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Seeking help: An exploration of the experiences of women survivors of intimate partner violence in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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Summary: *Intimate partner violence is a pervasive violation of women's human rights worldwide. Women employ various strategies in response to intimate partner violence, including seeking assistance from informal or formal sources. Using a qualitative research approach, this article aims to explore the characteristics of these help-seeking sources and investigate the motivating and inhibiting factors that influence survivors' help-seeking behaviour in Addis Ababa City Administration. While the choice of assistance sources varies and is often shaped by different factors, the research findings indicate that, for diverse reasons, survivors tend to prefer seeking help from informal sources. The research reveals that survivors in the study area turn to formal institutions primarily when confronted with factors such as the batterer's unwillingness to change, sustaining severe physical injuries, fear for their lives and the safety of their children, and when they are emotional or desire retribution. On the other hand, the reluctance to seek assistance from formal institutions*

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is associated with psychological, economic, cultural, social and institutional factors. Drawing upon these findings, the research proposes recommendations to enhance both formal and informal assistance for survivors of intimate partner violence against women.

Key words: *intimate partner violence; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; help seeking; human rights; women*

1 Introduction

Intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) is a grave violation of fundamental human rights and freedoms.¹ This type of violence jeopardises survivors' rights, including the rights to life, health, security, dignity, bodily integrity, and protection from inhumane or degrading treatment – rights recognised under both international and regional human rights frameworks.² Although there is no universally accepted definition of intimate partner violence (IPV), for the purpose of this article, IPV is defined as any act of violence, whether singular or recurrent, occurring within an intimate relationship and perpetrated by a current or former spouse, or cohabiting or non-cohabiting partner. IPV encompasses physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviour that result in physical, sexual or psychological harm.³ It can manifest in various forms such as battering, rape, restrictions on freedom of movement, control over financial resources, intimidation, stalking and image-based abuse.

IPV is the most prevalent form of violence experienced by women worldwide.⁴ Approximately one-third of women who have ever been in intimate relationships have experienced some form of physical

1 OECD 'Working Party on Gender Mainstreaming and Governance. Strengthening governance and survivor/victim-centred approach to eliminating gender-based violence' 2021 GOV/PGC/GMG (2021)2/Rev3 61.

2 Human Rights Guide 'Domestic violence and human rights' 2023, <https://www.guidedroitshomme.fr/en/themes/domestic-violence/what-is-domestic-violence/domestic-violence-human-rights> (accessed 2 January 2024).

3 World Health Organisation 'Violence against women' 2017, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women> (accessed 15 September 2023).

4 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime *Handbook for the judiciary on effective criminal justice responses to gender-based violence against women and girls* (2019) XI.

and/or sexual violence by their intimate partners.⁵ Furthermore, 38 per cent of murders against women at the global level are committed by their male intimate partners.⁶

Historically, spousal or partner abuse has been normalised, with women expected to endure or tolerate it as a normal facet of marriage or intimate relationships.⁷ Influenced by deep-seated historical and cultural perspectives, Ethiopia has similarly held this outlook on IPVAW. In Ethiopia, IPVAW is customarily perceived as a tool that can be employed by men to control and subdue unruly wives, rendering it a natural and accepted part of life, particularly between married couples.⁸

The 2016 Demographic and Health Survey of Ethiopia revealed that among women aged 15 to 49 years who had experienced physical violence and identified perpetrators, 68,2 per cent reported their husband or partner, 25,2 per cent reported a former husband or partner, and 2,5 per cent reported a current or former boyfriend as the perpetrator.⁹ Regarding sexual violence, 69,3 per cent reported their current husband or partner, 29,8 per cent reported their former husband or partner, and 2,2 per cent reported their current or former boyfriend as the perpetrator (some women identified multiple perpetrators).¹⁰ Moreover, 34 per cent of women who have ever been married and are aged 15 to 49 years had encountered spousal physical, sexual or emotional violence.¹¹

Despite the prevalence of IPVAW, the severe human rights violations it represents, and the recognition of multiple forms of violence as criminal offences under Ethiopia's Criminal Code, survivors rarely report these cases or seek help.¹² Nevertheless, the availability of

5 World Health Organisation 'Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence' 2013 2, https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/85239/9789241564625_eng.pdf?sequence=1 (accessed 28 October 2023).

6 As above.

7 E Erez 'Domestic violence and the criminal justice system: An overview' (2002) 7 *Online Journal of Issues in Nursing* 1.

8 E Mulugeta 'Mapping report for young lives research policy programme on violence affecting children and youth (VACAY)' 2016 35, https://www.younglives-ethiopia.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/Report.VACAY_Final_Oct11percent20copy.pdf (accessed 2 September 2023).

9 Central Statistical Agency (Ethiopia) & ICF *Ethiopia demographic and health survey 2016* (2016) 301.

10 Central Statistical Agency & ICF (n 9) 303.

11 Central Statistical Agency & ICF (n 9) 294.

12 M Dessalegn, Y Worku & M Wagnew 'Geographic variation and determinants of help seeking behaviour among married women subjected to intimate partner violence: evidence from national population survey' (2021) 20 *International Journal for Equity in Health* 10.

sources of help and the factors influencing help-seeking behaviour remain under-researched in the study area. To address this gap, this article aims to explore the characteristics of available support sources and investigate the factors that encourage or discourage survivors from seeking assistance.

The article is structured in five parts. The first part provides the background to the article. The second part outlines the categories of help seeking. The third part examines the motivating factors that influence survivors' help-seeking approaches. The fourth part explores the factors that inhibit survivors of IPVAV from seeking help from formal institutions. Finally, the fifth part presents conclusions and recommendations.

