gender expectations contribute to men's experiences with domestic violence against men (DVAM), particularly in contexts where men are victims rather than perpetrators.

This paper adopted the Gender Role Strain Theory (GRST) as a framework to explain how gender role expectations shape men's responses to domestic violence. GRST posits that societal norms surrounding masculinity, such as emotional suppression, dominance, control, and invulnerability, creates psychological strain when men are unable or unwilling to meet these expectations (Pleck, 1995). In response, men adopt coping mechanisms that either reflect or resist these norms. Some remain silent about their experiences of abuse, reflecting cultural expectations that men should endure hardship without expressing vulnerability. Others respond in ways aligned with dominant masculine ideals, such as asserting control or withdrawing emotionally or financially, as expressions of power and autonomy (Acosta *et al.*, 2020). GRST emphasizes that perceived threats to masculinity, particularly in intimate relationships, often provoke responses aimed at reinforcing or restoring masculine identity. This aligns with Moore's (2021) argument that when traditional male roles are challenged, men engage in behaviours that reassert their sense of control and dominance. Framing male responses to domestic violence within GRST allows for an understanding of the social and psychological pressures that influence men's behaviour in intimate partner contexts.

Furthermore, GRST provides a framework for understanding men's financial and sexual behaviours within abusive relationships. The theory suggests that the masculine ideal of the provider is deeply tied to household authority, where financial control becomes a symbol of dominance and respect (Andrews *et al.*, 2020). In this context, men who perceive a threat to their role or authority may use financial decisions as a means of asserting or regaining power. At the same time, societal expectations often compel men to maintain their provider role regardless of personal hardship, reinforcing the notion that masculinity is measured by the ability to financially sustain a household. GRST also links masculinity to sexual success and validation (Acosta *et al.*, 2020). When sexual rejection or emotional neglect is perceived as a threat to masculine identity, men may engage in behaviours aimed at restoring their sense of dominance or desirability. This aligns with Moore's (2021) argument that perceived threats to masculinity often result in actions designed to reinforce traditional male identity and status, particularly within intimate relationships.

Despite its usefulness in explaining men's responses to abuse, GRST has limitations. One major critique is that GRST focuses primarily on psychological strain and does not fully address external barriers that may shape men's ability to respond to abuse. For example, GRST does not sufficiently explain why men are less likely to report abuse to formal institutions such as the police or social welfare offices. While the theory highlights shame and masculinity norms

as barriers to disclosure, it does not account for institutional biases, lack of male-specific support services, or legal challenges that may discourage men from reporting DVAM (Wong & Mellor, 2014). GRST remains a relevant theoretical framework for understanding men's responses to domestic violence despite its limitations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study on which this paper is based employed a cross-sectional research design and a mixed-methods approach to examine how male victims of domestic violence respond to abuse in Kigamboni Municipality. The cross-sectional design was selected to capture relationships between key variables, enabling a broad snapshot of male victims' experiences and responses to abuse within a defined time frame. The mixed-methods approach combined quantitative and qualitative data to provide a holistic understanding of the research problem. Quantitative data were analysed using statistical methods to assess patterns in help-seeking behaviour and coping mechanisms among male victims. From the data that were collected, trends in how men respond to abuse, such as seeking formal help or relying on informal support systems, were identified. Qualitative data, obtained through focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs), added depth by exploring the social, psychological, and cultural influences that shape men's responses, providing context to the quantitative findings. The analysis was integrated in such a way that the quantitative data informed the broader trends in help-seeking behaviours, while the qualitative data provided a deeper understanding of the motivations behind these behaviours. The integrated analysis combined the strengths of both methods, allowing the qualitative data to illuminate and contextualize the findings from the quantitative analysis. This approach provided a more nuanced interpretation of the numbers and trends, explaining not only what men do in response to abuse but also why they act in certain ways, thus enriching the interpretation of the quantitative results. This combination of methods strengthened the study by providing a more complete picture of male victims' responses, ensuring that the findings were not only statistically significant but also contextually rich, enhancing both validity and reliability (Creswell, 2015).

Study Area

The study was conducted in Kigamboni Municipality which is located in Dar es Salaam Region. The district covers 578.3 square kilometres and is divided into seven wards: Kigamboni, Kaskazini, Kibada, Vijibweni, Kimbiji, Somangila and Mjimwema. Established in 2015 under Government Notice No. 512 and operationalized in 2016 (URT, 2021), Kigamboni is an urban municipality, home to a diverse population spanning various ethnicities, professions, and socioeconomic backgrounds. As the area continues to grow, the persistence of traditional gender norms, rooted in patriarchal ideals, influences the social fabric of the area, making it an important site for studying male victims of domestic violence. The presence of domestic violence against men (DVAM) remains largely unaddressed due to the stigmatization of male victimhood. Societal expectations in Kigamboni and similar urban areas in Tanzania, typically position men as providers and protectors, making it difficult for male victims to acknowledge abuse without contradicting these deeply embedded ideals of masculinity. This cultural barrier often prevents men from seeking help or disclosing their experiences of violence. Moreover, while organizations like SHIWACHANDO (*Shirika la Wanaume Wanaopitia Changamoto Kwenye Ndoa*, i.e., Association of Men Experiencing Challenges in their Marriages) offer critical support services for male victims of domestic violence, the overall lack of targeted services and legal recognition for male victims of domestic violence makes Kigamboni a focal point for examining how social stigma and gendered power dynamics affect men's responses to abuse. This paper, therefore, explores the challenges faced by male

victims in Kigamboni and the ways in which their responses are shaped by entrenched societal attitudes.

