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Barriers to the Utilisation of Provisions of the Zimbabwean Domestic Violence Act among Abused Christian Women in Zimbabwe

By Excellent Chireshe¹

Abstract

The Domestic Violence Act of Zimbabwe was enacted in response to an escalation in cases of domestic violence. In spite of the enactment of the Act, domestic violence continues and there is limited utilisation of the provisions of the law. This paper seeks to identify factors that militate against the utilisation of provisions of the Act by victims of domestic violence. Twenty-two Christian women who were abused by their male intimate partners participated in the study on which this paper is based. A qualitative design, influenced by the feminist perspective, was adopted for this study. Purposeful sampling was applied in selecting participants who took part in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Participants were given an opportunity to share their individual experiences. Data were analysed thematically. The study revealed that religious, cultural and economic reasons prevented most victims of domestic violence from seeking legal recourse. It was recommended that successful implementation of laws relating to domestic violence needs a coordinated response from all sectors. Recommendations for further research were also made.

Key Words: Domestic Violence, Abused Christian Women, Zimbabwean Domestic Violence Act

Background and Significance

Violence against women has been of great international concern and has received much attention. It has come to be described as a global pandemic because of its devastating consequences on the abused and society in general. Violence against women knows no racial, geographical, cultural, religious, or linguistic boundaries, thereby affecting women of all walks of life. While female-perpetrated violence has been researched and documented, male-perpetrated violence against females is the most frequently reported (Chibber & Krishnan, 2011; Ilika, 2005; Shaw & Lee, 2009; Townsend, 2008; Yigzaw, Berhane, Deyessa, & Kaba, 2010). From a feminist perspective, violence against women is a consequence and reinforcer of patriarchy (Christiansen, 2010; Gnanadason, 2012; Knickmeyer, 2004; Prinsloo, 2007). In 1993, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly passed the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women which offered the first official definition of violence against women

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(Ilika, 2005). The UN General Assembly defined violence against women as any act of gender-based violence, which results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts (Ilika, 2005). Apart from the UN General Assembly, some international conferences such as the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), and the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) have also addressed violence against women and identified it as an issue of global importance (Sturke, 2008).

One of the most common forms of violence against women is domestic violence. The UN has endorsed the view that domestic violence is a women's issue (Amirthalingam, 2003), notwithstanding that males can also fall victim to female-perpetrated violence within the domestic sphere. Domestic violence has emerged as one of the primary public policy concerns in countries around the world.

Domestic violence in the form of intimate partner violence is quite common, and it is this type of violence that this paper concerns itself with. Focus is on intimate partner violence against women in heterosexual relationships. The terms domestic violence, domestic abuse, intimate partner violence, spousal violence or abuse shall be used interchangeably although the term domestic violence shall be the most frequently used. Informed by a feminist perspective, this study focused on violence by men against women.

An increase in cases of domestic violence in Zimbabwe gave rise to the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act (hereinafter the Act) in 2006. The Act was put in place with the aim of protecting victims of domestic violence. Osirim's (2003) recommendation that "Zimbabwe needs to move in the direction of South Africa with respect to legislation that fully criminalises domestic violence" (p. 165) was addressed by the enactment of the Act in 2006.

According to Section 3 of the Act (Zimbabwe 2006, subsection 1) domestic violence includes (among others):

any unlawful act, omission or behaviour which results in death or the direct infliction of physical, sexual, or mental injury to any complainant by a respondent and includes the following: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional, verbal and psychological abuse, economic abuse, intimidation, and harassment.

A victim of domestic violence seeking relief from the abuse may report the violence to a police officer who may arrest the perpetrator or advise the victim or his/her representative to apply for a protection order. A protection order is a document that a magistrate signs and is aimed at protecting the complainant from serious or substantial harm or discomfort or inconvenience, whether physical, emotional or economic (Nawaz, Nawaz, & Majeed, 2008; Zimbabwe 2006, Section 9). The Act was a major accomplishment that acknowledged the seriousness of violence against women in Zimbabwe. Prior to the establishment of the Act, there had not been any law in Zimbabwe that specifically addressed domestic violence (Osirim, 2003; Tichagwa, 1998).