1.1 Methodology

1.1.1 Data sources and methods

This research made use of both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data included information gathered from informants through semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, court room observations and court case reviews. Informants included survivors of IPVAV; judges; prosecutors; police officers; defence attorneys; experts from shelters; one-stop centres; Addis Ababa City Administration Bureau of Women, Children, and Social Affairs; Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA); as well as community elders and religious leaders.¹³ Furthermore, secondary sources such as literature (both published and unpublished), official reports and websites were consulted.

Purposive sampling was used to select five sub-cities: Arada, Bole, Kolfe-Keranio, Lideta and Nifas-Silk.¹⁴ This resulted in a sample encompassing five city court divisions, five first-instance court divisions and one high court. Data was collected from 33 female IPV survivors who had navigated the justice system. Survivors were purposively selected based on factors such as age, socio-economic status, the type of violence they experienced and the final judgments on their cases. Additionally, key actors were purposively selected based on their positions and experiences (total: 72 participants).

¹³ Data collection took place in three distinct phases: from 1 June–14 November 2022, from 25 January to 24 March 2023 and from 8 April 2023–6 April 2024 (these data were gathered for the purpose of the researcher's PhD study).

¹⁴ These sub-cities were purposively selected based on the number of VAW cases adjudicated in 2021.

Four focus group discussions were conducted, each comprising six participants, including judges, prosecutors and survivors, facilitated by the researcher. Furthermore, 97 purposively selected closed IPVAW case files (from 2013 to 2023) adjudicated by the selected courts were reviewed. Data was further enriched through the observation of four court cases involving IPVAW. Since this research employed a qualitative research approach, the sample size was determined by data saturation. Data analysis involved narration and content analysis techniques.

1.1.2 *Ethical clearance*

The research adhered to all ethical standards of scientific social science research, guided by the World Health Organisation's ethical and safety recommendations for research concerning violence against women.¹⁵ Prior to commencing the research, permission was obtained from relevant institutions within Addis Ababa City Administration.¹⁶ All informants participating in the research were informed about the research's purposes, potential risks and benefits in a manner tailored to their comprehension levels. Data collection commenced only after having obtained informed consent from the participants. To ensure comprehensive data collection, recordings were made (audio recordings for willing participants, and detailed notes for participants who were not willing to be audio recorded). Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through the use of codes for participant names (judges were coded as HJ-1, HJ-2, and so forth; public prosecutors as PP-1, PP-2, and so on; police officers as P-1, P-2, and so forth; mediators as M-1, M-2, and so forth; other experts as I-1, I-2, and so on, and survivors as S-1, S-2, and so forth), and diverse data sources were triangulated to enhance credibility.

1.1.3 *Delimitations*

The research was geographically confined to an urban jurisdiction, Addis Ababa City Administration. As a result, the findings are not representative of the national situation and should be interpreted cautiously when applied to a broader context.

15 World Health Organisation *Ethical and safety recommendations for intervention research on violence against women: Building on lessons from the WHO publication putting women first: Ethical and safety recommendations for research on domestic violence against women* (2016).

16 Approval for the study was obtained from the Addis Ababa University Centre for Human Rights, with additional support letters received from various entities (Lideta First Instance Court, Ministry of Justice and Addis Ababa Police Commission) (recordings and notes of interviews on file with author).

2 Help-seeking behaviour of IPVAV survivors

Women employ diverse coping strategies in response to IPV. Some endure the abuse in silence, attempting to dismiss or ignore the incidents or even normalise the acts.¹⁷ Others may respond to aggression with violence, leading to a cycle of mutual violence. Some seek help from informal or formal sources.¹⁸

Help seeking among survivors of IPVAV is a broad term that encompasses any action taken to obtain support or assistance in response to IPV. This may involve seeking advice and support from friends, family members or other trusted individuals; obtaining counselling and/or medical care; seeking refuge in shelters; contacting law enforcement agencies (for instance, the police); or initiating legal separation or divorce from the perpetrator.¹⁹

Help seeking can be categorised as informal or formal, depending on the source of assistance the survivor pursues. In this research, survivors were asked about their initial sources of help in instances of IPVAV. Among the respondents, 79 per cent reported seeking assistance from informal channels such as family, friends, neighbours, local elders and religious leaders, while 21 per cent reported turning to formal institutions.

2.1 Informal help seeking

The response to IPVAV varies and is often influenced by the severity of the violence. However, in most cases, survivors initially turn to relatives, close friends or local elders for advice and support.²⁰ Seeking informal help usually marks the first step in the help-seeking process and can have a major impact on a survivor's subsequent decisions.²¹ The data collected for this research shows that, out of the survivors who sought assistance from informal sources before turning to formal institutions, 31 per cent approached family members, 31 per cent approached neighbours, 15 per cent contacted local

17 A Dwarumpudi and others 'Coping responses to intimate partner violence: Narratives of women in North-West Tanzania' (2022) 24 *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 2.

18 As above.

19 A Fidan 'Women's help-seeking behaviour for intimate partner violence in sub-Saharan Africa' PhD thesis, University of Tennessee, 2017 51.

20 S Garoma, M Fantahun & A Worku 'Intimate partner violence against women in West Ethiopia: A qualitative study on attitudes, women's responses, and suggested measures as perceived by community members' (2012) 9 *Reproductive Health Journal* 9.

21 Fidan (n 19) 52.

elders, 15 per cent approached religious fathers (priests, pastors, imams, and so forth) and 8 per cent contacted friends.