Sampling Procedures and Sample Size

Yamane's (1967) formula was used to determine the sample size of 133 respondents from a population of 200 male victims registered with SHIWACHANDO. This sample size was deemed adequate as it represented over 66% of the target population and met the minimum requirements for statistical analysis. The following are the calculations for sample size:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2} \dots \dots \dots [1]$$

Where:

n = sample size,

N = Total population (200), and

e = Margin error of 5%.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Therefore, } n &= \frac{200}{1 + (200 * 0.05 * 0.05)} \\ &= 133.33 \end{aligned}$$

The study employed the simple random sampling technique using the lottery method to select participants from the pool of eligible male victims of domestic violence. Simple random sampling was chosen because it ensures that each eligible participant had an equal probability of inclusion, enhancing the representativeness of the sample and minimizing bias in the selection process (Creswell, 2015; Fink, 2013). This method is widely used in research to ensure that every member of the target population has a fair chance of being included, thus improving the generalizability of the study's findings. A list of all male victims who met the study's criteria was obtained from SHIWACHANDO records. Each individual in the list was assigned a unique identification number. The numbers were transcribed onto separate slips of paper, which were thoroughly mixed in a container. Participants were then selected randomly through the lottery draw, and those whose identification numbers were drawn were invited to participate in the study. Every time a participant was selected, their slip was returned to the container to ensure that each individual had an equal probability of being selected on subsequent draws. The sample size of 133 participants was achieved through this process, which aligns with standard guidelines for sample size selection (Yamane, 1967). This approach minimized selection bias and ensured that all eligible individuals in the study population had a fair opportunity to participate, thereby enhancing the validity and representativeness of the findings (Cohen *et al.*, 2018).

Data Analysis

The collected quantitative data were analysed to compute frequencies and percentages (descriptive statistics). Furthermore, inferential analysis, particularly binary logistic regression, was done, as given by Agresti (2002), to determine influence of forms of domestic violence on chances of male victims' response to the violence they went through. Binary logistic regression was chosen due to its ability to model the relationship between a binary dependent variable (in this case men's responses: Yes = 1, No = 0) and multiple independent variables, specifically the forms of abuse. This method enabled the researcher to understand the likelihood of different responses to violence, based on predictors such as physical, sexual, financial, and psychological violence. The dependent variable was men's responses whereby eight statements were asked to understand whether men abuse women in retaliation, report to friends and families, report to

religious leaders, report to police/social welfare, keep it a secret, end the relationship, stop providing for the family, and/or go for another partner. The response was either Yes (1) or No (0). Independent variables were forms of domestic violence, particularly physical, sexual, financial, verbal/psychological violence, which were measured at the scale level in terms of scores on index scales which were created from several questions per each form of violence. For example, physical violence comprised six statements of whether men were slapped, pushed, got objects thrown at him, beaten, burned or kicked whereby the respondents were supposed to respond 1 = Not at all, 2 = Very rarely, and 3 = Always. The scores that were obtained from the scale were summed up. The highest possible score was 18 points (i.e. $6 \times 3 = 18$); 12 was the mid score (i.e. $6 \times 2 = 12$); and the lowest possible score was 6 (i.e. $6 \times 1 = 6$). The second was sexual violence about which five statements were asked which needed to uncover whether women withheld sex when requested, used sex as a bargaining tool/ exchange for resources, belittled sexual performance, had affairs with other men, and/ or kissed husband forcefully to which the respondents were supposed to respond 1: Not at all, 2: very rarely, and 3: Always. The scores that were obtained from the scale were summed up, and the highest possible score was 15 points (i.e. $5 \times 3 = 15$); 10 was the mid score ($5 \times 2 = 10$); and the lowest possible score was 5 (i.e. $5 \times 1 = 5$).

The third form was financial violence which had seven statements, and men were required to respond whether they were prevented from having access to their own money or bank accounts, forced to hand over their salary or other income, restricted from working or earning money, Taking loans without a husband/partner consent, forced to sign financial documents or agreements, spent household money on personal items without consulting her husband/partner, and hiding or destroying financial documents. The respondents were supposed to respond 1: Not at all, 2: very rarely, and 3: Always. The total scores on the seven statements were summed up, and the highest possible score was 21 points (i.e. $7 \times 3 = 21$); 14 was the mid score (i.e. $7 \times 2 = 14$); and the lowest possible score was 7 (i.e. $7 \times 1 = 7$). The last form of violence that was asked about was psychological violence which comprised six statements of whether men were called abusive names, insulted, accused of cheating, humiliated by words in public, denied food, and character assassination. The respondents were supposed to respond 1: Not at all, 2: very rarely, and 3: Always. The total scores on the six statements were summed up, and the highest possible score was 18 points (i.e. $6 \times 3 = 18$); 12 was the mid score (i.e. $6 \times 2 = 12$); and the lowest possible score was 6 (i.e. $6 \times 1 = 6$). The study results were considered statistically significant if $p \leq 0.05$. In addition, tables and figures were used to present the study findings.

The binary logistic regression model was specified below:

$$\text{Logit}(P_i) = \log(P_i/1 - P_i) = b_0 + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + b_3x_3 + \dots b_kx_k \dots \dots \dots (1)$$

Where:

Logit (Pi) = ln odds (event), that is natural log of the odds of an event (men responding) occurring

Pi = Prob (event), that is the probability that the event will occur

1-Pi = Prob (no-event), that is the probability that the event will not occur

b_0 = Equation's constant

$b_1 - b_k$ = Coefficient of the independent variables

k = Number of independent variables

x_1 to x_k = Independent variables entered in the model

x_1 = Physical violence (total scores)

x_2 = Sexual violence (total scores)

x_3 = Financial violence (total scores)

x_4 = Verbal/psychological violence (total scores)

The qualitative data from focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) were analysed using thematic analysis to illuminate and enrich the quantitative findings. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was chosen for its flexibility in

identifying and analysing patterns within data. The analysis began with familiarization with the data, whereby transcripts and field notes were thoroughly read to identify initial patterns and themes related to men's responses to domestic violence. Next, initial codes were generated by marking relevant data segments, such as men's decisions to seek help, retaliate, or keep abuse confidential. These codes were organized into broader themes, grouping related codes to explain how various forms of abuse, societal norms, and personal experiences shaped responses. Themes were then reviewed and refined, ensuring they aligned with the research objectives, and any irrelevant data were discarded. After refining the themes, each was defined and named to clarify its significance in relation to the study's questions. For instance, themes such as masculinity and vulnerability fear of emasculation, and help-seeking barriers were defined to capture key aspects of men's experiences. Quotations from participants were used to illustrate these themes, providing realities of the challenges men faced. Finally, the qualitative findings were integrated with the quantitative data to offer a holistic understanding of male victimization. The combination of both data sets allowed for a nuanced interpretation of the role of gender norms, social stigma, and masculinity in shaping men's coping strategies and help-seeking behaviours

