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## **“Ke tšile bohadi” - Staying in abusive marriages: A case study of selected women in under-resourced areas of Musina in Limpopo Province**

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**Abstract.** Globally, cases of abused married women have become endemic. One acknowledges the fact that the majority of women are subjected to all forms of abuse, some leading to murder. In South Africa, in particular, there has been an increasing number of women abuse and murder, especially to those women who continue to stay in abusive marriages. The aim is to develop African research lenses or perspectives in studying the phenomenon of women who continue to remain in abusive marriages. It becomes necessary to develop African lenses to reflect on this phenomenon in the light of culture and heritage as being central to African philosophy and epistemology. To that end, selected lived experiences of women were collected for this purpose. A targeted number of women abused was interviewed and their lived experiences were collected and analysed for this purpose. The African Womanism Theory was used in the process of guiding the study and Thematic Content Analysis was used to make sense of the data. This paper concludes that while culture in Africa has been generally praised for its useful tenets and directions, at times it becomes oppressive.

**Keywords.** Abused women, marriage, low-resourced areas, culture, religion

### **Introduction and Background Information**

Cases of abuse among married women have become endemic and a disturbing social phenomenon that affects the community on a daily basis. The World Health Organization (2013:3) found that universally, “1 in 3, or 35% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner”, who in some instances, could have been a marital partner or spouse. There is an alarming growth in the number of women who continue to stay in abusive marriages in South Africa (WHO, 2013; Herman 2015; Trevillion, Oram, Feder & Howard, 2012). A study conducted in three South African provinces highlights that 19% of women in Limpopo, 27% in the Eastern Cape and 28% in Mpumalanga have suffered physical abuse in their lifetime by their intimate or marital partners (Abrahams, Mathews, Martin, Vetten, Van der Merwe and Jewkes, 2013). Evidently, the statistics are disproportionate to the total population in each province; a cause for much more concern.

Media reports have reported that women abuse is growing persistently (Seabi, 2012; Maphumulo, 2018 & Eckstein, 2011). Statistics South Africa (2018:6) reported that “although the crime rate in general, has decreased between 2013/14 and 2016/17, women abuse such as physical abuse, sexual assault, increased drastically between 2015/16 and 2016/17”. Gender

Links (2012) reported that 36% of women in KwaZulu-Natal, 51% in Gauteng and 45% in the Western Cape have an experience of abuse and the majority of those women continued to stay in such abusive marriages. Given the aforesaid mentioned information, the abuse of women in marriage remains a serious problem and despite several attempts to eradicate this problem, yet we are still faced with this problem.

Historical evidence shows that women have always suffered abuse at the hands of their husbands (WHO, 2013; Medical Research Council Organization, 2010 & Herman, 2015). Sibanda and Msibi (2016) argue that there are cultural, social, religious and economic factors that play a role in driving women abuse. This notwithstanding, factors that force women to stay in such abusive circumstances were the subject of this study. Therefore, it is important to understand the contributing factors for women who continue to remain in an abusive marriage.

### **Problem Statement**

The abuse of married women is a serious problem that affects many. This is the case irrespective of class or ethnicity. Seabi (2012) found that between 10 and 60 per cent of married women of reproductive age in South Africa have had experience of abuse in their marriage. Interestingly, and in line with the above statement, societal, cultural and religious teachings seem to have an influence in accelerating abuse of women in marriages.

However, evidence shows that women continue to stay in abusive marriages even when the abuse is sustained (Eckstein, 2011). According to Shilubane and Khoza (2014) hold the view that there are circumstances that make it difficult for women to leave abusive marriages and are a notable increase in the number of cases of abuse which are reported on a daily basis. The above statement is supported by The South African Police Service (2017) reported that cases of abuse against women are regularly reported by women at police stations and this includes women in marriage.

Medical Research Council of South Africa (MRC-SA) (2010) study (cited in Sibanda & Msibi 2016) found that women in rural areas in South Africa have been victims of societal, cultural and religious teachings which reinforce patriarchy. In support of the above-mentioned statement, WHO (2010) opines that patriarchal structures are common phenomena in African countries and expose a lot of women to abuse as well as to diseases and physical injuries that could result from the abusive behaviour. It is emphasized that women's unequal status is persistent in patriarchal societies (Mies, 2014; Smith & Segal, 2018; Rawal & Agrawal, 2016). There is a saying in Northern Sotho which states: "Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi". Simply translated, it implies that a married woman has to constantly stay at the bridegroom's home no matter what problems she may encounter, including enduring abuse by her partner. Therefore, as a result of such teachings, women may continue to stay in an abusive marriage even though the abuse is sustained.

