



A Sociological Perspective of Men's Underreporting of Domestic Violence and a Lack of Appropriate Interventions in the Caribbean

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Introduction

There is a common social perception of domestic violence that illustrates a one-sided picture of men as perpetrators and women as victims.

Women's experience of domestic violence as victims is considerably more documented than men's experience (Mc Feely et al. 2013; Smith 2012).

A UNODC (2013) report indicated that 12% of men in Grenada, 7% of men in Jamaica and 4% of men in Trinidad and Tobago were killed as a result of domestic violence. The statistics do not show the extent of men's experience with domestic violence as victims since it is grossly underreported in the Caribbean.

This paper discusses interventions for men and highlights the fact that the majority of domestic violence services are designed to assist mostly women and children.

A sociological perspective is applied to the discussion to explain why men underreport domestic violence and why there is a lack of appropriate interventions to assist them. Recommendations are made in terms of research, intervention and service provision.

Men's Experience with Domestic Violence

Kolbe and Büttner (2020) found a prevalence rate of 3.4 to 20.3% for male victims of domestic violence who had experienced particularly physical abuse. They concluded that the prevalence of domestic violence against men have not been extensively studied to date.



Schlack et al. (2013) showed that over a 12-month period, 0.9% of men had been victims of physical abuse compared to 1.2% of women victims, which demonstrated a very small significant difference of 0.3% between the two sexes.



Thureau et al. (2015) further demonstrated that 9% of men experienced domestic violence on numerous occasions, 70% of men had suffered psychological violence, 10% of men had been strangulated by their partner and weapons were used against 33% of men in the study, all by their female partner.



However, there continues to be a lack of sound measure for the prevalence of domestic violence perpetration against men (Alhabib et al., 2010).

The Caribbean Context

- According to van Wijk (2012) while there have been some efforts to identify male domestic violence victimization incidence rates in the Caribbean, only domestic violence against women and children has been studied and that “virtually nothing is known about domestic violence against men in the Caribbean, or its consequences”.
- For example, A 2018 UNDOC study on gender-related homicide of women and girls showed that in Guyana, 85% of women that were killed were murdered by an intimate partner or family-related homicide. The figure was slightly higher in Jamaica where 90% of domestic violence-related homicide victims were women. In Trinidad and Tobago, nearly one-third of female homicides were domestic violence and family-related, according to the study.
- There were no comparative data for men in these countries.
- The aforementioned figures highlight the fact that there is still limited research on men and domestic violence in the Caribbean.
- Due to the lack of empirical studies on male domestic violence victimization in the region, there is an inaccurate perception that the phenomenon only affects women and children in Caribbean societies.

Men's Disclosure of Domestic Violence

Bates (2020) study findings demonstrated that the attitudes towards male victims of domestic violence impacted on their help-seeking behaviour. The men in the sample from Bates' study indicated that "they felt that society did not believe them" or "perceived them as either weak or abusers".

According to Hogan et al. (2012), there is a lack of recognition within society that men can be affected by domestic violence.

Men are apprehensive to discuss and disclose their experiences of domestic violence because they tend to feel shame and emasculation (McCarrick 2015).

The concept of the "minority man" is discussed by Hester (2013) who explains that media coverage of domestic violence places quite an emphasis on female victims, with very little mention of male victims, only to state that 'men are in the minority'.

Men's Disclosure of Domestic Violence in the Caribbean

In the Caribbean, there is insufficient data on men's disclosure of domestic violence.



In Trinidad and Tobago, a common perception is that men are unlikely victims of domestic violence. Discourses and research on the island are based on stereotypical views of what the victims and abusers look like (Joseph-Edwards and Wallace (2020).



Male victims of domestic violence are often reluctant to disclose their victimization due to fear of ridicule, embarrassment, stigmatization and negative treatment towards them.



This similarly applies to reporting by males in other countries, given the particular social shame, humiliation and even punishment attached to being a male victim of domestic violence (George 1994; 2002).

Interventions for Male Victims of Domestic Violence

- Interventions for men experiencing domestic violence victimization are not always able to provide them the services that they need (Hines et al. 2007; Cook 2009).
- Cook (2009) demonstrated apparent challenges men faced when they sought help from existing hotlines, programs and even law enforcement. For example, when calling domestic violence hotlines, the men in the sample reported that the hotline workers advised that they only helped women.
- Through the works of CEDAW, major efforts have been made in bringing domestic violence to the forefront and calling for change across the globe, including the Caribbean region. However, the regional response has been primarily towards women.
- Different Caribbean countries have developed national organizations to treat with domestic violence, which have targeted mostly women. One such country is Jamaica, which has over seven national domestic violence agencies, most of which provide services mainly for women.

Sociological perspectives

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism acknowledges both social agency and social forces shaping and constraining social action, so that social behaviour is theorized as both structurally constrained and actively constructed (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007).

Symbolic interactionism offers a powerful lens through which to view domestic violence particularly from the perspective of the male victim including their reasons for not reporting domestic violence victimization as well as the barriers they face to help-seeking.

The way male victims of domestic violence are perceived by law enforcement and service providers may influence their identity and self-esteem as males in society as well as influence the appropriate action taken on the part of service providers to assist the male victim.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, intervention services tend not to support male victims of domestic violence in restructuring their sense of self as well as recognizing their competencies on which to rebuild their self-esteem.

Hegemonic Masculinities

Just as male rape victims embody subordinate masculinities, so do male domestic violence victims who are also marginalized and stigmatized as 'abnormal' or 'deviant'. (Javaid 2017).

Men's attitudes towards seeking help are strongly associated with adherence to social norms and ideologies surrounding masculinity (Addis and Mahalik, 2003; Berger et al. 2013).

Such norms endorse being apathetic, self-reliant, emotionally inexpressive and in control of one's self and situation (Nam et al., 2010).

Self and societal perception of masculinity are also important factors in reporting domestic violence, help-seeking and the lack of appropriate interventions that provide specific support for male victims (see Huntley et al. 2019).



Gender Bias

Explicit and implicit gender biases are still embedded in our culture and can affect the way society and intervention services respond to male victims.

These explicit and implicit gender biases can also affect the choices men themselves make with regards to their help seeking behaviour.

This is supported by findings from Corbally (2015) who found that the men who had children, reported that they received gender biased treatment from social services and the bias and consequently the negative experiences they encountered resulted in the men giving up on future help-seeking.

There are few data available to describe the experiences of male domestic violence victims, particularly in the Caribbean. If there are services available, there are very few opportunities, spaces, or professionals trained to work with specifically males when it involves domestic violence (Choi and An 2016).

Conclusion

- Addressing this stigmatized topic in an open and supportive way is a mandatory prerequisite to identifying male victims of domestic violence in any practice.
- Further understanding of this topic is warranted through extensive and updated research particularly in the Caribbean.
- Such research may lead to the development of theory and practice, which may inform practitioners' work with male victims (Migliaccio 2002; Hogan et al. 2012;).
- Intervention services should be tailored specifically to support men and this should receive considerable funding similar to interventions that were developed to support women.
- Services geared towards males would allow a safe space for men to disclose their issues and process their feelings that are deemed incongruent with their gender roles. This would also eliminate the gender biases inherent in generic services.

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