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the appropriate institutional review board, and formal research clearance was granted by the President's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government (TAMISEMI). Additional authorization was obtained from administrative officials within Kigamboni Municipality to conduct research in the selected communities. Prior to data collection, participants were thoroughly briefed on the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw from the study at any stage, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant to ensure ethical compliance and respect for autonomy. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, strict measures were taken to ensure participant confidentiality and emotional safety. Interviews and focus group discussions were held in private and secure environments. All responses/arguments were anonymized and stored in secure digital files, accessible only by the researcher. Participants were informed in advance about the nature of the questions and were assured that they could skip any item or entirely withdraw from the study without penalty.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Men's Responses to Domestic Violence Incidents

The primary aim of the study was to understand the actions/responses men take when they experience abuse, with responses categorized as either "Yes" or "No." The findings, presented in Table 1, display the "Yes" responses, indicating the specific actions that men reported taking in response to domestic abuse. Table 1 also shows how these responses were distributed across different age categories. Men who did not respond with an "Yes" answer (i.e., those who answered "No") are not included in the table, as they indicated that they did not engage in these behaviours when faced with domestic violence.

Table 1: Men's Responses to Domestic Violence Incidents by age category, n (%) Yes

Response	18-35 years	36-45 years	46-60 years	>60 years	Total
Abuse women in retaliation	9(31)	15(33.3)	16(38.1)	2(4.8)	42(31.6)
Report to friends and families	22(75.9)	33(73.3)	43(89.6)	6(54.5)	104(78.2)
Report to religious leaders	7(24.1)	5(11.1)	18(37.5)	4(36.4)	34(25.6)
Report to police/social welfare	1(3.4)	7(15.6)	9(18.8)	2(18.2)	19(14.3)
Keep it a secret	18(62.1)	30(66.7)	25(52.1)	6(54.5)	79(59.4)
End the relationship	17(58.6)	20(44.4)	27(56.3)	9(81.8)	73(54.9)
Withholding financial support	9(31)	4(8.9)	14(29.2)	5(45.5)	32(24.1)
Seek another partner	13(44.8)	15(33.3)	19(39.6)	8(72.7)	55(41.4)

Reporting to Friends and Family

The results in Table 1 reveal that a significant proportion of men 78.2% reported their experiences of domestic violence to friends and family, making this the most common response overall. The breakdown by age in Table 1 shows that men aged 46–60 years had the highest likelihood of reporting, with 89.6% indicating they confided in close social networks. This was followed closely by men aged 18–35 years (75.9%) and ones aged 36–45 years (73.3%). However, only 54.5% of men aged 60 and above reported to friends and family, which suggests differences in help-seeking behaviour across age groups. According to Walker *et al.* (2020), men often prefer to turn to informal support systems, such as friends and family, due to stigma and fear of being disbelieved by formal institutions. It was reported that male victims often preferred informal support from family and friends over formal support due to the positive and empathetic reactions they received in these settings. Informal support typically involved emotional reassurance, validation of their experiences, and practical assistance, creating an environment where they felt heard and understood. In contrast, formal support systems were often perceived as fraught with prejudice, scepticism, and blame, which led to feelings of doubt and reluctance to seek help from these services. The fact that male victims tend to prefer informal support over formal channels suggests that formal support systems may not be meeting their needs. This raises important questions about the effectiveness and accessibility of these services. If male victims perceive formal services such as law enforcement as being judgmental, prejudiced, or blaming, they are less likely to reach out for help when needed (Dixon *et al.*, 2020).

In addition to seeking help from immediate family and close friends, men reported taking their conflict matters to the wife's family. It was found that a significant number of men, especially middle-aged and young-aged ones, approached first their wives' relatives for support. These cases sometimes resulted in effective resolutions, with family members helping mediate conflicts. However, other cases did not yield positive outcomes, particularly when the wife was the economic provider for her family of origin. In such cases, the husband often found it difficult to find help, as the wife's family relied on their daughter for financial support. This dynamic whereby the wives played pivotal roles in supporting their families of origin economically made men hesitant to take their cases to the wife's family; instead they resorted to turn to friends. These findings reflect patterns seen in previous research, where social support networks, especially family and friends, are crucial for help-seeking in domestic violence situations (Machando *et al.*, 2017; Taylor *et al.*, 2021).

Keeping Abuse a Secret

The findings revealed that 59.4% (n = 79) of male participants concealed their experiences of abuse. This trend was most prominent among men aged 36–45 years (66.7%) and 18–35 years (62.1%). In contrast, 54.5% of participants aged 60 and above reported concealing domestic

abuse. These findings indicate that middle-aged men were more likely to remain silent about their victimization, reinforcing patterns observed in earlier studies on masculinity and help-seeking behaviours (Taylor *et al.*, 2021). The high secrecy among men in midlife reflect the strong influence of traditional masculine norms internalized during early adulthood. As Douglas and Hines (2011) contend, in patriarchal societies, the idea of women as perpetrators of violence is often unimaginable, with men typically viewed as the primary instigators and offenders. These societal perceptions can significantly determine men's willingness to seek help. These norms; which emphasize emotional suppression, self-reliance, and stoicism; continue to serve as barriers to disclosure. The findings affirm that these sociocultural factors directly shape behavioural responses to abuse and inhibit seeking help. As Huntley *et al.* (2020) argue, effective support mechanisms must directly confront and deconstruct entrenched societal narratives that equate disclosure with weakness.

On the contrary, in their qualitative investigation of help-seeking behaviours among Australian men, Walker *et al.* (2020) found that male survivors were more likely to disclose their experiences of abuse when they perceived the situation to be sufficiently serious to justify reporting. This suggests that the decision to seek assistance is contingent upon the individual's assessment of the severity of the abuse. However, older men exhibited a greater likelihood of disclosure, indicating a reduced influence of hegemonic masculine expectations in later life. These age-based variations provide clear evidence of the intersection between gendered socialization and life stage in shaping men's responses to victimization.

