

The Burden of Bearing Daughters: Experiences of Gender-Based Violence Towards Women Birthing Only Girl Children Within Rural South African Marriages

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Abstract: This qualitative case study explores the phenomenon of gender-based violence perpetrated against women by fellow women for only birthing girl children within rural patriarchal South African marriages. While extant literature on intimate partner violence typically documents such abuse as inflicted by male romantic partners, the current study reveals that women also inflict emotional, psychological, and financial maltreatment onto fellow women who are unable to bear sons, manipulated by discriminatory cultural mores that sons are more valuable than daughters. Through rigorous document analysis, the current study found that bearing only daughters within a patriarchal marital context precipitates victimisation of the mother by mothers-in-law and other female family members including the community. Blame and illtreatment for failing to produce a male heir reflects the lower status of girls and women as well as denial of women's fundamental human rights. Critical consciousness-raising and educational interventions are exigently needed in rural communities to promote gender equality and universal respect for all women, regardless of the sex of children they bear.

Keywords: Culture, gender-based violence, girl and boy children, marriage.

Introduction

Marriage is a very broad concept, and it means different things for different people. Baloyi and Manala (2019) define marriage in terms of the functions it serves and acknowledge that in the African context, one of them is childbearing. Baloyi and Manala (2019) further argue that as much as childbearing is appreciated in the African families, the celebration is not equal. The reality is that male children are given more value and priority than the female ones. The researchers are in support to the abovementioned authors that the preference and favour given to the birth of male children than the female ones, promotes gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence is a violence directed against a person because of that person's gender and can take multiple forms including physical, emotional, financial, psychological and otherwise (Centre for Women's Global Leadership, 2017; Dlamini, 2021). Despite the well documented literature about the intimate partner violence that most of this crime is perpetuated by men, women can also contribute. Gender-based violence does not consider sex, race, religion, status (Gill, 2018) and relationship hence women are also perpetrators. The perpetration of gender-based violence by women to women is done in the name of culture. Culture is defined by Machaka (2019, 36) to be reflecting the values and beliefs held by members of a community and is transmitted from generation to generation.

As already highlighted, this research was qualitative in nature and adopted case study approach. Empowerment theory served as a lens. The findings are that women can also be the perpetrators of gender-based violence to other women. Being unable to bear a boy child as a wife, can expose a woman to victimisation. Culture can be used to manipulate, victimise and blame women for bearing only girl-children in the marriage. The experiences of these mothers are explored and shared in this study.

Materials

This study was conducted in two month's period due to its nature that it was a desk top review. The two academics ensured that their University libraries were massively utilised to gather sufficient data. More facilities such as internet services also came on board to complement the existing library services and as a result enough data was collected.

Theoretical framework

Empowerment theory underpinned this study. Julian Rappaport, the social scientist identified Empowerment theory in 1981, through the study of the relationship between social systems and individual wellbeing in the community context (Willig & Rogers, 2017). According to Willig and Rogers (2017), the empowerment originated from the American community psychology. Individuals are connected to the social systems and this relationship can be studied through Community psychology (Willig & Rogers, 2017). Through his engagement with individuals and social systems, Rappaport established the need to empower those with less than their fair share of power to understand their own situation, gain more power and take the responsibility.

Yearwood, Cox and Cassidy (2016) defined the empowerment in the context of the social workers and refers to it as a tool used to increase change. Social workers are using empowerment as a tool towards the achievement and building an autonomy and control in peoples' lives (Martinez-Rico, Simón, Cañadas & McWilliam, 2022). The basic tenets of Empowerment theory are that it recognises that oppression is a primary contributor to disempowerment and particularly to the marginalised groups (Martinez-Rico et al, 2022). This theory relates well in this study in a sense that not only the marginalised groups (women giving birth to girl-children) are empowered, but the bigger community as well. The marginalised women are empowered to appreciate themselves and their girl children as human beings (individual level). On the community level, the empowerment theory promotes awareness to community members to observe and practise the Constitution and respect the women giving birth to girl children as human beings.