Some participants shared insights into the factors influencing a survivor's choice to approach informal help providers. One informant suggested that the decision to seek help from informal or formal sources should depend on the type of violence. He noted that in cases of severe physical violence or threats to the survivor's life, seeking legal protection from formal institutions is essential. However, the informant highlighted that in the case of other disagreements, it is better for survivors to explore informal options, as taking marital issues to formal institutions can often lead to divorce.²²

Another informant emphasised that survivors of IPVAW should turn to family and friends for support, in an attempt to resolve the issue through mediation, unless the violence is severe. The informant highlighted that engaging in formal help seeking can be a prolonged and adversarial process. Moreover, the partner facing legal action may harbour resentment, as it has the potential to bruise his ego and escalate the problem, possibly leading to divorce. She added:²³

In such situations, the couple's children often remain with the mother, making it difficult for her to attend court appointments as she may have to leave her children unattended. This could potentially compromise the children's well-being. Therefore, resolving such issues through mediation is preferable.

The data collected for this research revealed that 79 per cent of survivors typically first sought help from informal sources. One informant indicated that survivors often turn to family and friends to address IPVAW issues. She highlighted that even though this may depend on the type and extent of the violence, survivors only resort to formal sources if informal approaches are ineffective.²⁴ Another informant emphasised that the chances of IPVAW cases reaching courts are slim, as they are usually resolved through mediation. He added that even serious physical violence is often mediated before reaching court, with the parties often reconciling and resuming cohabitation.²⁵ Similarly, an informant highlighted that she often does not encounter such cases in criminal benches because those 'who are brave enough' to bring their cases to courts are relatively few.²⁶

22 Interview with M-6 conducted on 20 July 2023.

23 Interview with M-1 conducted on 18 June 2023.

24 Interview with PP-10 conducted on 22 August 2022.

25 Interview with HJ-10 conducted on 20 October 2022.

26 Interview with I-2 conducted on 8 November 2022.

Informal sources of help for IPVAW survivors offer significant advantages, including emotional support, understanding, empathy, companionship, shelter and protection.²⁷ They may facilitate amicable conflict resolution between couples without the need for legal or other formal intervention.²⁸ However, informal sources are also associated with certain drawbacks. For instance, one informant mentioned that those offering informal help may take into account factors such as the woman's relationship with her abuser and the number of children involved, and they may encourage women to stay in violent relationships in an effort to improve them.²⁹

Another informant added that the challenge with informal help providers is that their main concern is saving the marriage or relationship at any cost. As a result, they often pressure the survivor to forgive and forget, even begging her to do so. She emphasised that this can lead the survivor to agree to things she does not want, and this approach can also put the survivor in danger as the issue remains unresolved.³⁰ Another informant believes that one of the mistakes informal sources often make is to cover up issues and advise the couple to forget them, saying 'You have children, so leave the issue for their sake'. He added that saying 'leave it for the sake of God or children' without resolving the matter from its root provides no remedy, but instead aggravates the matter.³¹

One survivor shared her own experience with informal sources by stating 'When I sought help from my friends and neighbours, they advised me to tolerate the abuse and try to save my marriage for the sake of my two children'.³² Another survivor described the challenges she encountered when she approached informal sources as follows:³³

My husband is very good at talking and convincing people. When I go to our relatives and ask for assistance, he tells them they are interfering in his marriage and that they are trying to break up his family. People are afraid of being labelled as meddlers in someone else's marriage. In the end, even my own relatives told me to handle my problems on my own and that they would not interfere. And I could only go to the neighbours when things were severe. As a result, the only advice I received from family and neighbours was 'as a woman, I should be

27 P Choden 'Help-seeking behaviours of Bhutanese women subjected to intimate partner violence (IPV)' PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2019 163.

28 As above.

29 M-6 (n 22).

30 M-1 (n 23).

31 Interview with M-4 conducted on 21 July 2023.

32 Interview with S-4 conducted on 16 February 2023.

33 Interview with S-33 conducted on 17 June 2023.

patient for the sake of my children', and they pressured me to engage in mediation.

The existence of such practices was also substantiated in an interview with an informant who has taken part in mediating couples for more than two decades. She stated that '[w]hen women who encounter challenges in their relationships come to me for advice, I call both parties and advise them to let go of their disagreements for the sake of God and their children and to remember their happy moments'.³⁴

Another challenge that was repeatedly mentioned by participants regarding informal sources was the fact that such help providers often take sides. According to a survivor, she sought help from members of a small religious association to which she and her husband belonged. However, they failed to provide any help for her and they rather took her husband's side, alienating her.³⁵ Another informant added: 'I told my friend about the problems that I have been encountering in my relationship, and she tried to mediate between us by talking to his friends. But at the end of the day, she sided with him and ignored me.'³⁶

One of the informants interviewed, who currently provides religion-based counselling for couples, indicated that couples should not involve third parties in their marriage. He stated that their bedroom is their 'parliament' where they should discuss and solve their problems through negotiation. However, if they are unable to resolve their problems on their own, they can involve someone who is very close to them, such as a trusted friend or religious leader. He specifically advised couples not to discuss their problems with family members, as this could often lead to more problems and even divorce. He explained that family members are less likely to be neutral in a marital dispute and that they may take sides, which can narrow the chances of the issue being amicably resolved. He also added that women should be tolerant and look at the bigger picture, as divorce can be difficult for women with children, who may have difficulty finding another partner.³⁷

Although most of the survivors interviewed indicated that informal help providers were their first choice for various reasons, a recurring challenge mentioned by participants is that informal sources of help tend to cover up problems to save the marriage. Moreover, in some cases, these sources may coerce the survivor to mediate

34 Interview with M-3 conducted on 19 July 2023.

35 Interview with S-3 conducted on 16 February 2023.

36 Interview with S-5 conducted on 16 February 2023.

37 Interview with M-2 conducted on 20 June 2023.

by pressuring her, which at times can endanger her safety as the issue remains unresolved. In other cases, they may side with the perpetrator, leaving the survivor feeling isolated and unsupported.