Seeking Another Partner

It was found that 41.4% ($n = 55$) of the 133 men interviewed responded to domestic abuse by seeking another partner as a way of redirecting their emotional and sexual needs. This behaviour was most prevalent among men aged 46–60 years ($n = 19$, 39.6%), followed by those aged 36–45 ($n = 15$, 33.3%) and 18–35 ($n = 13$, 44.8%). Only eight men aged 60 and above (72.7%) reported this information, indicating that older men are significantly less likely to pursue new relationships in the context of abuse. These findings confirm that men in their mid-life years are more inclined to seek alternative romantic or sexual connections as a response to abuse. Men in this study frequently cited a lack of intimacy and emotional support within their primary relationships as the primary justification for taking such actions. They reported that as relationships matured, particularly among couples aged between 40s and 50s, they often experienced a shift from emotional closeness to a role more defined by financial and familial obligations. Men in this study described themselves as fulfilling the role of providers, responsible for ensuring financial stability and addressing household needs, rather than being recognized as emotional or romantic partners by their female partners. This echoes findings by Qian and Hu (2024), who reported that mid-life men often experience emotional marginalization within long-term relationships due to the increasing routine of domestic life. Male victims reported that, as family responsibilities intensified, their female partners became more preoccupied with child-rearing and household duties, reducing opportunities for emotional and physical sexual connection. As a result, emotional neglect contributed to feelings of invisibility and devaluation. This aligns with findings by Frankland and Brown (2018), who observed that emotional neglect and diminished intimacy in long-term heterosexual partnerships were common precursors to infidelity among middle-aged men. The pursuit of extramarital relationships, therefore, may function less as an escape and more as a mechanism for restoring a sense of emotional worth. The current findings support this theory, as participants did not necessarily express a desire to leave their primary relationships but sought emotional and physical connections elsewhere to compensate for the perceived voids. These findings reinforce the view that marital and cohabiting relationships often evolve into routine-driven arrangements in midlife, where affection, intimacy, and mutual appreciation gradually

decline. The resulting emotional voids contribute to pattern of external relationship-seeking, not always as an act of betrayal, but as a response to unmet emotional needs within the primary home. These behaviours highlight the necessity of addressing emotional and gendered expectations within intimate relationships, particularly during the middle stages of life, as highlighted in the work by Ogolsky *et al.* (2020).

Formal Reporting

The results presented in Table 1 show that formal help-seeking was the least common response among participants. Only 25.6% reported seeking assistance from religious leaders, while just 14.3% reported abuse to the police or social welfare services. Men aged 46–60 years were the most likely to report to religious leaders (37.5%), whereas formal reporting to the police was lowest among men aged 18–35 (3.4%). Participants in this study shared their experiences of unsatisfactory and negative outcomes when seeking police intervention, describing instances where law enforcement responses were either dismissive, or exacerbated the situation, leaving them feeling unsupported and further victimized. These findings confirm that formal reporting mechanisms were significantly underutilized by male victims of abuse, particularly younger men (Dim & Lysova, 2022; Khan & Ratele, 2020). This pattern is consistent with a growing body of research identifying gendered socio-cultural barriers as primary deterrents to male help-seeking (Hine *et al.*, 2022; Moore, 2021). Notions of hegemonic masculinity emphasizing emotional stoicism, self-reliance, and invulnerability discourage men from identifying as victims or disclosing abuse; younger men, in particular, appear to be in a socially sensitive phase of masculine identity formation, where external perceptions of strength and control are especially important (Hine *et al.*, 2022; Kim *et al.*, 2023). These gendered expectations contribute to a culture of silence in which seeking formal help is perceived as a threat to one's masculine image. Similar findings were reported by Hine *et al.* (2022), who analysed call data from a male domestic violence charity and observed that male victims frequently experienced severe emotional distress, yet faced significant barriers to help-seeking due to social stigma and masculinity norms. The present study echoes these patterns, as male victims in Kigamboni reported coping mechanisms that reflect internalized emotional suffering and adherence to cultural expectations of masculine resilience. The limited formal reporting observed among male victims in Kigamboni can partly be explained by the policy environment, which, as reflected in the Tanzania National Gender Policy (2023), predominantly frames gender-based violence as an issue affecting women and girls. The absence of explicit recognition of male victimization contributes to societal invisibility, stigma, and the underdevelopment of services tailored for abused men (Tsui, 2014). A study by Huntley *et al.* (2020) provided recommendations for improving support for male victims of domestic violence, emphasizing the need to raise awareness and increase the visibility of DVAM services specifically for men. They emphasized that doing so would facilitate better access to these services and help address the unique challenges faced by male victims.

Institutional barriers further compound these challenges. Several studies have shown that domestic violence services are frequently ill-equipped or unwilling to address the needs of male survivors. In a qualitative study of 30 male survivors of IPV, Cook (2009) found that men who reached out to domestic violence hotlines were often told the services were intended for women. Similarly, Douglas and Hines (2011), in a survey of over 300 male survivors, reported that approximately two-thirds of respondents did not find domestic violence agencies or hotlines helpful. A systematic review by Huntley *et al.* (2019) reinforced these findings, identifying fear of being disbelieved, blamed, or turned away by service providers as key deterrents to formal help-seeking. These experiences erode trust in institutional systems and reinforce the perception that male victims are not recognized within formal definitions of victimhood.

The findings of this study further support this literature. Participants, particularly younger men, demonstrated extremely low levels of engagement with police and welfare services. Many appeared to distrust these institutions or viewed them as biased against men. Prior studies have documented how male victims are often met with disbelief, minimization, or even misidentification as perpetrators when reporting abuse (Drijber *et al.*, 2013; Hine, 2019). The field data suggest that this institutional mistrust is widespread and contributes directly to men's decisions to avoid formal intervention pathways. Particularly, higher reliance on religious leaders among men aged 46–60 reflects a culturally grounded preference for informal, confidential support mechanisms. Religious leaders were more likely to be approached because they were viewed as trustworthy, discreet, and emotionally available. This trend aligns with findings by Machado *et al.* (2017), who reported that male survivors of victimhood frequently sought help through personal networks such as friends, family members, or religious figures where they could avoid stigma and preserve autonomy. Overall, the findings affirm that the reluctance of men to seek formal help is not due to ignorance of available services, but rather to a combination of institutional exclusion and cultural norms that discourage disclosure. Male survivors often face environments that either delegitimize their victim status or fail to provide the emotional safety necessary for engagement. Addressing these barriers requires systemic reforms to ensure that services are inclusive and responsive to men's experiences. Equally important are public education initiatives that dismantle harmful gender stereotypes and broaden societal understandings of victimhood beyond traditional, female-centred models.

