



REVIEW ARTICLE

Economic Abuse as a Form of Intimate Partner Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of the Literature

Chinelo Nduka,^{1,2} Vivian Omuemu,³ Adedayo Tella,⁴ and Darlington Obi²

¹ School of Public Health, University of Port-Harcourt, Rivers State.

² Department of Community Medicine, NAUTH, Nnewi

³ Department of Public Health & Community Medicine, UBTH, Benin

⁴ Department of Community Medicine, UPTH, Port Harcourt

Keywords

Economic abuse;

Intimate partner violence;

Violence against women'

Measurement scale,

Prevalence;

Response

ABSTRACT

Background: Economic abuse (EA) is a form of intimate partner violence (IPV) whereby one partner controls the ability of the other to acquire, use and maintain economic resources. It is significant because economic concerns are a major reason survivors remain in abusive relationships, as they lack the means to cater for themselves and their children if they leave.

Aim: This paper reviews the literature on measurement, prevalence, and response to EA within the context of IPV in sub-Saharan Africa.

Method: A comprehensive desk-based review was conducted between November 2020 and February 2022. Google, Google Scholar, Pubmed, ResearchGate, Web of Science, and Science Direct were searched using relevant keywords such as IPV, EA, domestic violence and financial abuse. Full-text publications of quantitative and qualitative studies written in English were included.

Findings: Various measurement scales for EA have been created, revised, and adapted over the years with some being more inclusive. The prevalence of EA in sub-Saharan Africa varied across countries, and no context-specific measurement scale is available for the region. Economic abuse was found to be the form of IPV with the least legislative response and often absent from plans of action on violence against women.

Conclusion: This review buttresses the need to develop measurement scales for EA specific to sub-Saharan Africa to properly assess the regional prevalence. There is also a need to heighten awareness of EA to promote recognition and appropriate response.

Correspondence to:

Chinelo Nduka
Department of Community Medicine
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital
Nnewi Anambra State
nwokeabiachinelo@yahoo.com

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women (VAW) is arguably one of the most endemic but overlooked human rights violations globally.¹ Upon development

of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, the elimination of all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking, sexual

and other types of exploitation was adopted as a target.² Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a form of VAW described as an ongoing pattern of behaviour where one partner uses physical, sexual, psychological and/or economic abuse against the other in order to exert power and control over them.³ It is a gendered issue as it is disproportionately perpetrated by men against women⁴⁻⁶ and the consequences are worse for women.⁷ The phenomenon is a pervasive social and public health issue globally cutting across all populations, irrespective of social, economic, religious or cultural groups,^{1,8} with about 1 in every 3 women having experienced it in their lifetime.^{2,9,10} The prevalence rate in sub-Saharan Africa has been reported as 40% according to a regional analysis by the World Health Organization (WHO).² Researchers opine that the burden of EA is often underestimated because victims tend to under-report IPV due to the persistent belief that family and intimate relationship problems are 'private' and should not be discussed.¹¹

To perpetrate IPV, various tactics are utilized by abusive men and one of such commonly employed tactics is economic abuse (EA),¹² which has been described as patterns of behaviour in which one partner controls the ability of the other to acquire, use and/or maintain economic resources.^{13,14} The primary aim of EA is to undermine the victims' autonomy and economic independence with the direct consequence being that they become economically dependent on the abuser.

Three major domains of tactics employed by EA perpetrators have been outlined in the

literature namely economic control, economic exploitation and work sabotage.¹⁵ Economic control occurs when abusers prevent their victim from having knowledge of or access to economic resources^{12,16}; economic exploitation on the other hand occurs when abusers intentionally aim to destroy the economic resources of their victims^{3,17}; while economic sabotage occurs when abusers prevent their victim from acquiring regular or increased income.¹² Furthermore, two critical dynamics differentiate EA and its effects from the other forms of abuse. First, it can occur without any contact between the victim and the abuser, hence, IPV survivors can continue experiencing EA long after the relationship has ended and other forms of abuse have been terminated.¹⁸⁻²⁰ Secondly, EA perpetrators aim to create and reinforce economic dependency of the victim on the abuser thus limiting their options in ways that pose barriers to resisting other abusive acts,^{21,22} leaving the abusive relationship and rebuilding their lives.¹⁸ Therefore, strategies to curb IPV are significantly incomplete without putting EA into consideration.