2.2 Formal help seeking

Formal sources of assistance for women experiencing IPVAV encompass the criminal justice system, civil legal remedies, legal aid centres, one-stop centres, shelters and other psychosocial services. These formal avenues are designed to aid women in ending the violence in their relationships, with or without terminating the relationship.³⁸ According to the data collected for this study, 43 per cent of survivors initially reported the violence to the police; 6 per cent to community policing; 3 per cent to the Kebele; 12 per cent to the Woreda Women, Children and Social Affairs office; 9 per cent to the Sub-City Women, Children and Social Affairs Office; and 27 per cent to the Addis Ababa City Administration Bureau of Women, Children and Social Affairs. Additionally, 79 per cent of survivors more than once sought help from formal institutions.

Nevertheless, the data collected for this research revealed that survivors often tolerate IPVAV for a significant period before deciding to report it to formal institutions. Accordingly, when informants were asked about the duration of time they lived with the violence before reporting it to formal institutions, 64 per cent of survivors responded that they had tolerated the violence for over five years; 6 per cent of survivors responded that they had endured the abuse for over three years; 9 per cent of the survivors reported that they had lived with the violence for more than three months before seeking help; and the remaining survivors indicated that they reported the initial incident of abuse.

3 Factors that motivate help seeking from formal institutions

Research findings indicate that survivors of IPVAV typically turn to formal institutions only after having endured prolonged abuse, often reaching a breaking point where they declare 'enough is enough'.³⁹ This critical juncture typically follows a period of escalating or severe abuse, often accompanied by threats and a tangible risk to their lives and the lives of their children.⁴⁰

38 Choden (n 27) 46.

39 Erez (n 7) 2.

40 As above.

According to the data collected for this research, 52 per cent of survivors who sought assistance from formal institutions identified the recognition of the batterer's unwillingness to change as their main motivation; 24 per cent attributed their decision to severe physical injuries sustained, while 12 per cent expressed fear for their lives. Concerns for their children's safety motivated 3 per cent of survivors, while another 3 per cent cited fear for both their own safety and that of their children. The remaining 6 per cent reported experiencing both physical injuries and fear for their children's well-being as reasons for seeking help. The factors that motivate survivors to seek help from formal institutions will be briefly explored in the following parts.

3.1 Partner's unwillingness to change

Survivors often seek help from formal institutions when they internalise the reality that their abusive partners are unlikely to change, leading to a significant shift in their approach to handling IPVAW.⁴¹ This realisation can come after failed reconciliation attempts, when their children have matured, and the need to hide the abuse diminishes,⁴² or when a survivor decides to permanently terminate the violence and the relationship.⁴³ One informant noted that women tend to bring IPVAW cases to light only when they have decided to pursue a divorce or terminate the relationship, as making these private matters public can complicate the continuation of the relationship.⁴⁴

3.2 Severe physical attack

Studies conducted in other countries have revealed that an incident of severe physical attack is one of the main factors that encourage survivors to seek help.⁴⁵ Similarly, some informants highlighted an incident of severe physical attacks as a pivotal factor that motivates survivors to seek help. For instance, according to one informant, many women prefer to keep matters related to IPV private, as it is often regarded as a family matter. He pointed out that some individuals even normalise the behaviour until it escalates to an unbearable

41 Choden (n 27) 156.

42 S Kassim 'Legal provisions against domestic violence in mainland Tanzania with special reference to criminal law: A critique' (1993) Research Report 21, Centre for Development Research 100.

43 Fidan (n 19) 54.

44 Interview with HJ-1 conducted on 21 June 2022.

45 Choden (n 27) 158.

extreme. The informant emphasised that survivors often only reach out for assistance when confronted with severe physical violence.⁴⁶

A survivor who contacted the police after having suffered a severe physical attack shared her experience as follows: 'When he brutally hit me in the eye, and I almost lost my eye sight, I knew the situation was very dangerous, and I had to report him to the police.'⁴⁷ Similar responses were provided by a considerable number of informants, with severe physical violence being the key factor motivating them to seek help, particularly from formal institutions.

Some of the survivors found it difficult to pursue their cases through formal institutions until the violence escalated, and they feared for their lives. Accordingly, one survivor mentioned that the batterer was her husband and the father of her children and, as a result, she would have preferred the case to be resolved through mediation by involving family members and their religious leaders. Unfortunately, this was not possible, and the violence escalated, and she was afraid for her life.⁴⁸

3.3 Violence extending to children

The data collected for this research identified another significant motivator for women to seek help, which is when the violence begins to affect their children. Some survivors revealed that they tolerated IPVAV for years but felt compelled to act when it started impacting their children. As a result, the presence of children and their well-being became strong motivators.

One of the survivors mentioned that she has tolerated repeated violence while living with her partner. She noted: 'Finally, when he took my child away from me, I said to myself I should at least do this for my child, I need to protect my rights for my child's sake, no matter what the consequences of my action be.'⁴⁹ Another survivor stated: 'My child should not have a similar fate as mine; I had to leave that relationship.'⁵⁰ Similarly, a survivor indicated:⁵¹

I tolerated the violence until it started affecting my daughters. At that point, I realised I had to take action. I had encountered IPVAV throughout my marriage, but lately, he had started abusing my

46 Interview with P-1 conducted on 21 June 2022.

47 Interview with S-1 conducted on 16 February 2023.

48 Interview with S-23 conducted on 11 March 2023.

49 Interview with S-32 conducted on 4 May 2023.

50 Interview with S-6 conducted on 16 February 2023.

51 S-33 (n 33).

daughters as well. That's when I started to think that I needed to do something to save them. When he beat my elder daughter until her fingernails came off, I decided to disclose the violence that I had endured for years. Moreover, I was motivated to report the case when my children said, 'We don't want you to suffer this much for us. We don't want this life.' Since I knew that my husband loves money and would not give me enough maintenance for our five daughters, I asked them, 'If I leave your father, our living standard will change. Will you be able to handle that?' To my surprise, they said, 'It is better for us to live on the streets than to live like this.' This encouraged me to report the abuse and seek justice for the first time.