Methods

This study seeks to report on the findings of a qualitative desktop research conducted to explore the phenomenon of gender-based violence perpetrated against women by fellow women for only birthing girl children within rural patriarchal South African marriages. Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich printed and online materials related to gender-based violence, patriarchal cultural practices, and the experiences of women birthing only daughters to collect sufficient data. Data was collected through extensive review of relevant literature, including academic journal articles, books, and online sources. Document analysis was employed to interpret the data. The study was limited by its reliance on available published accounts and the inability to directly observe cultural practices or interview affected women.

Discussion and findings

Marriage

Marriage is defined by different people differently depending on their context. According to Ogoma (2014, 95) marriage is an "intended temporary or permanent union between a man and a woman that is socially, culturally or legally recognised". Mafela (2014) and Ogoma (2019) further unpack the marriage and stipulate that it is a public issue because it cannot just take place without the knowledge, recognition and celebration by the other significant others or community members. The implied message here is that there is some form of approval, support and celebration of the marriage in that particular community. The element of approval is emphasised by Akapini, Chirani and Bamora (2023) that this union of man and woman should go through acceptable practices such as payment of bride wealth, family gatherings, exchange of gifts and cultural performances. This approval is the confirmation in that community that two families are connected by marriage. In the study of customary marriage, Saini et al., (2022) including Akapini et al., (2023) opine that even though the actual marriage pertain two individuals (man and a woman), families and the larger community have a significant impact on how marriage is established and maintained. The notion of the involvement of more than just the couple is also confirmed by Sindane (2019) that the individuals are to a certain extent influenced by their families in selecting a spouse. However, Mafela (2014) suggests that in an African context marriage is not reciprocal, it is not between a man and a woman marrying each other, instead a man marries the woman. Let alone the same sex marriage.

In addition to the marriage definition, Ayisi (1997) adds an element of procreation. According to Bateman (2020) procreation refers to reproduction. Taking into consideration that one of the purpose of the marriage is procreation, Ayisi (1997) and Ogoma (2014) further stipulate that a marriage without a child/ children, is not a marriage. The researchers' argument is that not having a child or children, does not make a family less than being a family. This

issue is further considered to be a discrimination and equivalent to the stigma and gender-based violence. In supporting the Ogoma (2014)'s argument that the family is not just a component of the man, the wife and their children, the researchers argue that the departed souls, relatives and the unborn generations are regarded as members of the family. It does not matter whether there are children or not in the marriage, hence, the family will always be socially, culturally and legally appreciated with or without biological children. The researchers' viewpoint is that labelling to the family without the child/ren is similar to the one with girl child/ren as previously stipulated.

Discrimination

Sindane (2019); Hackett et al., (2020) as well as Lang and Spitzer (2020) define discrimination as the differential treatment of an individual based on a socially ascribed characteristic. Giurgiu and Damian (2015) postulate that discrimination may be direct or indirect and multiple connotations such as harassment, victimisation and attaining the dignity of the person etc. Phenomena that are usually associated to discrimination are racism, sexism, stereotypes (Giurgiu and Damian, 2015). In this situation women (the bearer of the girl-child/ren) are stigmatised instead of being appreciated for bearing a child into the family. Sindane (2019) and Hackett et al., (2020) highlight that it is unfortunate that the discrimination and stigmatisation can start within the family. Despite the Constitutional rights that nobody can be discriminated against their sex, race, ethnicity and others, women are treated against the Constitution. This is also against Maslow's hierarchy of needs level two and three -love and sense of belonging as well as security and safety (Özyiğit, 2017; Hale et al., 2019).

A discovery has been made that discrimination is not only emanating from apartheid policies, but culturally based in African families. It has been identified from the literature that African marriages intentionally or unintentionally promote discrimination starting from the families and other sub-systems of the bigger system. This notion of discrimination, promotion of gender-based violence and patriarchy, is noted by Baloyi and Manala (2019) that it is culturally based. This practice on its own is against the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996 which emphasises human dignity and respect. According to Sindane (2019) respect is a basic building block of a healthy and satisfactory marriage. The Constitution further promotes and recognises the rights of its citizens.