In spite of significant attention given to the topic of domestic violence in recent years, it continues to be a massive problem with enormous individual and societal consequences (Townsend, 2008; Tracy, 2007). Within the Zimbabwean context domestic violence still occurs despite the passing of legislation on domestic violence (Chireshe, 2012; Chuma & Chazovachii, 2012; Hove & Gwazane, 2011).

Given that religious beliefs affect people in many different ways, influencing decisions and behaviour (Wang, Horne, Levitt, & Klesges, 2009), it was the purpose of this study to find

out whether and to what extent the use of the Act among Christian women, abused by their male intimate partners in Zimbabwe, was influenced by religious beliefs. Furthermore, while domestic violence, especially intimate partner violence in heterosexual relationships, has generated a large research literature, very little has been written (to the knowledge of the researcher) about domestic violence among Christian women in Zimbabwe and factors influencing the use of the Act by such women. This paucity of literature has prompted the present study.

The study sought to answer the following main research question: What factors serve as barriers to the utilisation of the Domestic Violence Act by abused Christian women who are abused by their male intimate partners in Zimbabwe? This study was part of a larger study which focused on the extent to which domestically abused Christian and Muslim in Zimbabwe women took advantage of the Zimbabwean Domestic Violence Act (Chireshe, 2012).

Method

Design

A qualitative design was adopted for this study. Since the qualitative design is based on an exploration of people's lived experiences and how they make sense of such experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2007), it was found appropriate for this study. The design enhanced the extraction of an individual account from each participant through listening to stories of their experiences of domestic violence. The qualitative method adopted in this study was the phenomenological method which, as Aspers (2009) suggests, holds that the social world is constructed by its inhabitants. This study, in observance of empirical phenomenology, investigated domestic violence as it was experienced and perceived by specific individuals.

Sample

Participants were selected along predetermined criteria. Purposeful sampling, which involves choosing participants who have the right information for the study (Neuman, 2006), was employed in this study. Women who had experienced domestic violence were selected with the assistance of leaders of Christian women's church organisations, the researcher's friends and relatives as well as some of the participants. Where participants assisted in the identification of other prospective participants, this was snowball sampling. In snowball sampling, researchers identify a small number of individuals who have the characteristics in which they are interested (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2001). These individuals identify, to the researcher, other prospective participants, and these, in turn, identify yet others. Twenty-two women, belonging to diverse Christian churches, aged between 25 and 52, who were or had been in intimate heterosexual relationships with partners that abused them physically or otherwise, participated in the study. They all belonged to the Shona ethnic group and resided in and around Masvingo City, Zimbabwe.

Instrumentation

Since in-depth semi-structured interviews are an effective means of gathering data on people's experiences (Aspers, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), they were used to collect qualitative data on Christian women's experiences of domestic violence. An interview schedule was used. An expert on the subject of domestic violence was asked to check on the relevance of the items on the interview guide.

Procedure

Perspectives of feminist research influenced the interview process, in which the participants were encouraged to tell their stories. Giving voice to abused women by sharing their stories from their perspectives was a means of validating their experiences; treating them as subjects and not objects.

Participation was voluntary because, as Heppner et al. (2007) advise, the dignity and welfare of participants is central in all research endeavours. Due to the sensitivity and potential danger of participating in the study, the selected participants were assured of their anonymity. Anonymity was ensured by using numbers to represent participants. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form after understanding the specifications of the study as articulated on the consent form.

Interviews were conducted at different venues, namely, the participants' homes, the researcher's home, and the researcher's office at work. In each case, privacy of the interview setting was maintained. Although the interviews were directed by the interview guide, flexibility was allowed. Most of the interviews were audio-recorded and lasted an average of one hour. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted between September and December, 2011.

