



Psychological Violence Against Women: Experiences of Women Imprisoned For Murder In Uganda

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Abstract:

Majority of women in prison report a history of multiple forms of violence. Much as there is considerable research on the history of violence amongst women imprisoned for murder, no research has so far been conducted in Uganda and, elsewhere, most of the studies have paid attention to physical and sexual violence. To fill this gap, I carried out a study to investigate the experience of psychological violence in the life history of women convicted of murder in Uganda. Drawing from a purposive sample of 30 women, this paper includes data from interviews with 20 women who experienced psychological violence at different stages of their lives. The study employed the qualitative tradition of phenomenology. Data were collected using face-face-to-face in-depth interviews and analysed using NVivo 12 software. Interviews with women revealed that they were subjected to psychological violence during different stages of their lives which included; during childhood, in intimate relations and during arrests and trials. Psychological violence was manifested in different ways that included among others; women being scared, insulted, yelled at and called all sorts of bad names. Perpetrators were reported to be family members, police officers, lawyers and judges.

Keywords: Psychological violence, Women convicted of murder, qualitative study, Phenomenology, Uganda

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INTRODUCTION

Violence against women (VAW) remains a global human rights violation and a public health concern. As a multidimensional phenomenon, VAW is manifested in both physical and non-physical, that is, sexual, verbal, emotional and economic aspects (Coll *et al.*, 2020). Perpetrators of VAW include intimate partners, relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues (Fernandes *et al.*, 2023). However, violence against women and girls is most common in the family environment (Tani *et al.*, 2016). Violence against women causes harm to women's mental, physical, sexual and reproductive health aspects (World Health Organisation, 2019). World Health Organisation (2019) estimates that globally, 35 per cent of women have either been subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate and non-partner in their lifetime. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 44% of women in the age group of 15-49 years have experienced, at least, some form of intimate partner violence (IPV) while 14% have experienced non-IPV with emotional violence being more common (Muluneh *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, two countries in Eastern Africa, that is, Uganda and Ethiopia are characterised by the highest levels of all forms of violence at 42% and 41% respectively (Muluneh *et al.*, 2020).

Research has shown that majority of the imprisoned women are victims of different forms of violence that stretch from childhood (Gehring, 2018). Moreso, violence explains the behaviour of most of the women imprisoned for murder (Bloom *et al.*, 2003; Pelvin, 2019). This paper discusses women's experiences of psychological violence before they were arrested and imprisoned for murder. Psychological violence can be manifested in emotional abuse and neglect (Friestad *et al.*, 2014). It includes being neglected; threatened, insulted, controlling behaviour and being told that one is not worthy enough (Yoder *et al.*, 2019). Psychological violence is taken to be the most serious and frequent form of VAW (Taylor and Mumford, 2016). Psychological violence is the most common form of violence perpetrated by an intimate partner and the most frequent in the Western world (Karakurt and Silver, 2013).

Although psychological violence is taken to be the most serious and widespread compared to physical and sexual violence, less research has been conducted on psychological violence (Beyarslan and Uzer, 2022). Moreso, both the victims and professionals undervalue psychological abuse even when it is considered to be a precursor of other forms of violence (Heise *et al.*, 2019). For example, in a qualitative study of 14 abused women, half of them did not consider psychological abuse from their partners as violent behaviour (Prosman *et al.*, 2014). In this case, efforts to reduce VAW should also include an investigation of the psychological form of VAW (Taccini and Mannarini, 2023).

The Context

Uganda is a patriarchal and agricultural-based economy with land as a major factor of production. Women in Uganda occupy a low position and are affected by gender inequality in the socioeconomic, cultural and political structures. For example, women have no full rights and access to land because the rights to own, inherit, manage and control land are vested in men under the dominant customary tenure system (UBOS, 2019). Women's disproportionate share of unpaid, non-market and agricultural-related work has been documented (SIGI, 2014). Women in Uganda are also afflicted by harmful cultural norms and practices like early marriage, bride price and polygamy [2] (Bantebya *et al.*, 2014). In Uganda, violence against women is justified and facilitated by gender and social norms (Carlson and Mazurana, 2006). As such, the government of Uganda recognises VAW as a public issue. Uganda subscribes to several international frameworks like the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In addition, there are national frameworks such as the National Policy on the Elimination of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and The Domestic Violence Act,