Eckstein (2011) maintains that women who are in abusive marriages continue to make justifications as to why they remain in such relationships. The author holds the view that some women in abusive marriages focus on the positive social aspects such as love for their partner, instead of negative aspects of abuse from their partner in order to cope with their marriages (Eckstein, 2011).

Based on previous research conducted on the abuse of women in marriages, there seem to be several explanations forcing abused women to stay in abusive marriages. Herman (2015) concurs that most women may continue to stay in abusive marriages despite negative consequences. As noted by Eckstein, (2011) these include mostly fear of being alone, lack of a safe haven, economic dependence, and fear of losing security or surviving on moments of great happiness.

Research reveals that patriarchal structures and culture are the root causes of women who continue to remain in abusive marriages (Shilubane & Khoza, 2014; The Gender-Based Violence Organisation, 2012; Sanders, 2015). Mies (2014) argues that males are dominant and are considered authoritative figures while women are considered to be weak in most African countries. However, women abuse in marriages have been traditionally hidden within homes and there has been, until quite recently, a general lack of awareness of the seriousness and extent of the problem (Seabi, 2012). Nonetheless, Shilubane and Khoza (2014) found that a woman who is abused may be too embarrassed and humiliated to speak out as a result of a culture that encourages patriarchy. As a result, this limits the effectiveness of women to report abuse or to leave their abusive marriages.

### **Methodology**

This study followed a qualitative approach and descriptive in nature. The researchers sought to describe the experiences of women who continue to remain in abusive marriages. In the case of this study, the researchers' interest was to describe the experiences of women for the purpose of developing a culturally truthful understanding of the authenticity of women's abuse. This research used a case study design. Flick (2014) explains that the aim of case studies is the exact description or reconstruction of cases and processes under analysis. Purposive sampling was employed such that full in-depth information was collected from relevant sources.

A qualitative and descriptive design was used to describe the experiences of women who continue to remain in abusive marriages. "Descriptive design was chosen because it describes real-life situations", (Burns & Grove 2011). A qualitative research method was used in order to investigate women abuse in marriage. Specifically, a case study approach was adopted by focusing on the experiences of women who continue to remain in abusive marriages. Leedy and Ormrod (2010:94) argue that "qualitative research involves looking at characteristics, or qualities, that cannot easily be reduced to numerical values' and typically aims to examine the many nuances and complexities of a particular phenomenon".

### **Population and sampling**

The population consisted of married abused women from under-resourced traditional areas of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Participants were identified purposefully through referrals by a local social worker who once handled the cases. Researchers focused only on women who married traditionally. Women who were not married did not form part of the study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Limpopo Ethics Committee. The permission to conduct the study was sought from the Department of Health and participants to record their experiences. Prior to conducting the interviews, informed consent was obtained from the participants. Participation was voluntary and that the confidentiality of their information was ensured. Nevertheless, the participants were informed that they can withdraw from participation at any time without being questioned. Most importantly, the participants were informed that their responses would not be linked with their identities and that after transcribing the recordings would be kept safe.

### **Data collection**

In-depth individual interviews were conducted on 20 married abused women who were referred from Thuthuzela Care Centres, a care centre for sexually abused women, and Khuseleka, a one-stop centre for abused women from Musina in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The data was collected over a period of

5 weeks using the participant's language and also recording while field notes were taken during interviews

The data was collected until saturation was reached, which is, interviews continued until no new information was obtained. Interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began during the data collection process when interviews were conducted. The records were constantly reviewed and maintained. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated in English. The researchers used Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) to analyse data. As outlined by Braun and Clark (2011), TCA entails identifying, analysing and reporting themes within the data. Raw data from interview transcripts, field notes and recordings were coded, and themes were developed so that meanings can be interpreted and conclusions made. The steps of Thematic Content Analysis as clarified by Braun and Clark (2011) were followed in the study.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Literature suggests that cases of women abuse in marriages have become endemic and a social issue that affects people on a daily basis (World Health Organization, 2013; Abrahams et al, 2013 & Shivambu, 2015). Research shows that wife abuse by their husbands has been on the public agenda for many years but the phenomenon is still not studied sufficiently, nor are there effective measures in place to deal with the scale of the problem (Seabi, 2012; Eckstein, 2011 & Herman, 2015). The World Health Organization (2013:3) found that universally, “1 in 3, or 35% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner”, who in some instances, could have been a marital partner or spouse. In a study conducted by Seabi (2012) found that between 10 and 60 per cent of married women of reproductive age in South Africa have had experience of abuse in their marriage. Therefore, it is evident that the abuse of women in marriages by their husbands have been visible throughout history (Moore, 1979 cited in Shivambu, 2015:7).