The findings of this study are further illuminated through the lens of the Gender Role Strain Theory (GRST), which posits that men experience psychological distress when they are unable to meet culturally prescribed standards of masculinity (Pleck, 1995). In the context of help-seeking, GRST explains that admitting victimization and seeking formal support may be perceived as a failure to uphold masculine ideals such as emotional stoicism, independence, and strength. Younger men, in particular, are likely to be influenced by these norms, which helps account for their minimal engagement with institutional services. Seeking help from police or social welfare agencies can symbolize vulnerability or loss of control, thus conflicting with internalized gender role expectations. As a result, many men opt for silence or turn to informal networks that allow them to retain a sense of autonomy and dignity. This theoretical framework offers a deeper understanding of how gender role expectations function not only as personal beliefs but also as powerful social constraints that shape men's behavioural responses to domestic violence.

Furthermore, Gender Role Strain Theory (GRST) traditionally centres its analysis on the internal psychological tension men experience when they fail to fulfil prescribed masculine roles such as being emotionally stoic, dominant, and self-reliant. However, despite experiencing significant abuse, many male victims refrain from formal reporting due to systemic exclusion and institutional disbelief, which act as external sources of gender role strain beyond internal psychological conflict. The lack of male-sensitive services and pervasive stigma within formal support systems exacerbates feelings of marginalization, reinforcing secrecy and alternative coping strategies such as retaliation or reliance on informal networks. This illustrates how social and institutional structures contribute to masculine strain by denying men legitimate avenues for help, highlighting a critical gap in GRST's current focus on personal role strain.

Withholding Financial Support as a Form of Control and Response to Emotional Neglect

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that 24.1% (n = 32) of the 133 male participants reported withholding financial support as a response to abuse or emotional dissatisfaction. This behaviour was most prevalent among men aged 46–60 (n = 14, ??.%), followed by those aged

18–35 ($n = 9$, 77.8%), with lower occurrences among men aged 36–45 ($n = 4$, 44.4%) and 60 and above ($n = 5$, 55.6%). Participants described financial withdrawal as a deliberate strategy to express dissatisfaction, reassert control, or respond to perceived emotional neglect within their relationships. These findings align with recent research which demonstrated that financial behaviours in intimate relationships often function as instruments of power and control. Financial withdrawal serves as a means to communicate frustration, assert dominance, or resist perceived marginalization, particularly when men feel emotionally excluded or undervalued. Midlife men, often positioned as primary providers, associate financial contribution with identity and authority in the household. When affection and emotional reciprocity decline, the decision to withhold support reflects both a coping response and an assertion of relational power (Stylianou, 2022). Among men aged 60 and above, financial withdrawal was linked to a perceived loss of respect or diminished status within the family. Studies suggest that older men respond to relational disempowerment by withdrawing financial resources to reassert their role or regain symbolic authority. These findings reinforce the notion that economic behaviours in intimate relationships are not solely practical decisions but are deeply embedded in emotional dynamics, gender expectations, and perceived power imbalances.

Binary Logistic Regression Results on Men's Responses to Domestic Violence

Binary logistic regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive relationship between forms of domestic violence experienced by men (physical, sexual, financial, and verbal/psychological) and whether men responded to them or otherwise. The results in Table 2 show that the overall Wald statistic was significant ($p = 0.000$; $p = 0.000$; $p = 0.000$; $p = 0.000$) for abusing women in retaliation, reporting the incidents to friends and families, reporting the incidents to religious leaders, and reporting the incidents to police/social welfare respectively, meaning that the overall models were well predicting the outcome. In addition, the chi-square for the Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients were significant ($p = 0.000$ and $p = 0.023$) meaning that the overall model was well predicting the outcome of abusing women in retaliation and reporting to religious leaders respectively. The chi-squares for the Hosmer and Lemeshow Test were not significant for abuse women in retaliation, reporting abuse to friends and families, and reporting abuse to religious leaders, meaning that the overall model well predicted the outcome. However, the same static was significant ($p = 0.017$) for reporting the incidents to the police/social welfare meaning that the overall model did not well predict the outcome. The Nagelkerke R^2 values that were 0.3; 0.05; 0.12; and 0.04 for physical, sexual, financial, and verbal/psychological violence, respectively show that the predictor variables entered in the model were able to predict about 30% (i.e. 0.3×100); 5% (i.e. 0.05×100); 12% (i.e. 0.12×100); 4% (i.e. 0.04×100) of the variance of the outcome variable (response to domestic violence), which was indicated by abusing women in retaliation, reporting violence incidents to friends and families, reporting violence incidents to religious leaders, and reporting violence incidents to police/social welfare respectively).

Table 2: Binary logistic regression results of the men's responses to domestic violence (n=133)

Forms of Violence	Men's responses			
	Abuse women in retaliation	Report to friends and families	Report to religious leaders	Report to police/social welfare
Physical	0.27(0.081)** *	0.017(0.079)	0.042(0.07)	0.031(0.088)
Sexual	0.346(0.127)* **	- 0.239(0.123)**	0.002(0.12)	-0.004(0.144)
Financial	- 0.307(0.1)***	0.061(0.088)	0.205(0.087) **	0.033(0.103)
Verbal/psychological	0.047(0.073)	0.011(0.074)	0.052(0.554)	-0.018(0.084)
Constant	- 3.621(1.18)** *	2.563(1.105)**	- 4.145(1.12)* **	-2.119(1.254)*
Overall Wald statistic	17.18(p=0.000)	36.99(p=0.000)	28.91(p=0.000)	52.28(p=0.000)
Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients chi-square	32.29(p=0.000)	4.143(p=0.387)	11.3(p=0.023)	0.29(p=0.990)
Hosmer and Lemeshow Test chi-square	6.67(p=0.573)	8.47(p=0.389)	12.99(p=0.112)	18.71(p=0.017)
Cox & Snell R ²	0.22	0.03	0.08	0.02
Nagelkerke R ²	0.3	0.05	0.12	0.04

NB: The outcome variable was men's response to domestic violence: Yes = 1, No = 0.