of 2010, which criminalises all forms of VAW. However, due to inadequate policy implementation, VAW has persisted and, customary norms and values, which victimise women have continued to exist alongside formal laws (Namy *et al.*, 2017). For example, the 2020 Police Annual Crime Report indicates that domestic violence cases increased from 12,541 in 2019 to 17,664 in 2020 and of 17,664 cases, 13,145 victims were female adults. Under Ugandan law, domestic violence is not a defence against legal proceedings and as such, a woman who murders her abusive partner is treated as an offender (Peel, 2023).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The study was guided by phenomenology. As a qualitative tradition, phenomenology aims at understanding, describing and interpreting individuals' behaviour and the meaning they attach to their lived experiences (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). This qualitative design was useful in gaining an understanding of lived experiences of women with psychological violence (Manen, 2017). To understand social reality, phenomenology puts emphasis on the knowledge and experiences of the research participants (Gardiner, 2017). In the current study, the design was useful in enabling women to narrate how they lived and experienced violence.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

The participants for the current study were 30 women who were recruited from one prison that is concealed to protect women. Because this prison accommodates majority of women convicted of murder, it was purposively selected. With the assistance of Prison officials, I selected 30 women purposively. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), purposive sampling is important in qualitative research because the researcher selects the participants whose qualities help in achieving the objectives of the study. The selected women were in the age range of 22 and 69 years. Most of the women were illiterate. Of the 30 women, only three women had attained a post-secondary certificate, nine never went to school while eighteen were primary school dropouts. Most of the women were subsistence peasant farmers with only 3 employed in the formal sector. Before arrest, all women had been married with children. Women had no prior imprisonment and criminal history. Most of the women's victims were family members (N=23) and of there, 14 were intimate partners. Women's sentences were from 20 years to death penalty.

Ethical Considerations

Uganda prisons services cleared the current study. Prior to data collection, I acquired an introductory letter from the prison headquarters which introduced me to the female prison. To get to the participants, I was introduced to them by the officer in charge of the prison. Moreso, I obtained ethical clearance from the City University of Hong Kong where I attained my PhD. All the female participants consented to be part of this study and, no one was forced or coerced to take part. I ensured confidentiality and anonymity. The names cited in the paper are anonymous are were proposed by female participants.

Data Collection

This study employed one-on-one in-depth interviews. The interviews were face- to- face with semi-structured interview guide as a tool of data collection. This method facilitated rapport building and a favourable environment for participants to freely respond (Yeo et al., 2014). The method also empowered women to openly and freely express themselves in narrating their lived experiences of violence. The site for the interviews was outside under the tree and this was dictated by the prison rules. The interview time was around 1 hour and, interview were

conducted in both English and Luganda-a local language that was well known to both the researcher and participants. In Uganda, prison rules dictate that no researcher should record participants' voices. To this effect, note-taking was employed.

Data Analysis

I employed a continuous method of data analysis which began during data collection. Data management and analysis were done by NVivo 12 software which assisted in coming up with the final narrative themes. From the participants' narrations of their experiences with psychological violence as cited verbatim, NVivo 12 software was employed to generate themes. The generated codes and themes form the discussed findings of this study. To begin the analysis process, I transported the interview notes to the NVivo software. To create the system of nodes, I closely read the notes and used the software to do an open coding structure. What followed was reorganising and synthesising the interview notes to create specific categories through axial coding. Finally, the narrative themes were generated from specific categories (Marshal and Rosman, 2016).

RESULTS

Overall, it was found of the 30 women, 24 were victims of multiple forms of violence before imprisonment at three phases of their lives (childhood, intimate relations and during trials). To this end, 12 women experienced childhood violence, 21 suffered IPV while 17 experienced violence after committing murder at the hands of police and court officials. However, psychological violence became more prominent than other forms of violence. For example, of the 12 women victims of childhood violence and 21 victims of IPV, 11 and 20 women reported psychological violence respectively. Moreso, women victims of violence at the hands of police and court officials (N=17) only reported having suffered from psychological violence. Presented in this part are findings from women victims of psychological violence.