The abovementioned discrimination treatment also denies the mother of the girl child a sense of belonging to the family and a bigger society because she is mothering a girl child. Hence, Machaka (2019) and Baloyi (2022) postulate that in each and every societal group there are certain traditions, norms and values including beliefs, which positively benefitting the society and those which are harmful as well. The abovementioned authors further emphasise that this attitude influences discrimination, oppression, domination and exploitation of women in those relationships. Williams et al., (2019); Hackett et al., (2020) as well as Slobodin et al., (2021) link discrimination with poor mental and physical health, including psychological distress and decreased life satisfaction. Stress, isolation and depression are experienced as a result of discrimination and rejection (Mundell et al., 2011; Sindane, 2019; Williams et al., 2019; Slobodin et al., 2021). Physical health such as hypertension and acute cardiovascular sickness can also be developed (Hackett et al., 2020).

Mubangizi and Tlale (2023) connect the discrimination of girls and women from the birth of a girl child and link it to the customary marriage. The abovementioned authors are of the view that customary laws uphold and promote the principle of patriarchy in which girls and women are discriminated from birth. The treatment does not end up during birth but continues through socialisation for girls to live a life of being male subordination throughout, either as daughters, sisters, wives, and widows (Mubangizi & Tlale, 2023). The birth of a girl child in the South African marriages is a good thing, but the cultural treatment of giving less value to the girl child, make women (the bearer of the girl children), less important and discriminated against. This treatment makes the woman feel useless and valueless as the husband will be encouraged to marry another woman who will give birth to boys and make the family proud. Giving birth to girl children in the South African rural marriages, can be equivalent to a childless family and therefore the marriage can be dissolved on that ground (Baloyi, 2020). This treatment is against Baloyi (2022) that marriage is a partnership which should be characterised by mutuality, respect and love. In other words, this should defeat any sign of negative cultural ideologies which may attempt to denigrate other person. The discrimination treatment contravenes the South African Constitution especially when it is practised by other women to their fellow women.

Mothering girl child

According to Machaka (2019), the general feeling in this context is that in South Africa, girls and boys are treated differently by the families and societies. Boys are receiving a high treatment and respect and girls are disproportionately facing lower levels of investment in their health, nutrition and education (Machaka, 2019). Through culture and patriarchy, it is becoming normal and well accepted that girls and women are placed in an inferior position.

The appreciation of a boy more than a girl child in the South African families does not come as a surprise because it is socially and culturally acceptable.

Women who are mothering girl children in the marriage are seen as useless and lowering the status of their husbands in those communities, hence the husband is encouraged and allowed to marry another woman. Due to the low level of girls and women in South African marriages, nobody will ever think about the feelings of those women, and bullying will take place. Antiri (2016) and Gottier (2019) define bullying as the experience of causing another person (woman) inferior and unimportant. Social, verbal and physical bullying becomes relevant (Antiri, 2016; Gottier, 2019). In this situation, these women are bullied by their family members including mothers-in-law, fellow women, and community members. The husbands who are patriarchal, can create a scenario out of this situation so that he can be violent to the wife, in order to install fear and for the woman to agree to the marriage of the second wife. The women with that experience should be empowered to know that irrespective of their situations, they are human beings who are equally important to the rest as per the Constitution.

Strategies to minimise the burden of birthing girl children within the rural South African marriages.

Self-knowledge

Gertler (2018) defines self-knowledge as the knowledge of one's own mental states such as current experiences, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs or desires. In the study conducted by Özyiğit (2017) titled "the meaning of marriage according to university students: A Phenomenological study", self-knowledge and spouse selection are very important when one consider marriage. Sindane (2019) refers to self-knowledge as personal preference. Basically, this means that the individual look for the characteristics that are desirable to them when selecting a partner (Sindane, 2019). Self-knowledge also entails similarities and differences on specific issues like socio-economic status, educational background, characteristics, age, religious, traditional views, ethnic and cultural features (Özyiğit, 2017; Sindane, 2019). It is argued that self-knowledge and good spousal selection can facilitate equal partnership in the theatre of marriage as the couple is playing its drama despite their cultural or traditional affiliations. Equal partnership can provide the space for the partners to have freedom to act to the maximum of their abilities without any judgement or blame (Baloyi, 2022).