### **Societal Aspects That Sustain Patriarchal Tendencies**

The Gender-Based Violence Organisation (2012) reported that individuals who perceive abusive behaviours as normal because of societal standards may find it hard to identify their marriage as abusive and therefore, see no reason to seek help. The abuse of women in marriages is part of everyday life for many women and in some traditional societies it is accepted as a norm, Starburg (2006) cited in (Shivambu, 2015). For this reason, women may continue to stay in an abusive marriage because society does not see it as a problem. It may be even more difficult to realise the abuse is unhealthy because of societal norms, cultures and beliefs.

Cases of women abuse in marriages have become an endemic and a social issue that affects people on a daily basis and in many traditional societies it is accepted as the norm (Starburg, 2006). For example, “There is a saying in Northern Sotho which states “Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi”. “Patriarchy, which exists in most emerging countries, endorses the male as head of the family (Shivambu, 2015). As a result, patriarchy contributes to the incidence of abuse of women by their husbands as they are viewed as the property of their male spouses (Aderinto, 2010).

### **Culture and Traditional perceptions**

There are diverse cultural insights about how women must be treated in marriage and how they should respond to that behaviour. Research reveals that in most emerging countries

women in marriages, culturally are taught to obey their husband's authority and at all times to show respect (WHO, 2013; Shivambu, 2015; Shilubane & Khoza, 2014). As found by Brown-Miller (2012) culturally women in marriages are expected to be subordinate to the man because men are traditionally professed to be head of the family. Cultural justifications for abuse of women in marriage typically track from traditional beliefs of the proper roles of men and women (Saine, 2012). Therefore, it is argued that socialisation, tradition and culture thus encourage and promotes abuse of women in marriage, in the sense that men are expected to dominate in all situations (Shivambu, 2015). This statement is supported by Brown-Miller (2012) states that because of these traditional perceptions and cultural beliefs, men are always expected to continuously strive to be a leader and determined to get what they want in their marriages.

Aris (2011) positions that cultural beliefs play an important role in the abuse of women in marriages, in the sense that most of the women in an abusive marriage who believe that for the sake of protection and care, they should obey to everything their husbands say even when the abuse is sustained. Most importantly, many women in abusive marriage are raised in confidence that their identity is united to the man's (Saine, 2012). However, Aris (2011) argues that "mistaken beliefs is rooted in most African cultures and that that rural African woman, born and raised in these cultures, have little or no knowledge about other belief systems". For this reason, several authors concur that cultural societies till to date, often differentiate between fair and unfair reasons for abuse of women in marriage and often distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable ways of abuse (Saine, 2012; UNICEF, 2011 & Brown-Miller 2012).

According to WHO (2013) states that culturally, husbands are given the right to punish their wives and even in the situation where culture grants men considerable control over women behaviour, abusive husbands generally exceed the norm. This statement is supported by Wadesanga et al., (2011) argues that cultural norms create an environment where women abuse in marriage is accepted, justified and women believe it is a normal part of marriage. Shilubane and Khoza (2014:95) found that "Culturally, black women in South Africa are perceived as subordinate and inferior and are not expected to take part in decision making". However, women believe that if they complain no one will listen to them (Aris, 2011).

Ekstein and McDonald (2010) posit that cultural philosophies in many developing countries provide legitimacy for the abuse of women in marriage in some certain circumstances. Although, throughout history culturally male control of family means unavoidable places decision-making authority in husband's hands, leading to male dominance and property right over women (UNICEF, 2011). According to McDonald and Eckstein (2010) in many societies globally, women are expected to be subjected to their male partner's desires sexually and respect him socially at all times.