Another survivor also stated that her children were the reason she had tolerated the violence for so long. Once they understood what was happening, they knew that mentioning their father's abuse of their mother would put them at risk of being beaten as well. As a result, the survivor and her children communicated with one another through eye signals. One day her son, who was four years old at the time, said, 'Mama, let's sleep covering ourselves with a blanket before my father comes so that he won't torture you.' That innocent remark was a wake-up call for the survivor, making her aware of how the violence was affecting her children. Their growing fear of their father motivated her to leave the relationship and seek help for their sake.⁵²

3.4 Anger or retaliation

Anger and retaliation are also mentioned as factors that motivate survivors to report their cases. One informant highlighted that some women report such cases and seek help when they are emotional and angry.⁵³ Another informant noted that, in some cases, some women may accuse their partners of such acts strategically, aiming to influence divorce settlements, such as to get property or child custody. He added that these accusations may stem from a sense of revenge, particularly when women suspect their partners of infidelity or when faced with issues of sexual incompatibility.⁵⁴

During a focus group discussion, participants raised the issue of false claims being reported to the police. For instance, it was mentioned that in some cases a woman might begin a sexual relationship with a man on his promise of marriage. However, if the man later breaks off the relationship, the woman might accuse him of rape or physical abuse in order to get revenge. It was emphasised that such false

⁵² S-1 (n 47).

⁵³ Interview with PP-2 conducted on 20 June 2022.

⁵⁴ Interview with P-4 conducted on 8 September 2022.

allegations are usually identified after a thorough investigation. A failure to uncover the truth can result in the unjust punishments of innocent individuals.⁵⁵

4 Factors that prevent survivors of IPVAW from seeking assistance from formal institutions

Numerous factors act as barriers, preventing survivors of IPVAW from seeking assistance from the criminal justice system. These barriers encompass a wide array of elements, including psychological, economic, cultural, social and institutional factors, which collectively contribute to the complex nature of the violence.

According to the data collected for this research, the factors hindering women from seeking help from formal sources in the study area include survivors' perceptions of the violence; love for the perpetrator; fear and shame; economic dependence; concern for the well-being of their children; and issues related to the availability of support services. These factors will be briefly discussed in the following parts.

4.1 Survivors' perception of the violence

When women face aggression and abuse, their decisions on how to address these issues are significantly influenced by ideological and social factors.⁵⁶ As a result, a considerable number of women endure abusive relationships because they internalise societal values, embrace cultural norms, romanticise family and marriage, and yield to social pressures.⁵⁷

Within patriarchal social structures, there often is a reinforcement of attitudes that justify violence, implying that women are expected to bear the consequences if they deviate from the prescribed feminine ideals and roles.⁵⁸ Thus, self-blame for violence becomes a significant factor, as cultural norms dictate that women bear responsibility for upholding family harmony and must make greater sacrifices to preserve their families.⁵⁹

55 FGD-2 with judges conducted on 10 November 2022.

56 N Rico 'Gender-based violence: A human right. Women and Development Unit' (1997) 27, <https://repositorio.cepal.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/ad963a4d-1ed1-4a5c-80b5-283a76f73044/content> (accessed 11 October 2023).

57 As above.

58 Fidan (n 19) 85.

59 Rico (n 56) 27.

As pointed out by feminist scholars, women who believe that violence against women is acceptable under certain circumstances may not perceive themselves as victims and may be less inclined to seek assistance when subjected to violence.⁶⁰ Therefore, the process of help seeking typically begins with women acknowledging the actions of men as acts of violence and deeming these intolerable.⁶¹

In Ethiopia, IPVAW, especially between married couples, is often considered natural and accepted as a normal part of life.⁶² As a result, some Ethiopian women justify IPV by rationalising it as an expression of love. For instance, some say: 'If my husband does not beat me, it means that he does not love me.'⁶³ Moreover, according to the 2016 Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey, 63 per cent of women aged 15 to 49 years agreed that wife beating was justified if the wife burns the food, argues with the husband, goes out without telling him, neglects the children, or refuses sexual intercourse.⁶⁴ As a result, despite the prevalent nature of IPVAW in Ethiopia,⁶⁵ survivors seldom report their cases or seek help from formal sources.⁶⁶

An informant pointed out that IPVAW is highly normalised in society, and survivors frequently justify it for various reasons. Consequently, many cases of IPVAW remain concealed and go unreported.⁶⁷ Another informant noted that survivors often endure the abuse for many years, providing different justifications for delaying a response and seeking help from formal sources. He emphasised that this tolerance significantly contributed to the widespread nature of IPVAW.⁶⁸

Upholding family honour was mentioned as one of the reasons influencing survivors to be hesitant to seek help from formal institutions. An informant noted that in most cases, survivors refrain from taking such matters to formal institutions because some believe that these issues should remain private. They choose not to involve external parties in order to preserve family honour, resulting in silent suffering for many years.⁶⁹ One survivor stated, 'I have tolerated the abuse for many years because I thought that was what I was

60 Fidan (n 19) 85.

61 Fidan (n 19) 51.

62 Mulugeta (n 8) 35.

63 As above.

64 Central Statistical Agency & ICF (n 9) 263.

65 Garoma and others (n 20) 1.

66 Dessalegn and others (n 12) 10.

67 Interview with PP-5 conducted on 22 June 2022.

68 M-6 (n 22).

69 Interview with HJ-22 conducted on 23 March 2023.

supposed to do, to keep quiet and preserve the reputation of my family.⁷⁰

Most of the survivors interviewed indicated that they did not consider formal institutions as their first option and tried to solve the problem amicably. As a result, only 21 per cent of survivors reported the first instance of violence to such institutions.