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis, which is a method appropriate for analysing qualitative data (Schutt & Chambliss, 2006), was adopted. After completing all 22 interviews, the transcribed data were analysed, using tables to summarise all the information on each of the different issues that formed the focus of the interviews. Important categories in the data were identified.

Results

Utilisation of the Law

The study revealed that in the face of the abuse, a majority of the participants (16 out of 22) did not take advantage of the provisions of the Domestic Violence Act. Only six participants appealed to the provisions of the Domestic Violence Act by reporting the violence they experienced to the police. All of these six participants, except for one, had also shared their experiences with members of their religious communities who advised them to take further action. The participants who appealed to the law indicated that they were encouraged to do so by members of their religious communities who made it clear that God willed their peace.

The reporting of abuse to the police confirms Laird's (2001) statement that women across the social divide are slowly getting more courageous and are "breaking the silence" (p. 295) about abuse, some getting protection orders and others leaving the situation. In reporting the abuse, the cultural tradition of silence and preserving family secrets is challenged. Bannerman (2007) views the reporting as a life-giving subversion, by which he suggests that, while reporting is often met with societal disapproval, it can bring about liberation from abuse. Furthermore, the appeal to legal institutions by some participants seems to suggest that there is no necessary contradiction in the operation of religious and secular institutions and that the spiritual and legal solutions are complimentary. In this connection, Cooper-White (1996) contends that "the phenomenon of violence against women needs to be approached as much from the discipline of social and political ethics as from the field of pastoral psychology" (p. 13). The point is reiterated

by Nason-Clark (2004) who states that “condemnation of domestic violence requires both the language of contemporary culture and the language of the spirit” (p. 304).

While a few participants took legal action against their abusers, the majority did not. This finding is consistent with results obtained elsewhere, for example, in South Africa (Phiri, 2001), Mozambique (Bonate, 2006), Ghana (Amenga-Etego, 2006), and Jordan (Gharaibeh & Oweis, 2009).

Non-Utilisation of the Law

As already mentioned a majority of participants did not report the abuse to the police or seek legal remedies. A number of reasons emerged. The reasons, which can be classified as religious, socio-cultural and economic, had to do with the advice the participants got from their religious communities as well as friends and relatives. Furthermore, the reasons had to do with the participants’ own internalised beliefs.

Religious Reasons

A substantial number of participants (16) indicated that religious reasons, among others, deterred them from reporting the abuse to the authorities. The major religious reason was that only God had the power to end the abuse by changing the abuser. Prayer was identified as the key to ‘unlock’ God’s intervention. The advice to pray for God’s intervention was given by religious leaders and communities who advised the participants to look up to God who has all the power. One participant had this to say:

The pastor’s wife, to whom I went for advice, said to me: “Pray for your husband and forgive him as Jesus teaches. One day he will change. Reporting him to the police will actually worsen the situation as it will only harden him.”

Similarly, another participant showed that she trusted that prayer could solve her problem when she said, “The solution to any problem lies with God who has all the power and is all-knowing.” The quotations suggest that prayer was perceived as transformative.

Belief in the power of prayer to end domestic violence seems to have been influenced by the perception that Satan or the devil was behind the violence. For that reason, participants did not contemplate reporting the matter to the police or consider solutions such as divorce or (temporary) separation. This spiritualisation of the cause of violence tended to result in viewing spirituality, particularly the use of prayer, as the solution. One participant had this to say: “The church members and leadership did not blame my husband for the violence but instead saw the devil at work in the family; hence they encouraged me to pray so that things would get better.” Similarly, another participant reported that a counsellor from her church suggested that her problem may have been caused by evil spirits and as such it could only be effectively addressed through prayer.