Women's Experiences of Psychological Violence During Childhood

This form of violence was reported eleven out of 12 women who were victims of childhood violence. All women reported having been psychologically abused by family members (fathers, stepmothers and sisters). Psychological violence went alongside other forms of violence, especially, physical form and, women reported having experienced it as early as four years. This abuse was manifested through insulting, yelling, cursing and isolation from other children. Faith and Jennipher who were at the time six and seven years respectively reported being insulted and yelled at by their stepmothers. Faith who was imprisoned for killing her partner said that her stepmother abused her repeatedly for seven years. Faith lost her mother when she was three years old. Her father married another woman when she was just five years of age. Faith said that she dropped out of school in primary two when she was six years old because her stepmother wanted her to take care of her newborn baby. Faith narrated her ordeal that she at that stage started being subjected to verbal and psychological abuse every time her father would be away.

I started suffering when I was five years old. After the death of my mother, my father married another woman who immediately started torturing me. I even dropped out of school when I was in primary two----. For as long as my father was away, which was his daily habit, my stepmother would torture me over very flimsy reasons. For example, she would insult and threaten to kill me when her baby that I used to carry would cry (Faith, 41 years).

Phiona on the other hand, was six years old when her father started insulting and cursing her. Phiona who was serving a 45-year sentence for killing her partner is said to have together with

her mother suffered the wrath of her father. Her mother's crime was that of producing girls only. Phiona informed me that her father didn't rate her so highly because she was a girl child. He used to castigate her and make negating references that she would be just as useless as her mother who only specialised in producing girl children. In her words:

My father quite often insulted and cursed me. He never considered girls as children. He, always, said that I would have no bright future and would just be as useless as my mother, who only produced girls (Phiona, 52 years old).

Adroa whose form of psychological abuse was perpetrated by her sister-in-law said that every time the woman would yell at her as a way of calling her to perform some duty. Adroa who was eight years old at the time she was abused narrated how she was, always, insulted and isolated from other children during such times as mealtime and other joyous occasions that a growing child would, ordinarily, enjoy most. She thus stated:

I suffered at the hands of my sister-in-law. She would yell at me every time she would call me to do any chore. Every evening, for example, she would isolate her children from me and take them to her bedroom to give them sweets and other eats that she used to bring home from work. My right place to be in would be the kitchen (Adroa).

Women's Experiences Of Intimate Partner Psychological Violence

Psychological violence was the most reported form of abuse during intimate relations. Twenty women reported being psychologically abused by their partners. Psychological violence was manifested in women being told that they were not worthy of being called women, threats of marrying other women, telling them that they are old as compared to their partners' new mistresses and in extreme cases using their mistresses to abuse them verbally. For the majority, this abuse started a few months into their marriages. Aryampurira shared her experience below:

My partner insulted me several times since we got married----- He used to tell me that I was not suited to him for a wife. He kept telling me how he was going to marry other women of his standard (Aryampurira).

Phiona's partner not only subjected her to psychological violence for many years but would again use his mistresses to abuse her as stated below:

My partner abused me for almost 28 years. He used to tell me that I was not a worthy woman for him to marry because, in his view, I was lazy, old and ugly. He also used his mistress to abuse me. On one occasion, I found a message on my phone from his mistress insisting to me that my partner was having an extra-marital affair with her because I was a useless woman (Phiona).

Similarly, Faith's partners used to embarrass her in front of her children. He would also call and invite other women in her presence. She shared her experience;

My partner used to embarrass me before my children and other people. He had no respect for me at all. He used to call and invite other women when I would be around and he would, sometimes, come with them to my marital home. I one day confronted him over this act of embarrassing me before his mistresses; he then said that I should stop asking him why he calls and invites his women home. That it was because they were more beautiful than me (Faith).

Other women described the related experience to the one presented above. For eleven women, the experience of psychological violence was linked to men's extra-marital affairs and,

accordingly, men justified their behaviour by psychologically abusing the women. For most women, psychological violence went alongside physical violence.