4.2 Love towards the perpetrator

Expectations surrounding romantic partnerships are shaped by societal narratives that advocate passive, affectionate, nurturing roles for women.⁷¹ Survivors of abuse often find themselves entangled in complicated emotional connections with their abusers, which can deter them from taking measures, such as involving law enforcement for the abuser's arrest. In many instances, survivors choose to report cases to the police not with the intention of prosecuting the abuser, but rather to put an end to the ongoing violence.⁷²

Similar perceptions were reflected by informants who participated in this research. For instance, an informant stated:⁷³

We hear about IPVAV a lot, but such cases do not often come to formal institutions for various reasons. These include love; if the survivor is in a relationship with the batterer, she might not report the abuse, thinking that he will marry her if she tolerates him. Or some survivors might think the batterer will change his behaviour if she loves and nurtures him.

Another informant noted that survivors often do not want the perpetrator to be sued; they just want to voice their grievances. Some of them bring complaints solely to have the police scold their partners and warn them not to repeat such acts.⁷⁴

One survivor shared her experience by stating that instead of seeking formal intervention, she had tolerated her husband's abuse and infidelity for an extended period due to their marital bond. Upon their marriage, she had pledged to love and honour him, a commitment she had strived to uphold. Consequently, she had

70 Interview with S-9 conducted on 16 February 2023.

71 YI Crichton-Hill 'Stories of resistance: Women moving away from intimate partner violence' PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, 2016 335.

72 E Skinnider & A Qosaj-Mustafa 'Preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence' (2020) A Training of Trainer's Manual for Prosecutors and Judges. Council of Europe project 'Reinforcing the fight against violence against women and domestic violence in Kosovo' Phase II 26.

73 FGD-3 with judges conducted on 23 March 2023.

74 Interview with PP-1 conducted on 20 June 2022.

chosen to tolerate his behaviour and sought the mediation of family members when their situation escalated. This path was sustained until the abuse became very serious, forcing her to seek formal intervention.⁷⁵ Similarly, another survivor stated that her love for her partner led her to leave her family and even convert to his religion. Despite the relentless abuse that pushed her to attempt suicide twice, she refrained from reporting him for an extended period, clinging to the hope of salvaging their relationship and amicably resolving their conflicts.⁷⁶

According to the data collected for this research, in most cases, survivors still loved their partners and only turned to formal institutions because they incurred severe physical injuries, feared for their lives and the safety of their children, or had repeatedly tried informal approaches and failed.

4.3 Fear and shame

Survivors may experience fear about potential retaliation from their partners should they seek assistance from formal institutions, as the act of separation, or even the perceived threat of separation, frequently increases instances of IPV.⁷⁷ Abusers might employ intimidating tactics, such as threats of harming or even killing their partners should they attempt to leave.⁷⁸ These threats must be taken very seriously, as 'separation assault' is a common occurrence in which victims may sustain injuries or even be killed.⁷⁹

Therefore, women who decide to break free from their abusers may face an equal, if not greater, risk of experiencing renewed abuse.⁸⁰ This dilemma places them in a difficult position as they strive to ensure their own safety and that of their children, highlighting the complex and dangerous nature of leaving an abusive relationship.⁸¹

A survivor stated that, since her husband was repeatedly abusing her, she requested a separation from him, but he continuously refused. He threatened her by saying, 'You will not live after taking half of my property. I will throw acid on you and you will spend the money on medication.' She believed that reporting the abuse and

⁷⁵ Interview with S-2 conducted on 16 February 2023.

⁷⁶ Interview with S-15 conducted on 11 March 2023.

⁷⁷ Skinnider & Qosaj-Mustafa (n 72) 25.

⁷⁸ United Nations Office on Drug and Crime *Handbook on effective prosecution responses to violence against women and girls* (2014) 43.

⁷⁹ As above.

⁸⁰ As above.

⁸¹ As above.

her desire to leave were the primary reasons that triggered the last brutal physical attack.⁸²

In a focus group discussion, participants noted that since the survivor and the perpetrator often see each other and probably lived together, this makes it difficult for her to report the abuse or request a separation. Since the perpetrator has easy physical access to her, she may be exposed to a graver attack. The participants also added that reporting IPVAV to formal institutions has both advantages and disadvantages: On the one hand, since people are afraid of the police, some perpetrators may behave accordingly after the survivors' report and, on the other, some may be offended and become more aggressive.⁸³

The fear of being held responsible for the dissolution of their marriage, as well as the shame associated with airing their private matters in a public forum, may prevent survivors from reaching out to formal institutions for assistance.⁸⁴ Survivors may also struggle with fears related to potential consequences, such as doubts regarding the support they may or may not receive from formal institutions.⁸⁵

Some of these concerns were reflected by informants. For instance, a survivor indicated that, even though her husband abused her repeatedly, she never reported him to the police because she was afraid of what people would say about her. She added that she did not want to be blamed for breaking up her family.⁸⁶

Another survivor expressed her distrust towards the criminal justice system and the fear that it may not back her up by noting: 'Which woman has got justice so that I would be motivated to take my case to court? I was afraid that taking my case to formal institutions would only bring me more trouble.'⁸⁷

As a result, fear and shame create complex challenges for survivors, deterring them from seeking help from formal help providers.