Spouse selection

Taking into consideration the analogy in Baloyi (2020, 06) that marriage should be seen as a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator, the two individuals must complement each other in the theatre of marriage. The implied message here is that when one selects a partner, it must be a partner who complements and support their partnership. The element of sharing common opinions, interests, beliefs and attitudes with the partner in the marriage, when choosing an appropriate partner cannot be over emphasised (Özyiğit, 2017). The two people who are marrying one another should have some form of similarities in order for them to see things from the same eye.

Self-care

In the study of the "investigating social workers' coping strategies towards burn out in Kwa-Zulu Natal within UMhlatuze Municipality", Duma (2021) emphasises that taking good care of the self is a good strategy for reducing and coping with burnout. Burnout in this situation is the emotional blackmail which women giving birth to girl children are experiencing in their marriages. Self-care entails a number of activities which can assist the discriminated women to survive bullying and labelling. Those activities are and not limited to support groups, stokvels, church sessions (on Thursdays) and other group work related meetings. In the context of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired deficiency syndrome (AIDS), Ramlagan et al., (2010) define support group as a viable way to help people living with HIV and AIDS to ameliorate the effects of stigma directed to them. It is further highlighted that support group provide a sense of belonging and education to live with the effects of stigma. Ramlagan et al., (2010, 117) further highlight that support groups also relieve stress by providing mutual emotional support among members. Support groups are powerful tools to empower the victims to bring hope and confidence as well as dealing with the effects of stigma, isolation, loneliness and other related victimisations. Mundell et al., (2011) believe that support group make the individuals not to feel alone by listening to the stories shared by others in the similar situation.

Pre-marital counselling between the partners

Saidi (2022) in their study of role of counselling in marriage presuppose that marriage counselling assists individuals in making informed decisions about how to build and strengthen their relationships. The abovementioned authors further highlight that even when the couple is married and encountering challenges, it is advisable to attend a marriage

counselling. “Marriage counselling encompasses a wide range of technical interventions aimed at reducing marital discord. Marriage counselling’s focus and goals are generally the resolutions of the immediate presenting problems and the provision of emotional support to the spouses as well as the enhancement of their self-esteem and optimism” (Saidi, 2022). This means that as much as pre-marital is on a proactive level, but the reactive counselling can also assist the couple with the necessary support for the enhancement of their relationship.

Awareness raising in communities.

Strategies such as community media outreach and community mobilisation have shown success in raising awareness and shifting social norms related to gender equality and women’s empowerment in developing country contexts (Khan & Ghadially, 2010; Samu & Wyrod, 2016). Mass media approaches like radio, advertisements and posters with empowering slogans can help reinforce and normalise alternative perspectives on gender over time (Svenkerud & Singhal, 1998). For example, Samu and Wyrod’s (2016) analysis of an entertainment-education radio drama in Burkina Faso demonstrated increased listener knowledge and more progressive attitudes toward women’s land rights over the course of the program.

At the grassroots level in rural South African communities, multi-level campaigns could incorporate traditional mediums like storytelling, songs, skits and community gatherings to share empowering messages (Khumalo, 2019). These community conversations have been used successfully for HIV/AIDS awareness and could be adapted around themes of gender equality and respect for all women and girls. Faith-based campaigns engaging local religious leaders to give sermons on these topics may have particular cultural resonance and ability to influence beliefs (Patel, 2017). Other facilities such as schools provide a key venue for participatory learning with youth, while training workshops for local officials stress enforcing laws prohibiting gender discrimination and provide tools to be social change agents (Checkoway, 2012).

Ultimately transforming entrenched gender biases requires sustained, multifaceted efforts across all parts of society (Samu & Wyrod, 2016). By raising critical consciousness and empowering both marginalised women and their broader communities, over time mindsets and behaviors can shift to align with Constitutional guarantees of dignity and equality regardless of gender.

Conclusion

Marriage on its own is a precious partnership, but in a patriarchal South African context it can have a negative connotation. It is not only being seen as an innocent holy communion, but characterised by certain expectations, and especially with regards to children. The fact that some significant others are involved and have a say in those marriages, cause some complications which are beyond the nature and medical conditions of the two partners. This influence, promotes gender-based violence and it has been discovered not to be perpetuated by men to women only, but women to women as well.

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