### **Patriarchy and the abuse of women in marriage**

The universality of abuse against women by their husbands across the boundaries of nation, culture, race, class and religion points to its roots in patriarchy. Shivambu (2015) defines patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. He further argues that historically, gender roles, which are the socially constructed roles of women and men, have been ordered hierarchically, with men exercising power and control over women. It is therefore argued that women abused by their husbands thus serves as a mechanism for maintaining male authority. According to Renzetti, Edleson and Bergen (2011) When a woman is subjected to abuse for disobeying social norms, patriarchy which governs female sexuality and family roles also reinforces prevailing gender norms.

In most African communities' male dominance over their wife is still supported by many families. A study conducted by Evans (2013) found that in most African countries patriarchal dominance is still supported by a moral order which reinforces the marital hierarchy. Although Shivambu (2015) argues that women who lived in traditional societies are expected their husband's respect and loyalty in all areas of their married life. Masenya (1996) states that religious teachings, cultural norms and the Bible reinforce the patriarchal system, and contains elements that oppress women. However, there is an argument between academic and religious writings, which support patriarchy and contribute to a better understanding of the status of women in present-day society. Nevertheless, it must be significantly noted that women in developed countries are also victims of different types of abuse.

Literature suggests that women abuse is prevalent in all societies particularly in black communities and married African women who are traditionally rooted in culture treat the abuse of African women as a secret (Pandey, 2008; Jones, 2014 & WHO, 2013). Although, the ideology of patriarchy also features obviously in the explanations of African rural-based women in abusive marriage in South Africa (Sibanda-Moyo, Khonje & Brobbey, 2017). However, Masenya (1996) argues that the reasons women in abusive marriages are argued to be historical and deeply rooted in culture, societal and religious teachings. The World Health Organization (2013) found that worldwide, 1 in 3, or 35%, of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner who in some instances could have been a marital partner or spouse. However, a study conducted in South Africa by Jack, (2014) reveal that 50% to 60% of marital relationships involve abuse whereby women suffer the abuse. Although studies of African women in abusive marriages in South Africa revealed culture as a factor generally contributing to the high rates of women abuse in marriages (WHO, 2013; Jack, 2014; Renzetti, Edleson & Bergen, 2011).

### **Religion**

According to Murray and Graves (2013), religious teachings that promote male power and female submission are found in many scriptural texts and are often taken out of context as a means of justifying physical and psychological abuse against women. Religious teachings about forgiveness can also perpetuate abuse if the victim interprets them as a need to forgive and return to an abusive relationship. Religious teachings which in most cases made women's relatively disadvantaged position in South African society inferior have also been factored into this argument (Djopkan, 2013). There is a general consensus, nevertheless, that these accounts do not stand on their own but interact in a complex manner to produce the widespread nature and critical extents of women in South Africa. This research report presents explanations informed by women's experiences and puts forth women's own explanations of abuse in marriages in South Africa.

Djopkan, (2013) point out that although most religions preach peace and love, however, history shows that they have also perpetrated and condoned the abuse of women in marriages. The above-mentioned author also argues that Christian churches, namely the Catholic church, still criticize divorce and promotes negative views of marriage after divorce, i.e. as divorce is considered a sin. As a result, women are thus encouraged to remain in an abusive marriage and endure any form of abuse in order for them to keep respect and social acceptance (Fortune & Enger, 2006).

Morgan and Bjorkert, 2006 (cited in Shilubane & Khoza, 2014:93) found that "Most societies perpetuate violence against women, and the reality is that violations of women's human rights are a misinterpretation of religious tenets". Religion may be another reason why women may be persuaded to remain in abusive marriages because some religious writings

recommend the entire control of a husband over his wife (National Resource Centre on Domestic Violence, 2007). For example, misinterpretation of Ephesians 5:22-23 New International Version says that “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife”. As a result of such misinterpretation, women may continue to remain in abusive marriages.

Dobash and Dobash, 1979 (cited in Shivambu, 2015) state that “Christianity was based upon the principle of patriarchy and not equality”. It is evident that Christian scriptures have much influence on cultural beliefs. According to Murray and Graves (2013), religious teachings that promote male power and female submission are found in many scriptural texts and are often taken out of context as a means of justifying physical and psychological abuse against women. Therefore, religious teachings about forgiveness can also perpetuate abuse if the victim interprets them as a need to forgive and return to an abusive marriage (Murray & Graves, 2013). This explanation of religious teachings includes, but does not exclude Judaism, Islam and Christianity (NRC DV, 2007).