82 S-33 (n 33).

83 FGD-2 (n 55).

84 Rico (n 56) 27.

85 United Nations Office on Drug and Crime Vienna (n 78) 45.

86 S-32 (n 49).

87 S-6 (n 50).

4.4 Economic dependence

In cases of IPVAW, unlike violence perpetrated by strangers, survivors may find themselves economically dependent on the perpetrators, often sharing a residence.⁸⁸ This economic dependence can hinder their ability to support themselves and their children, potentially leaving them with the belief that staying with the perpetrator is the only practical option to avoid homelessness.⁸⁹

As such, survivors frequently face a complex dilemma regarding their financial stability. Staying with their abusive partner entails enduring persistent violence, whereas leaving could potentially lead to a host of financial difficulties worse than experiencing IPV.⁹⁰ Consequently, a considerable number of women who are economically dependent on their partners are less inclined to seek help, highlighting how poverty can severely limit their choices for terminating the cycle of violence.⁹¹ In the rare instances where survivors decide to report the abuse, they may withdraw their claims, largely due to their economic dependence on their partners, coupled with the fear of potential eviction from their homes if they persist in pursuing legal action.⁹²

One of the survivors mentioned that '[t]aking my case to the police could result in divorce. Since I am economically dependent on my husband, I don't want a divorce. I don't know what will happen to me if I get a divorce.'⁹³ Another survivor added: 'Even if I suffered severe injuries, I know my background, I am economically dependent on him and I have no one to support me. Therefore, I had no other choice but to mediate and endure.'⁹⁴ Another survivor also stated that since she is economically dependent on her husband, he does whatever he wants and she has no voice.⁹⁵ One survivor revealed: 'I dared not report his repeated abuse because I feared it would lead to divorce, potentially causing a division of common property and the sale of my house, leaving me to wonder what would happen to my children.'⁹⁶

Another survivor expressed a similar concern, saying that she did not report the repetitive IPV she had encountered to formal

88 United Nations Office on Drug and Crime Vienna (n 78) 44.

89 As above.

90 Choden (n 27) 48.

91 As above.

92 As above.

93 Interview with S-7 conducted on 16 February 2023.

94 Interview with S-25 conducted on 3 May 2023.

95 Interview with S-31 conducted on 4 May 2023.

96 Interview with S-30 conducted on 4 May 2023.

institutions because she was afraid that if she did, her husband might file for divorce and her condominium would be sold. She added that she had seen cases in which courts decided on 500 or 1000-birr⁹⁷ maintenance for two children, and she asked how she would be able to raise two children with that amount of money. She mentioned that most women have similar problems as her, and she asked who would address their problems and who would give them justice.⁹⁸

In a focus group discussion, participants stated that it was difficult for survivors of IPVAW to seek help as it is a family matter. Often, the survivor is dependent on the perpetrator and may live with him. This raises the question of where she will live after reporting the case.⁹⁹

In another focus group discussion, one of the participants shared the case on which he had worked a while back, by stating that the case was a rape case, where a 15 year-old girl was raped by a man (an adult) whom she was seeing at the time. The prosecutor had a strong case, but the survivor refused to testify in court, and when she was pushed to do so, she changed her testimony in court so that the perpetrator could be acquitted. When the reason behind this was investigated, it was because she came from a very poor family and he financially supported her and her family.¹⁰⁰

The economic status of a survivor may also make formal help providers inaccessible to her. Since IPVAW cases are investigated by the police and charges are framed, argued and followed by the prosecutor, survivors are not expected to pay for legal professionals or cover court fees. However, they encounter transportation, meals and other fees when they report the case to the appropriate institutions or when they come to courts to testify. Unfortunately, the data collected for this research reveals that a considerable number of survivors are dependent on their perpetrators and cannot afford that.

According to one informant, '[w]omen come to our office after being abused by their partners, and we see that they don't even have enough money for transportation to return to their homes. As a result, the experts within the office contribute from our pockets and give them money for food and transportation.'¹⁰¹

97 US \$1 is exchanged for 56,6 Ethiopian birr on 23 February 2024.

98 S-6 (n 50).

99 FGD-2 (n 55).

100 FGD-3 (n 73).

101 Interview with I-6, conducted on 17 June 2023.

Another informant added that some of the survivors who come to their office arrive with their children. The children start crying because they are hungry, and the women do not have money to buy them food. As a result, the informant and her colleagues often give the women money from their own pockets to help them. She highlighted that this often happens.¹⁰²

Many informants noted that economic dependence on perpetrators leaves survivors feeling voiceless and powerless, depriving them of the ability to report the abuse and seek help.

4.5 Fear for the well-being of children

The well-being of children can act as both an incentive for leaving an abusive relationship and a reason for enduring the abuse. Concerns about the welfare of their children and the potential negative impacts of parental separation can hinder the process of seeking help.¹⁰³ Many women carry a burden of guilt regarding the potential harm to family bonds or the prospect of separating their children from their fathers.¹⁰⁴

In a focus group discussion, informants stated that survivors often do not report incidents of IPVAV because they fear it will lead to divorce and the destruction of their family.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, one survivor stated:¹⁰⁶

I am glad that my children are not growing up without a father, I know the feeling and effect of growing up without a parent because I have experienced it. I don't want my kids to have the same fate. If it were not for that, I wouldn't have stayed with him even for one day.