It emerged that some religious people from whom the participants sought help advised them to accept suffering as a reality of living among people of faith. Six participants reported that their religious leaders advised them to endure the suffering as it tests faith. One participant reported that her pastor said God had a purpose in her suffering and that one day the suffering would be a thing of the past as God would intervene. Similarly, another participant said a senior woman from her church to whom she turned for help advised that believers should expect some

suffering because Satan is after leading astray those who believe. Thus it was believed suffering was brought about by Satan for the purpose of making believers abandon their faith.

Six participants indicated that the advice they received from their religious communities was to the effect that it would be a sign of lack of faith to report to non-religious authorities. Influenced by such a perception, participants indicated that religious leaders were better placed to counsel religious people in situations of abuse than secular authorities.

For some (10) participants, the thought of reporting to the police invoked the fear of divorce, which was perceived as contrary to the will of God. The ten participants under consideration revealed that their belief in the permanence of marriage made it difficult for them to seek help from the police as this might result in divorce or separation. The participants felt that seeking relief from abusive relationships through legal means was a threat to the integrity of marriage which was meant to be permanent.

Social/Cultural Reasons

The fear of divorce and its associated stigma was a deterrent to reporting abuse as can be noted from some of the statements participants made. Nine participants revealed that they could not go to the police for fear of incurring divorce or separation that would lead to their loss of dignity. One participant reported that her husband threatened her with divorce if she reported to the police. In a similar vein, another participant said she avoided reporting to the police to avoid divorce which she perceived as the inevitable consequence of making domestic violence public. Thus participants' desire to avoid the disgrace associated with being a divorcee prevented them from taking advantage of the Act.

In an unsuspected issue, two Christian participants indicated that they were not prepared to face divorce because they were not comfortable with the idea of leaving their current sexual partners and engaging in sexual relations with other men. They felt this would be like committing adultery. One participant said "It is hard to imagine becoming a divorcee and getting married to another man while your first husband is still alive. It would appear you are committing adultery; you are making your body cheap." This view seems to be based on Jesus' teaching that "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:11-12, Revised Standard Version).

Shame also prevented the abused from reporting to authorities as the following quotation illustrates:

As a wife of an influential member of the church, I cannot report the battering to the police as this would tarnish his reputation. People look up to my husband as a leader. How would they feel about him if they hear that he is violent?

Five participants reported that their friends and relatives advised them to maintain silence in the face of the abuse as 'silence is power'. It was believed that when one does not answer back in the face of domestic violence, one will in effect be weakening the abuser. Non-retaliation was thus perceived as curbing further domestic violence. One participant said that her mother-in-law told her that silence conquers everything and so she should not answer back in the face of verbal abuse. Another participant said her grandmother advised her not to go about publicising the abuse as this might make her husband more violent.

Five participants indicated that they feared losing their children if they reported the abuse as the reporting might result in divorce or separation.

Participants who expressed fear of divorce and the subsequent loss of custody of their children also felt that if they left their children, the children might be exposed to abuse. The following comment epitomises fear of losing children:

I cannot imagine getting divorced and leaving my children behind. No one will be able to take care of them as I do. *Ndinogarira vana vangu* (Shona, literally translated as 'I will stay in the marriage for the sake of my children').

The study also revealed an aspect of Shona religion as it relates to children. One participant explained her fear for her children in terms of her husband and his relatives' capacity to incite their dead relatives (ancestral spirits) to cause the children to fall sick or encounter misfortune if she insists on having custody of children. She explained:

It is difficult to seek separation from your abusive husband because you will be forced to leave your children; otherwise if you take them by legal assistance, those children may experience misfortune or even death caused by their paternal ancestral spirits.

In this case fear of losing children, coupled with fear of the spirit world, became a deterrent to contemplating taking legal action against the abuser which might result in separation. The participants feared that in the event that divorce or separation took place, they might be alienated from their children, something for which they were not prepared.