According to Idriss and Abbas (2011), in the Islamic religion, there are instances where a Muslim husband is lawfully permitted to use physical force against his wife. In various Islamic texts, there is evidence that some Islamic scholars believe that a husband is permitted to use force against his wife. One of the most cited verses in this context is in the Quran (2014:94), entitled Surah An-Nisa. It is translated as follows: “Men are the protectors, guardians and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other and because they spend (to support them) from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in the husband’s absence what Allah orders them to guard. As to those women on whose part you see ill-conduct (that is, disobedience, rebellion) admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds (and last) beat them”.

### **Factors that characterize abusive marriage**

Married women may isolate themselves socially because of the abuse they go through at home. Steptoe, Shankar, Demakakos, and Wardle, (2013), define social isolation as an objective and quantifiable reflection of reduced social network size and scarcity of social contact. The above authors argue that through controlling or threatening behaviours, perpetrators can cut a victim’s social network and restrict their interactions with others. The World Health Organization (2010) states that isolation can include insisting on knowing where they are and making them always believe in societal norms, religious beliefs and culture. On the other side of the coin, Medical Research Council (2010) concludes that abuse is caused by a combination of factors rather than any single factor operating in isolation. For example, a man who believes strongly that the man should be the head of the household will be threatened by loss of work, particularly if the wife is employed.

According to Wilson (2011), argues that social isolation is accomplished by the husband in a marriage maintaining control over his wife time, associates and awareness of herself. As the underpinning of women who continue to remain in an abusive marriage is erratic and husband’s shows kind or loving in some incident, women in a marriage feel they can change the situation and remain in an abusive marriage (Hester & Donovan, 2014). This statement is supported by Wilson (2011) who argues that when incidents of abuse in marriage occur, the woman attempts harder to preserve the marriage and thereby investing more time into it. Wallace (1997) correctly notes the following modes of the social system that characterize women abuse in marriage:

- Social isolation: the abuser isolates the woman in marriage so that no support system or no family she only has the husband who is abusive.

- Economic stress: dependency is associated with financial. The husband may cut off the woman's financial support system. This may make it difficult for a woman to leave an abusive marriage.

- Power imbalance: if the husband in marriage is threatened by the woman's achievement, abuse in that marriage is likely to occur more frequently.

Wilson (2011) states that the husband in a marriage may forbid their partners to work, thereby creating financial dependence. The above author argues that many issues of power and partner control characterize most relationships where a woman is being abused.

### **Fear**

Married women may fear their partner as a result of abuse. Whiting, Oka, and Fife (2012) state that the threat of bodily and emotional harm is powerful, abusers use this to control and keep women trapped because they are afraid of their partners. Chabalala (2018) argues that abused women in marriage are much more likely to be terrorized and traumatized because of fear of their partners. Many times, leaving an abusive marriage is not only emotionally difficult but can also be life-threatening, (Stephoe, et al. 2013). In fact, the most dangerous time in an abusive marriage is post-break-up. This statement is confirmed by Chabalala, (2018) who state that Karabo Mokoena attempted to exit the relationship and she was in the process of establishing an organization that would help abused women and children.

Like widows, women in abusive marriage mourn the loss of the bond they have come to value. Roberts, (2007) identified twelve losses encountered by women in abusive relationship that intensifies their feelings of loneliness: safety, everyday routine, living in a home, personal possessions, self-esteem, a father figure for the children, love and caring from the male partner, success in marriage, hopes and dreams, trust in their partners, view of the world as a safe place and status and support systems. According to WHO (2010), the psychodynamics specific to a battery relationship may intensify a battered woman's fear of loneliness. Battered women are often told that no one will want them by the abuser. This form of emotional abuse leaves the battered woman with low self-esteem and they believe that no other person will want them. Therefore, they stay in their abusive marriages because they fear to be alone (Lettie, Lockhart & Danis, 2010).

### **Limitations**

The study sought to increase our knowledge of the impact of abuse of women in marriage. However, it had some limitations. The focus was only on married women who continue to remain in abusive marriages. Women who are not married were not be interviewed. The generalizability of the findings from qualitative studies is limited because of the selected specific geographic location for this study.

### **Recommendation**

Women who are in abusive marriages should be provided with support systems which would enable them to end abuse, for instance, the criminal justice system and health care system. Men in all sectors of society should receive a clear message that all those who abuse their wives in marriage would be held accountable and punished. Immediate support should be provided to women who are in abusive marriage from networks such as friends, family, neighbours and community structures. All members of society should be educated about abuse.

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