Another survivor mentioned that despite encountering severe abuse, she agreed to mediation for the sake of her children. She added: 'My children frequently ask for their father; they are too young to understand the abuse I go through.'¹⁰⁷ Another survivor noted that she often had to agree to mediation because of her children, regardless of the brutality of the abuse she endured. She stated that the mediators always said that 'a mother suffers for the sake of her children', and that she should do the same and be a good mother. As a result, she returned home for the sake of her children,

¹⁰² Interview with HJ-16 conducted on 27 October 2022.

¹⁰³ Choden (n 27) 48.

¹⁰⁴ Fidan (n 19) 64.

¹⁰⁵ FGD-3 (n 73).

¹⁰⁶ S-31(n 95).

¹⁰⁷ S-4 (n 32).

and the cycle of violence continued.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, according to the data collected for this research, children are one of the reasons that influence survivors to tolerate IPVAV and refrain from reporting such abuse to formal institutions.

4.6 Issues related to support services available

The delay in survivors' efforts to seek help due to issues related to support services can be attributed to several factors. These include a lack of information about available support services, services not aligning with their specific needs, or encountering unsupportive or negative service providers.

The level of awareness among women regarding the availability of support services plays a pivotal role in shaping their decisions to seek help, as survivors may feel overwhelmed by dealing with uncertainties about where to turn, whom to reach out to for assistance, or how to effectively navigate the support system.¹⁰⁹ In this research, survivors were asked about the sources of information that enabled them to be aware of their rights and where to find assistance. Eighteen per cent of survivors mentioned family and friends, while the rest approached the police, community policing, Kebele, and Women, Children and Social Affairs Office at Woreda or sub-city level on their own, believing that these were appropriate institutions from which to seek assistance. Regarding support services available, when informants were asked whether they had received any form of legal aid, medical, psycho-social or other related support, only 3 per cent of respondents confirmed that they had received medical treatment.

When asked about how support service providers responded to their needs, survivors stated that the way these sources responded to them determined their next step and their trust in the institutions. One survivor stated: 'When I incurred violence, I went to my Kebele; however, they did not aid me in any way. They made me believe that there is no justice in this country. And if you dare to complain about the system in front of them, you will have another thing coming.'¹¹⁰ Another survivor also stated:¹¹¹

I first went to the Sub-City Women, Children and Social Affairs Office; they said it was not their jurisdiction and sent me to the Woreda. And when I went to the Woreda they sent me back to the Sub-City. It was

¹⁰⁸ S-1 (n 47).

¹⁰⁹ Choden (n 27) 159.

¹¹⁰ S-4 (n 32).

¹¹¹ Interview with S-14 conducted on 11 March 2023.

exhausting. They did not assist me in any way except advising me to go back home and try to mediate with my husband. From the way they talked to me, I understood they were not on my side.

Similarly, another survivor stated “I went to the Sub-City Women, Children and Social Affairs Office, but they didn’t help me. Instead, they took his side and blamed me for the violence I encountered.”¹¹² Another survivor emphasised that when she sought help for the violence she experienced from the Women, Children and Social Affairs Office at the Sub-City level, a female expert told her it was not her concern and could not even direct her to a relevant institution. She vowed never to return to that office because she received no remedy and, instead, faced insults.¹¹³

Yet another survivor said that she had tolerated IPV for a long time because she did not know that she could get justice. The Women, Children and Social Affairs Office at the Sub-City level was not helpful, and they made her feel as if there was no way out for her.¹¹⁴ Another survivor stated that when she told the expert in the Women, Children and Social Affairs Office at the Woreda level about the economic violence she had experienced, the expert shrugged her shoulders and told her to try begging.¹¹⁵

Therefore, according to the data collected for this research, some survivors had negative experiences, feeling unsupported or even blamed. Service providers at times failed to effectively assist them, and sometimes directed them to go back home and attempt mediation with their partners. These interactions left survivors feeling helpless and without remedy.

5 Concluding remarks

Informal sources of help emerge as the preferred avenues for resolving IPVAW issues in the study area. While they offer advantages such as facilitating conflict resolution without formal intervention, they also present drawbacks. These sources may cover up problems to preserve marriages, and survivors can face coercion to mediate, potentially endangering their safety. In instances where these sources side with perpetrators, survivors are left feeling alienated and unsupported.

¹¹² S-3 (n 35).

¹¹³ S-4 (n 32).

¹¹⁴ Interview with S-12 conducted on 11 March 2023.

¹¹⁵ S-6 (n 50).

Despite the prevalence of IPVAV, survivors typically turn to formal sources as a last resort. Motivations for approaching formal institutions include the batterer's unwillingness to change, sustaining severe physical injuries, fear for the safety of themselves and their children, and when they are emotional or desire retribution.

Several barriers hinder survivors from seeking assistance from formal institutions. These include survivors' perceptions of the violence; love for the perpetrator; fear and shame; economic dependence; concern for the well-being of their children; and issues related to the availability of support services. These factors significantly influence survivors' decisions to seek help for the violence they endure.

To address the challenges encountered by survivors when seeking help, awareness-raising training should be provided for community elders, religious leaders and other informal support providers. This training should focus on fundamental mediation principles and human rights, empowering them to effectively safeguard the rights of survivors. The training should also highlight the detrimental impact of IPVAV on women's human rights and emphasise the significant number of IPVAV-related offences that are currently criminalised under the country's Criminal Code.

To improve the accessibility of formal institutions, awareness-raising campaigns should be conducted to inform women of their rights and the available services, encouraging them to seek assistance from these institutions. To further enhance accessibility, initiatives aimed at empowering women should be implemented to promote independence and the confidence to report abuses.

Training for support service providers should be conducted to ensure that they are gender-sensitive and responsive. Additionally, developing a comprehensive guideline for client reception and treatment is essential to reduce unprofessional conduct and mistreatment that survivors may experience when seeking help.