Research in sub-Saharan Africa suggests that violence against women is mainly rooted in the patriarchal nature of the society, where women are viewed as inferior to men, and need to be led and controlled^{1,23}. Womanhood is culturally denigrated to humility, passivity and submission with traditional norms encouraging male domination and power, which could be expressed through violence²⁴. This inferior social status makes it improbable for women to report such violence to anyone outside of their

family in order to avoid deviation from the traditional norms or incurring sanctions^{2,25}. Given the current growth of interest around EA, it is expedient to gather and review information on currently available measurement scales, prevalence, and response to economic abuse within the context of IPV in sub-Saharan Africa. This will establish an understanding of the present gaps that can inform future research and responses to the phenomenon.

METHODS

This review utilized a comprehensive desk-based literature review to identify available measurement scales and establish current knowledge on the prevalence and response to economic abuse as a form of intimate partner violence in sub-Saharan Africa.

The authors undertook full searches of original research, reports, and reviews between November 2020 and February 2022. Databases searched include Google, Google Scholar, Pubmed, ResearchGate, Web of Science, and Science Direct. Search words were “gender-based violence” OR “intimate partner violence” OR “intimate partner abuse” OR “domestic violence” OR “domestic abuse”) AND (“economic abuse” OR “economic violence” OR “financial abuse” OR “economic control” OR “employment sabotage” OR “economic exploitation” OR “financial exploitation”). Part of the data used was full-text publications written in English of both quantitative and qualitative research in sub-Saharan Africa.

FINDINGS

Measurement scales for assessing economic abuse

The majority of existing research on IPV focuses on the physical, sexual, and even psychological forms of abuse^{26,27} mostly because EA had historically been included within the definition of psychological abuse.^{17,28} It was only about a decade ago that scholars began to identify EA as its own unique form of IPV and since then, attention has been given to measuring how perpetrators economically abuse their partner and various scales measuring EA have been created, tested, and revised.

What was formerly known about EA came from one or two questions in measures that included a few items on EA such as the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (PMWI),²⁹ the Index of Psychological Abuse (IPA),³⁰ and the abuse questions used by the Safer and Stronger Program (SSP).³¹ Similarly, the Abusive Behaviour Inventory (ABI) included 10 questions on physical abuse; and 20 questions on psychological abuse with only two questions that focus on EA imbedded in the psychological abuse subscale.³²

The Domestic Violence-Related Financial Issues Scale (DV-FI) is another scale that incorporates an EA subscale, containing five items that measure EA experiences.³³ It was developed to be a comprehensive assessment of the unique financial issues victims of IPV face. Although the DV-FI expanded on the definition of EA when compared to the previous one or

two-item measures, it is still limited. It primarily focuses on credit card debt and credit rating which are important items in assessing for economic exploitation, but they are narrow in scope and only focus on victims of IPV who are engaged in the formal credit system and so might be insignificant for the sub-Saharan African context. Another instrument, the Checklist of Controlling Behaviours (CCB) was developed as a domestic violence assessment instrument to address multiple levels of violence and coercive control in IPV relationships.³⁴ It includes an EA subscale with seven items that focus primarily on capturing experiences of economic control within IPV relationships. Like the DV-FI, the CCB is also limited as it cannot fully measure the array of experiences a victim of EA may experience.

Having a measure that fully assesses all three domains of EA applicable to victims of IPV using either formal economic services and/or cash-only finances would permit an expansive and inclusive measure of EA experiences. The Scale of Economic Abuse (SEA) was the first full measurement scale for assessing EA.³⁵ It is a 28-item scale, although with only two subscales including Economic Exploitation (11 items) and Economic Control (17 items). The second full scale, the Scale of Economic Abuse—Revised (SEA-R) is a revised shortened version of the SEA.³⁶ It reduced the SEA to 12 items with subscales encompassing the whole three domains of EA: economic control (five items); employment sabotage (four items); and economic exploitation (three items).