Some abusers threatened their victims with further abuse if they reported the matter to the police. Six participants indicated that they did not seek legal recourse for fear of reprisals from their abusive spouses. One participant said that she never thought of going to the police or lawyers for fear of further violence from her husband and revenge from her in-laws who tended to place the blame for the violence on her.

What emerges from such responses is that the abuser may become even more aggressive and that in-laws may also take offence if their relative (the abusive man) is reported and prosecuted because the reporting is perceived as threatening the reputation of both the man and his family, bringing the whole family, both nuclear and extended, into disrepute.

Economic Reasons

Three participants reported that they did not seek legal recourse because they felt doing so might result in divorce which might in turn mean loss of financial support from the husband. As one participant said:

I did not think of reporting the violence to the police because my husband looks after the family, paying fees for children and supplying material needs. If I report to the police, we would end up in divorce and I will lose the support of my husband.

Discussion

The findings from this study should be considered in light of some methodological limitations. Generalisation from the study is limited by the small sample size, its homogeneity, sampling procedure, and geographical context. The number of participants and the sampling method may have restricted the researcher from obtaining more diverse information on the utilization of the Act.

In spite of the limitations cited, the study yielded some findings that could be useful for both practice and further research.

Religious Factors

Participants and those to whom they reported believed in the power of prayer. This belief rendered it inappropriate to report to authorities or to seek legal remedies. The belief in God's intervention tends to inculcate both a spirit of patience and one of resilience in the abused. As such, it may make one cope with the abuse. Furthermore, emphasis on prayer presupposes that the underlying cause of the violence is spiritual and that a spiritual solution is required. This perception of domestic violence is likely to prevent abused women from seeking legal recourse.

The perception that prayer can serve as a coping strategy also came out of previous research (Gillum, 2009; Sharp, 2011; Walington & Murphy, 2006). On the contrary, Taylor (2010) writes that when women put their power of change in God's hands, they are left "waiting and enduring rather than actively seeking out resources, support and options" (p. 121). This implies that they become helpless and so continue to live in abusive situations. Similar sentiments are expressed by other researchers as well (Amenga-Etego, 2006; Nason-Clark, 2004).

The advice to endure suffering in the hope that things will change for the better is also found within the context of Shona culture where abused women are often advised that marriage is not easy; it needs perseverance. One has to work hard to make marriage work. The belief that women are the "healers of wounded marriages" (Nadar & Potgieter, 2010, p. 151) deters abused women from taking legal action against their abusive spouses. The advice that one should endure suffering in the hope of God's intervention prevented some participants from seeking help from the police. In this regard, the abused remained silent because religion and culture taught them that it is a virtue to endure suffering. However, silence in the face of domestic violence perpetuates the culture of violence (Christiansen, 2010).

It seems the perception that it is ungodly to report to secular institutions is grounded in the belief that Christians belong to the 'light' and as such are better placed to settle their own problems. To report to the police would be like admitting that one has failed as a Christian. Not reporting to the police or not taking legal action becomes a face saver to the individual concerned. This finding speaks to both religious and socio-cultural factors.

The Christian belief in the sacredness of marriage as a divinely ordained institution that is meant to last a lifetime makes the thought of divorce or separation anathema. Within the Christian religion, divorce is portrayed as never a part of God's original plan because, when a man and a woman come together in marriage, they become one flesh that should not be separated by anyone (Maluleke & Nadar, 2002). The belief that marriage is a sacred bond ordained by God had a bearing on the participants' response to domestic violence. This understanding of marriage gave some victims the power to endure suffering in silence in order to preserve their marriages and to avoid violating God's plan. In this connection, Fiorenza (1995, p.145) says that abused

wives “who believe that divorce is against God’s will, cannot but remain in violent marriage relationships for ‘better and for worse’”.