The numbers outside the brackets refer to Beta coefficients while the ones in the brackets indicate standard errors.

***, **, * are significance levels at 1%, 5%, and 10%, respectively.

The findings in Table 2 indicate that physical violence ($\beta = 0.27$, St. Err. = 0.081), and sexual violence ($\beta = 0.346$, St. Err. = 0.127) had positive and significant influence ($p < 0.01$) on abusing women in terms of retaliation. This suggests that men who experienced physical and sexual aggression from their spouses were more likely to respond with retaliatory violence, possibly as a means of reasserting their masculinity or dominance in the relationship. These findings align with ones of previous studies which showed that retaliatory violence among men often stems from perceived threats to masculine identity, particularly in contexts of physical and sexual emasculation (Acosta *et al.*, 2020). Research further shows that challenges to a man's role within the household can provoke defensive aggression as a form of symbolic restoration of power (Brooks *et al.*, 2020). Remarkably, financial violence ($\beta = -0.307$, St. Err. = 0.1) was negatively associated with retaliation, indicating that men who experienced financial abuse (e.g., economic control, restricted access to money) were less likely to respond with aggression. This is supported by Stylianou (2022), who found that economic abuse tends to disempower men, reducing their capacity or willingness to confront or retaliate physically, particularly when financial dependency undermines traditional provider roles. During one of the focus group discussions (FGD) with male participants, men agreed that there were moments when they felt compelled to use physical force in response to severe provocation, threats to their safety, or direct attacks on their masculinity. Men reported that they tried to tolerate verbal insults and even physical aggression from their spouses until they reached a breaking point. A consensus emerged that the most unbearable form of provocation was when a woman ridiculed

a man's ability to perform sexually or questioned about his status as a 'real man.' The participants agreed as follows:

"A woman can insult you; she can even push you, and you try to ignore her. But the moment she tells you, 'You are not a real man; you can't even satisfy me sexually,' in front of people, what do you do? You are left with no choice but to show her that you are still the man in the house" (FGD, June 2024, Kigamboni Ferry).

Other participants agreed as follows:

"Sometimes it's not even about words; it's about survival. If your wife comes at you with a knife or threatens to pour hot water on you, do you just stand there? You either defend yourself or run away, and if you can't run away, you fight back" (FDG June 2024 Tua Moyo).

These discussions imply the need for men to maintain status and respect within the household and community often pushes them to retaliate when they feel their manhood is under attack. These insights are consistent with the Gender Role Strain Theory (Pleck, 1995), which explains that men experience psychological stress when they fail to meet socially sanctioned ideals of masculinity, often leading to aggressive compensatory behaviours. Men also added that when they realise their wives are having extramarital affairs or find romantic messages from other men; it provokes a strong reaction. In an interview with a Pastor (KII), he reinforced these findings, stating that if a woman physically assaults a man, disrespects him publicly, or challenges his role as a man, the elders and society at large often expect him to act in a way that restores his authority. Similar findings were reported by Taylor *et al.* (2021), who noted that community norms often reinforce retaliatory expectations when male status is perceived to be undermined, particularly in traditional gendered settings. The elder explained:

"A man who does nothing when his wife disrespects or humiliates him is seen as weak. Other men in the community will mock him, saying, 'He is controlled by his wife.' This pressures some men to act violently, not because they want to, but because they feel they have no other way to prove their authority" (KII, July 2024, Kigamboni Ferry).

The study findings show that financial abuse significantly increased the likelihood of men seeking help from religious leaders ($\beta = 0.205$, St. Err. 0.087, $p < 0.05$), underscoring the role of religious institutions as emotionally and culturally legitimate support systems for male victims of domestic violence. Participants reported perceiving religious leaders as trustworthy, morally authoritative, and more accessible than formal state institutions. These findings are consistent with existing literature, including arguments by Medzani (2019) and Gillum (2021), who emphasize that in societies where domestic violence remains highly stigmatized and underreported, faith-based actors often serve as the first point of contact for survivors. Spiritual engagement is not only a coping strategy but also a socially sanctioned avenue for expressing distress and seeking guidance particularly for men whose masculinity norms discourage public vulnerability or engagement with formal support structures. The study also reveals that access to religious support is not homogeneously available; a significant barrier emerges in the form of marital legitimacy, with counselling and mediation services being generally limited to legally recognized unions. Participants in non-marital or cohabiting relationships reported being excluded from religious guidance, primarily because their relationships are viewed by religious institutions as sinful or illegitimate. Participants in a focus group articulated this sentiment clearly as follows:

"Sometimes it's really difficult to seek help from the church, especially when you're just living together without being officially married. That kind of relationship isn't recognized under religious law; it's seen as sinful, like you're

committing adultery. So, when you don't have a formal marriage, it becomes hard to approach religious leaders for support" (FGD, 2024, Mji Mwema).

This structural exclusion not only deters help-seeking but also reinforces the broader experience of social invisibility and institutional gatekeeping that male victims encounter. These findings align with Hines *et al.* (2022), who observed that religious support systems often prioritize heteronormative, legally sanctioned unions, thereby marginalizing those in less traditional arrangements. The consequence is a dual burden: while religious leaders are perceived as supportive, their capacity to assist is constrained by institutional doctrines and moral gatekeeping, leaving a substantial segment of victims underserved. This limitation echoes findings by Mligo (2021), who cautions that clergy frequently default to scriptural interpretation rather than to evidence-based practices, thereby limiting their effectiveness in addressing the complex dynamics of abuse. The binary regression results also revealed that no predictor variable had a significant influence on reporting to police or social welfare services ($p > 0.05$), indicating deeply entrenched institutional and societal barriers. As Huntley *et al.* (2020) report, male victims often avoid formal systems due to fears of disbelief, stigmatization, or being perceived as less credible victims. Taken together, these findings emphasize the urgent need to expand access to inclusive, culturally competent, and professionally grounded support both within religious institutions and across the formal social care system to effectively respond to the realities of male victimhood in diverse relationship contexts.