Women's Experience Of Psychological Violence During Arrests And Court Sessions

Seventeen women reported being psychologically abused when they were arrested and during court sessions. According to women, this violence was manifested through insults, yelling at them, scaring them, and calling them all sorts of names that portrayed them as the worst characters ever to exist on earth. According to women, psychological violence by police was meant to intimidate them into accepting having committed murder. Noted in this study is that the majority of the women first denied ever killing their victims. Apart from psychological abuse from police at the time of arrest, the perpetrators of their abuse during court sessions were identified as state prosecutors, magistrates and judges. Aber's story is a typical example of how some women were victimised during court sessions. Aber was imprisoned for killing her stepson. Aber narrated how she experienced psychological abuse during her court trial sessions. Her trials, which were supposed to be conducted in the court premises within the district of her origin where she committed the crime were, instead, transferred to another district. This according to Aber was intended to have a certainly biased judge who was biologically related to her co-wife- the mother of the deceased child preside over her case. Aber narrated how her first time to appear in court after spending one year on remand was announced on the radio for one full month. This served to invite as many people as possible in the district to come and witness her trial. It should be the judicial practice to hold trial sessions in the court chambers. For Aber's trial, it was held outside in the big and open compound that accommodated as many people as possible, including, those that were remotely linked to the case at hand. This massive attendance was not at all to serve any witness purpose. The big audience around was meant to cheer up the judge through singing and dancing. Aber was mocked and insulted by even her lawyer whom the government provided her for legal support. Aber also said that her lawyer was a cousin brother of her co-wife. She narrated her ordeal as stated below:

I cannot explain to you in full detail the kind of psychological torture I went through before I was convicted. Both the judge and the lawyer that the government allocated to me for my defence were relatives of my co-wife, the mother of the murdered child. During the week of my trial, villagers who responded to the radio announcement call were around eating, dancing and singing songs that were meant to embarrass me. On the final judgment day, the judge made it clear that bad women like me deserved to spend many years in prison so that the children of the nation could be safe (Aber, 33 years old).

Other women told related stories to that of Aber. They talked of how certain criminal justice officials used statements that were psychologically intimidating and torturing to them. Prosper, who had a young baby of five months old that she could not leave behind said that she was, almost, made to leave her baby behind the day she was arrested. The police are said to have shouted at her and told her to leave behind the baby because she could also kill the baby. This is how she put it in her words:

The day I was arrested, five policemen picked me up from the compound while my baby was in the house. I pleaded with them to allow me to pick up my baby. They could not hear of this request being made to them. They just bundled me into their car while insulting me-----one of the officers told me that I better leave the baby in the hands of good women who were not going to kill him (Prosper, 41 years serving a life sentence).

Jennifer who was in prison for killing her partner revealed how she was arrested and psychologically abused by police officers who arrested her. She spent three days in police cells before being produced to courts of law for trial. Jennifer explained the psychological intimidation she was subjected to by police officers.

The day I was arrested by the police, I was not allowed to talk. They said they only wanted me to confess that I killed my partner. On top of beatings, I was abused, called a murderer, and the worst and ugly woman by the officers who arrested me. --- this took place in police cells for three days I was there (Jennifer).

DISCUSSION

This paper has presented findings from a phenomenological study with women victims of psychological violence. Consistent with the available literature, the findings of this study provide evidence that before imprisonment, women are victims of psychological violence that stretches from childhood. In Belgium, a qualitative study with 40 female prisoners found that during childhood, some women experienced psychological torture at the hands of their parents and were considered unwanted children (Nuytiens and Christiaens, 2012). However, the current study found intimate partner psychological violence to be the most form of violence reported by women. Similarly, the findings of a survey conducted in 28 countries of the European Union show that the prevalence of psychological intimate violence against women was 44% with up to 60% in Latvia (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014).

However, unique findings reported in the current study involve women who during childhood were subjected to psychological violence by their parents based on being girls. These findings are specific to an African context that treasures boys at the expense of girls. Uganda is a patriarchal society and, traditionally, boys have been treasured more than girls to the extent that some people do not look at girls as children. Boys are treasured for many reasons, including, the extension of the patriarchal clan. Studies have found that the culture of producing many children in Uganda is influenced by the desire to have a boy child (Beyeza-Kashesya *et al.*, 2010). Discrimination against girls is reported in most parts of Sub-Saharan Africa [1] (Ademiluka, 2018). In Nigeria, it is reported that women who do not bear sons feel very insecure, they are victimised and, men take on second women to look for sons (Igbelina-Igbokwe, 2013).