The depiction of marriage as a sacrament² in the Roman Catholic tradition means that it cannot be dissolved (Ramsay, 1999, p. 46). As such, the abused is expected to endure the suffering in the hope that things will change rather than try to seek help to get out of the abusive marriage. The belief in the sanctity of marriage was behind the advice that participants received from religious communities as well as friends and relatives. The internalization of this belief by participants meant that the participants would not contemplate a solution that might threaten family unity and so engender divorce or separation.

The prioritisation of the marriage union by those to whom abused women reported and by the women themselves, also came out of other studies (Ellison, Trinitapoli, Anderson, & Johnson, 2007; Wendt, 2008). In these studies, abused women were advised to remain in marriage and to work things out. The advice was based on the perception of marriage as a sacred bond, a lifelong commitment and the conviction that God hates divorce.

Socio-Cultural Factors

Fear of social stigma contributed to abused women’s unwillingness to take advantage of the Act. Since the private domain is protected culturally from outside intervention in both Christianity and Shona society, reporting to authorities is often shunned. The stigma surrounding domestic violence is great. When domestic violence is made public, it would be like washing soiled linen in public and this is likely to lead to the stigmatization of both the abuser and the abused. Given that homes of religious people are assumed to be safe spaces free from domestic violence, reports of violence in such homes would undermine this perception, hence the silence on the matter.

The desire to maintain family secrets, which deterred some participants from reporting the abuse, is also in keeping with a Shona proverb literally translated as ‘What covers houses are roofs’ which underlines the need to keep domestic secrets, confining them to the private realm and not making them public. Thus maintaining the secrecy of domestic violence would have the effect of protecting the image of the family. The advice given shows that communities can be more concerned with marriage than with the welfare of the abused; family interests take precedence over those of individuals, a common feature of most African societies where the needs of the community take precedence over those of the individual.

Given that reporting to public institutions is considered as some kind of application for separation or divorce on the part of the one who has reported, desisting from reporting would be tantamount to maintaining the marriage union. The fear of divorce is understandable when one considers that in the Shona society, married women are regarded as more respectable than single or divorced women (Armstrong, 1998; Mukonyora, 1999). Divorce is often viewed as a failure on the part of the wife, resulting in her stigmatisation (Mukonyora, 1999).

Consistent with findings from previous studies (Armstrong, 1998; Gonzalez, 2010; Maluleke & Nadar, 2002; Moyo, 2004; Yigzaw et al., 2010), the study revealed that one reason for keeping domestic violence a secret is to preserve marriage and so protect one’s social status.

It is, therefore, clear that participants often did not report abuse in order to protect their own image and that of their husbands, their families and their religious communities. For people

² An outward sign of an inner spiritual grace. In this regard, the marriage relationship is taken to symbolise the relationship between God and the church, a sacred relationship.

of high social standing such as religious leaders, the need to maintain integrity is even more compelling, hence the silence on the part of the abused.

One of the pieces of advice participants received from their religious communities as well as friends and relatives was that ‘silence is power.’ The silence advised involved not questioning the abuser about the abuse and not divulging the abuse to members of the public. This silence was believed (by the advisors) to result in the subsiding of the violence. The assumption behind this piece of advice was that if a woman does not answer back and does not talk publicly about the abuse, the abuser would get weakened and stop the violence. However, this was not the case with a majority of participants. Far from stopping the violence, the silence appeared to nurture it. To the perpetrator, the violence seemed to pay dividends as it enabled him to control his victim, knowing that there will be no reprisals. This finding confirms Hampton, Vandergriff-Avery, and Kim’s (1999) assertion that “Domestic violence will continue when the awards drawn from being violent outweigh the costs of not being violent” (p.245). This implies that an individual who receives positive results from being violent without having to pay a price for this is likely to continue with the violent behaviour. The finding that very often victims of violence are advised to keep it a secret also came out of other studies (for example, Armstrong, 1998; Pazeraite, 2008; Phiri, 2001; Ruiz, 2005).