The findings in Tables 3 show that the overall Wald statistic were significant ($p = 0.031$, $p = 0.026$, $p = 0.000$, $p = 0.047$) for keeping secret, ending the relationship, stopping providing for the family and decision to go for another partner, respectively, meaning that the overall models were well predicting the outcome. In addition, the chi-square for the Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients were significant ($p = 0.036$, $p = 0.001$, $p = 0.016$ and $p = 0.009$) meaning that the overall model was well predicting the outcome of keeping secret, ending the relationship, stop providing for the family and decision to go for another partner, respectively. The Hosmer and Lemeshow Test chi-square values that were insignificant ($p = 0.878$, $p = 0.219$, $p = 0.498$, $p = 0.578$) meaning that the model well predicted the outcome. The Nagelkerke R^2 values that were 0.1, 0.18, 0.13 and 0.13 mean that the independent variables entered in the model were able to predict about 10% (i.e. 0.1×100); 18% (i.e. 0.18×100); 13% (i.e. 0.13×100); and 13% (i.e. 0.13×100) of the variance of the dependent variable (response to domestic violence), which was indicated by keeping it a secret, ending the relationship, stopping providing for the family, and decision to go for another partner, respectively.

Table 3: Binary Logistic Regression Results of the Men's Responses Toward Domestic Violence (n = 133)

Forms of Violence	Men's Responses			
	Keep it secret	End the relationship	Stop providing for the family	Go for another partner
Physical	-0.114(0.07)	0.143(0.077)*	0.098(0.072)	0.082(0.068)
Sexual	0.178(0.107)*	0.292(0.115)**	0.288(0.126)**	0.307(0.113)**
Financial	0.151(0.086)*	0.084(0.082)	0.048(0.083)	0.015(0.076)
Verbal/psychological	-0.002(0.062)**	-0.124(0.063)**	-0.084(0.075)	-0.13(0.064)**
Constant	1.716(0.994)*	2.857(1.058)**	4.074(1.125)**	2.373(0.977)**
Overall Wald statistic	4.64(p=0.031)	1.267(p=0.026)	32.103(p=0.000)	3.937(p=0.047)
Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients chi-square	10.25(p=0.036)	19.002(p=0.001)	12.21(p=0.016)	13.523(p=0.009)
Hosmer and Lemeshow Test chi-square	3.76(0.878)	10.704(p=0.219)	7.364(p=0.498)	6.621(p=0.578)
Cox & Snell R ²	0.07	0.13	0.08	0.09
Nagelkerke R ²	0.10	0.18	0.13	0.13

NB: The outcome variable was men's response to domestic violence: Yes = 1, No = 0.

The numbers outside the brackets refer to Beta coefficient while the ones in the brackets indicate standard error.

***, **, * are significance levels at 1%, 5%, and 10%, respectively.

The findings in Table 3 indicate that men experiencing sexual abuse were highly likely to end the relationship ($\beta = 0.292$, St. Err. = 0.115, $p < 0.05$, stop providing for the family St. Err. = 0.126, $p < 0.05$, and decide to go for another partner $\beta = 0.288$, $\beta = 0.307$, St. Err. = 0.113, $p < 0.01$, respectively). These findings establish that men often turn to extramarital relationships when they feel emotionally and physically neglected in their marriages. The study suggests that when sex is withheld, used as a bargaining tool, or when a man's sexual performance is belittled, he may seek validation and fulfilment elsewhere. In contrast, verbal abuse that had negative influence reduced the likelihood of seeking another partner, implying that men who are verbally abused may not see infidelity as a necessary response/action to take.

Men reported to seek external relationships as an escape/relief because their partners withheld sexual intimacy. It appears that male victims of sexual and verbal/psychological abuse in the study area often engaged in extramarital affairs to seek emotional support, validation, or intimacy that they feel is lacking in their primary relationship (to compensate for emotional void they feel inside their relationships). Although extra marital affairs appear to provide temporary emotional relief, but in most cases it was found to further complicate relationship dynamics. It was further found that infidelity was most common among male victims whose partners deliberately denied them sexual intimacy over an extended period or where verbal abuse and persistent conflict had led to psychological distress. Men in these scenarios perceived infidelity as a form of emotional and psychological relief, allowing them to regain a sense of

intimacy and happiness, although temporarily. Men also reported that extramarital relationships provided them with both sexual satisfaction, self-esteem and a sense of emotional stability that was absent in their homes.

In this study, withholding sexual intimacy emerged as a key form of sexual abuse with profound implications for male victims, particularly within patriarchal societies where masculinity is tightly linked to sexual entitlement, virility, and dominance in intimate relationships. Unlike physical violence, sexual withholding operates as a subtle but deeply symbolic form of rejection that undermines men's sexual validation and masculine status, challenging societal expectations of male sexual agency. This perceived emasculation often drives men to terminate relationships or engage in infidelity as compensatory behaviours aimed at reclaiming their masculinity and restoring their threatened identity. This dynamic is well explained by the Gender Role Strain Theory, which posits that men experiencing strain from failing to meet masculine norms especially around sexuality adopt adaptive or maladaptive strategies to repair their sense of self.

However, men also acknowledged the fact that engaging in infidelity came with financial and emotional costs. Due to the fact that they had to provide financial support both to their extramarital partners and at home, the additional financial strain often compounded their existing challenges. Furthermore, male victims reported that extramarital affairs at times led to unintended consequences, such as children being born out of these relationships, which introduced extra problems, especially for legally married men. These complexities were less pronounced among men who were cohabiting rather than in formal marriages, as they experienced fewer legal and societal constraints related to their relationships. These findings suggest that although infidelity can function as a short-term coping strategy for male victims of domestic violence it often aggravates rather than resolving the challenges, especially when the wife finds out about the relationship. During a focus group discussion, male participants expressed frustration over their partners controlling or restricting sexual intimacy within the relationship; they said:

"You find that a woman dictates the schedule for intimacy, or sometimes every time you initiate, she tells you she is tired. There are times when an entire month can pass without sexual intimacy. Honestly, as a man, you have a wife in the house but you are living like siblings, can you really say you are married?" (FGD Vijibweni, June 2024).