This study identified women's experience of psychological violence at the hands of intimate partners. In this regard, the majority of the women (N=20) reported having experienced intimate partner psychological violence before killing their victim's majority being their abusive partners. It has been reported that the majority of women murderers kill their intimate partners after they have been subjected to long periods of all forms of abuse by their victims (Sea *et al.*, 2018; Voce and Bricknell, 2020). Important to note is that though not the focus of this paper, pathways to offending of most of the women in the current study were attributed to the experience of multiple forms of intimate partner violence with psychological violence being the most reported. Therefore, in the context of Uganda, the experience of violence during adult relationships is important in explaining women's offending behaviour.

Additionally, the study found out that the police, lawyers, magistrates and judges subjected 17 women to psychological violence during arrests and court trials. These results are not surprising given the gender stereotypes surrounding women's use of violence, which may be worse in a patriarchal society like Uganda. Women who murder face double punishment in the criminal justice system because of violating the formal law and traditional understanding of a woman meant to be a passive, caretaker and nurturer (Fitzroy, 2011; Venäläinen, 2017). When

women kill, they contradict social structures that define appropriate behaviour for men and women (Weare, 2013). These women are treated negatively by law enforcement professionals, courts of law and correctional facilities (Easteal *et al.*, 2015). In one study with 17 female homicide cases in the United Kingdom, it was found that judges used gender stereotypes words like sad, mad and bad woman in sentencing women (Potts and Weare, 2018).

Limitations

First, conducting a study with a focus on the life history of women has limitations. Some women in this study had spent more than ten years in prison. Therefore, the majority were reconstructing the stories of their childhood violence which happened many years back. This paper acknowledges the possibility that there could be missed and misconstrued stories, mainly, because of time elements. Second, a study that uses purposive sampling to select participants who meet a certain criterion does not capture the experiences of all participants in the same environment (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Understanding such a limitation shows me that the experiences of other women in the prison were not captured. In this case, I was able to avoid the generalisation of results on the general population of female prisoners.

Implications For Policy And Practice

The findings of this study have implications for policy and practice. For example, police need this knowledge about women's history of psychological violence to handle female offenders responsibly and to conduct thorough investigations to be presented in courts of law. This is appropriate to the Ugandan police who have been reported to torture suspects to obtain evidence from them (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Moreso, police need to be informed of the impact of psychological violence on other forms of VAW given the fact that when they are requested to assess the seriousness of a VAW episode, they more likely consider physical injuries than psychological violence (Myhill, 2017).

Court officials need the same knowledge for fair judgment. The findings of this study are also relevant for correctional facilities for proper treatment and rehabilitation of women. This study is important in providing knowledge for not only understanding issues that affect female prisoners but also women in the general population structure of Uganda. This knowledge could act as a basis for rehabilitation and correctional programs that take into consideration prior forms of violence that women experience before the climax of murder and any other violent crime.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that women imprisoned for murder in Uganda have a history of violence that begins during the childhood stage. With the majority having reported the experience of intimate-related psychological violence, this study emphasises the importance of paying attention to what happens during adult relations to understand the offending behaviour of women and assist women's victims of violence. Unfortunately, women in this study were also victims of psychological violence in the criminal justice system of Uganda. As Brooks (2007) noted, knowledge of the unfair and discriminatory treatment of women and all issues that affect them may not be in the conscious state of the dominant group of men. And, since male professionals are overrepresented in the criminal justice system (Chesney-Lind and Pasko, 2013), this paper emphasises the need to avail criminal justice professionals with knowledge about VAW for them to develop gender-sensitive judgements and policies. Most important, is the awareness of the psychological form of violence to both the victims and professionals since it has been recognised not only to be the most common form of violence experienced by women but, also a precursor of other forms of VAW (Heise *et al.*, 2019) yet, least recognised.

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