One other factor that emerged as a deterrent to reporting was fear of losing children that might come as a result of divorce emanating from the prosecution of the abusive partner. This fear is understandable because in the Shona society children belong to their father and his ancestors and usually upon divorce or separation, the father has custody of the children while the woman goes away empty-handed. Although legislation in Zimbabwe has been amended to allow mothers under certain circumstances to have custody of their children after divorce, the reality on the ground is that mothers are often prevented, on cultural grounds, from having custody over children. The custom of *roora*³ (bridewealth), which gives the father custody of children if the parents divorce (Bourdillon, 1998; Kambarami, 2006), explains why men continue to have custody over children in spite of the establishment of laws aimed at addressing gender inequality. Fear of losing children is one of the constraints women in abusive relationships face when considering leaving situations of abuse or taking legal action against the abuser (Armstrong, 1998; Peckover, 2003).

The finding that women who undertake legal steps to redress domestic violence are viewed negatively and are thus vulnerable to further violence, corresponds with observations made elsewhere (Amenga-Etego, 2006; Chireshe & Chireshe, 2009; Kethusegile, Kwaramba, & Lopi, 2000; Mesatywa, 2009; Ntlama, 2010).

Economic Reasons

The picture that emerges from findings is that some abused women stay in the abusive relationships because they do not have a sound financial base outside the marriage union. As such, they would remain married to ensure they are supported by the abusive men. The finding that financial dependency may prevent some abused women from seeking relief from the abuse is consistent with results from Gharaibeh and Oweis’ (2009) study conducted in Jordan.

³ *Roora* is a significant element of marriage among the Shona people of Zimbabwe. The custom involves some payment by the husband or his family to the family of his wife. *Roora* is negotiated between the wife-giving and the wife-receiving family.

Implications

The responses indicate that most participants did not see the law as having the capacity to address their problem, thus effectively rendering the Act irrelevant.

Findings suggest that religious convictions, strong among the participants and consolidated by cultural beliefs and practices, prevented most victims of domestic violence from seeking legal recourse. Because of the influence of religious teachings and cultural prescriptions on the role of women and the importance of marriage, most victims desisted from seeking legal recourse.

Reporting to authorities or seeking legal assistance was largely viewed as ‘rebellion’ on the part of the abused, hence, the advice to seek spiritual solutions, to try to be better wives and to endure the suffering, keeping in mind that God ‘hates divorce’ since a marriage union was meant to last a lifetime. The preponderance of advice from the religious sphere as well as the secular sphere was to preserve the marriage. Thus, it can be noted that religion and culture colluded to discourage participants from reporting to authorities and subsequently seeking legal solutions.

While most participants in this study reported being blamed for the violence that they experienced, none of them blamed themselves for the violence, a finding that contradicts findings from previous studies (for example, Chireshe & Chireshe, 2009; Davhana-Maselesele, 2011; Gonzalez, 2010). While the finding that the participants did not blame themselves for the abuse could imply more chances of reporting it to the authorities, the realisation of this, for participants in the present study, was stifled by religious, cultural and economic factors.

Entrenched beliefs and attitudes impede the full implementation of the law. Using the law in addressing instances of domestic violence is often viewed as being at variance with African (particularly Shona) culture, especially customary law with its values such as keeping family secrets, the primacy of the family, and the overarching norm of male dominance.

Given the results of the current study, it can be concluded that although the Domestic Violence Act of Zimbabwe purports to protect victims in the case of domestic violence; large numbers of victims fail to be protected.

In view of the findings, the wide dissemination of information on domestic violence and the different recourses available to women would prepare women and those who they report to, to find effective solutions to the problem. In addition, since domestic violence is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by many interrelated factors, the successful implementation of laws relating to domestic violence needs a coordinated response from all sectors, religious and non-religious.

Since the findings of this study are based on a sample of abused Christian women belonging to the Shona ethnic group in Zimbabwe, it may not be representative of all Christian women. In view of this, more comprehensive studies on a larger scale need to be conducted.

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