This statement reflects deep seated frustrations among male victims of psychological and sexual neglect, expressing how intimacy deprivation can contribute to feelings of rejection, inadequacy, and marital dissatisfaction. These findings align with ones by Baumeister *et al.* (2020), who observed that prolonged sexual rejection in intimate relationships can lead to emotional detachment, increased stress, and, in some cases, infidelity as a compensatory behaviour. The focus group discussions further revealed that such experiences contribute to psychological distress faced by male victims, particularly when sexual deprivation is used as a form of control or punishment within the relationship. These findings are in line with ones of a study by Wessells and Kostelny (2022), which showed that emotional and sexual neglects are significant but often overlooked forms of domestic violence that can erode relationship satisfaction and contribute to psychological distress among men.

About ending the relationship as a response to sexual and emotional abuse, the binary logistic regression analysis results presented in Table 3 reveal that men who experienced sexual abuse were significantly more likely to end their relationships ($\beta = 0.292$, St. Err. = 0.115, $p < 0.05$). Related findings from an FGD revealed that ending the relationship often emerged as the last alternative solution among male victims. Participants consistently described the decision to leave as the solution to prolonged verbal/psychological, and sexual neglects, particularly when reconciliation efforts had failed or when the abuse had escalated into more

humiliating or dehumanizing forms of violence. Men victims in the study area described sexual intimacy being used as a tool of control, whereby refusal, ridicule, or manipulation became routine. For many, sexual performance was directly linked to their sense of masculinity. When this was mocked, especially in relation to health-related challenges such as diabetes, which led to physical weakness or sexual dysfunction, the emotional damage was profound. Rather than receiving support, men reported being met with sarcasm, rejection, or open scorn from their partners. In such cases, leaving the relationship became not just a practical choice but also an emotional necessity to preserve dignity and psychological wellbeing. Focus group discussions further revealed that infidelity by female partners; whether suspected, discovered through messages, or directly confessed; was among the most consistent triggers for ending relationship. In more extreme cases, men recounted being told by their wives that the children they were raising were not biologically theirs. These revelations constituted what participants referred to as a “point of no return.” In some cases, men also reported initiating separation after becoming involved with other women, especially where a child was conceived outside the relationship. Such scenarios marked definitive psychological thresholds and featured the complexity of relational breakdown among male victims of abuse.

These findings align with ones of some earlier studies. For example, Robinson *et al.* (2021) found that male victims of domestic violence (DV) often chose to leave relationships when their sense of agency, dignity, and safety was persistently undermined. Similarly, Sapiro and Sandberg (2020) argue that the decision to exit an abusive relationship stems from the cumulative effect of violations, particularly sexual and emotional that erodes a man’s self-concept and relational identity. These decisions are not made lightly but represent assertive, intentional acts of self-preservation. Conversely, not all literature supports the narrative of exit. Brooks *et al.* (2020) caution that men often endure abusive relationships longer than expected due to entrenched gender norms. The fear of being perceived as weak or as having “failed” as a provider or protector discourages help-seeking and makes relationship termination more complex. This perspective is partially reflected in the field findings, where some men expressed deep conflict about leaving, even in the face of sustained abuse, due to concerns about societal judgment, property loss, concerns about children, or legal repercussions. Generally, this convergence of regression findings and field narratives emphasizes that ending the relationship is a statistically significant and deeply contextualized response to sexual and psychological abuse among male victims. It represents a coping strategy born not of convenience but of cumulative strain, with outcomes that, while sometimes liberating, often usher in new challenges. However, it was further found that separation did not always bring relief. Male victims described post-separation life as a continuation of hardship, compounded by legal and financial pressures. Men in formal marriages and those in cohabitation expressed frustration with property division laws, particularly when assets like homes which had been acquired before the relationship began. Others cited disproportionate child support demands, which they claimed exceeded their earnings, thus increasing financial instability. These structural challenges suggest that even when men leave abusive relationships, systemic barriers continue to reproduce forms of harm and psychological strain.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH

Conclusions

This study establishes that male victims of domestic violence respond in diverse ways. The findings reveal that each form of violence physical, sexual, financial, and psychological generates distinct behavioural responses. Sexual violence, in particular, triggered responses such as relationship termination, infidelity, retaliation, and financial withdrawal, while financial and psychological abuse produced different coping strategies, including silence or reliance on informal support networks. These varying responses highlight that male victimhood cannot be understood without recognizing how masculinity norms shape men's emotional and behavioural choices. Across all forms of violence, societal expectations of men as strong, resilient, and invulnerable constrained their ability to seek help, reinforcing secrecy, self-blame, and reluctance to engage formal services. The study finds that how men respond to domestic violence is influenced by the type of abuse and the social pressures of masculinity placed on them. Recognizing this complexity is essential for developing gender-inclusive policies, services, and interventions that acknowledge male victims as legitimate survivors with unique needs. Future responses to domestic violence must move beyond female-centred frameworks to ensure that all victims, regardless of gender, have access to protection, justice, and support.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

This study has demonstrated that informal social support systems are among the most frequently accessed by victims of domestic violence. Given this, it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of these support systems to inform the design of effective interventions. Specifically, educating informal support networks on how to best respond to domestic violence disclosures could significantly enhance the support provided to victims.

A more nuanced understanding of the informal disclosure process related to domestic violence is essential for the development of intervention strategies. Most existing research has concentrated on the victims' accounts of their experiences with abuse disclosure. However, it is equally important to explore the perspectives of those offering informal support family, friends, and others who may provide varying levels of assistance, or sometimes no support at all. This broader view will be critical in refining intervention efforts and ensuring that they are both comprehensive and effective.

Additionally, it is important that formal support services and policymakers consider the role of informal support networks when victims seek professional help. Understanding how victims engage with their informal networks, the social responses they receive, and the resulting effects on their mental and emotional well-being could significantly influence how formal services are structured. Incorporating this knowledge into service delivery could enhance the overall effectiveness of both informal and formal support systems.

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