It is worthy of note that these currently available full scales specifically designed for measuring EA as a form of IPV were developed among a population of women in the US with attendant implications for their use in other contexts. This is because not all the items will be relevant in sub-Saharan Africa, so it is important to either adapt these scales for use like the SEA-R has been validated and adapted for use in China,³⁷ or develop context specific ones.

Although there appears to be no consensus yet on the best practices for measuring EA as it can manifest in various ways,³⁸ scales for measuring it are important because they permit the assessment of a range of economically abusive behaviours. They can also be used to establish the prevalence of EA and the subsequent need for response.

Prevalence of economic abuse

The regional prevalence of EA is yet to be determined because it has historically not been included as a form of IPV in most surveys and so available prevalence rates depend on the study contexts, groups and the definition used. However, results from studies conducted in various countries within the region show higher prevalence rates compared to those in the Western world^{3,4,39} with reported rates of 32.6% in Cote d'Ivoire,⁴⁰ 64.2% in Nigeria,⁴¹ and 92.8% in Kenya⁴² for studies with women as the study population. A study conducted among men in Nigeria estimated the rate of perpetration of EA against women to be 23.2%⁴³ but this result could be fraught with social desirability bias and its associated

underreporting as women were not interviewed either to corroborate or refute their assertions.⁴³ Moreover, a review of demographic health surveys in different regions of the world showed that sub-Saharan Africa, compared with the other regions of the world, had the highest percentage of husbands making decisions alone on daily household expenditure²⁴ which is a pointer to EA.

Although the prevalence of EA may vary across regions, women are deprived of equal access to economic resources, opportunities, and power in every region of the world. Even in the same region and within the same country, the prevalence of EA has been found to vary which gives rise to the question as to what factors could be responsible for such differences. For instance, a cross-sectional study among young women in an urban area of South Africa reported the prevalence of EA to be 43.7%²⁶ while in a rural area of that same country, the lifetime prevalence of EA reported by women was 14.3% - 16.1%.⁹

Some scholars have posited that EA is even more prevalent than the physical forms of IPV^{13,17,44,45} and descriptive evidence from the Ghana Statistical Service shows that EA is the most common type of IPV against Ghanaian women.⁴⁶ Studies from other sub-Saharan African countries suggest that this higher prevalence of EA over other forms of IPV is a rising trend as a study conducted in Tanzania gave the prevalence rate of EA as 34% which was found to be the second highest form of IPV, based on the women's experiences in the past year.⁴⁷ But for lifetime experience, physical

abuse had higher rates⁴⁷ and thus could be an indicator of the growing awareness of EA as a form of IPV. This suggestion is buttressed by findings from other regions of the world such as South-East Asia where the EA prevalence rate in Palestine as of 1994 was 45% but by 2011, it had risen to 55%.⁴⁸ Thus, as the prevalence of EA grows, there is a need to develop appropriate responses to it.

Response to economic abuse

Since the awareness of IPV, studies have mostly focused on physical and sexual forms of violence due to their ease of identification and operationalization,^{26,27} which has also translated to a response being tilted towards these more studied forms of violence.²⁰ EA is the form of IPV with the least legislative response. A global report found that 160 out of the 190 countries examined had legislation on domestic abuse, but only 113 of these countries had laws in place to protect women from EA.⁴⁹ However, there is evidence that EA has started receiving significant attention internationally and in many nations' laws over the past few years² as it was reported in 2013 that 60.3% of countries had no specific legislation against EA. However, a 2017 report found that this figure had reduced to 50.1%.⁴⁹

Within the African continent, in the Protocol to the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (known as the Maputo Protocol), EA was recognized as a comprehensive definition of violence against women, in which economic harm is referred to.⁴⁹ The Maputo Protocol obligates African states to introduce legislative

reforms against domestic abuse and there is evidence that some countries such as Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe included EA.

Despite the recognition and institution of policies, response to EA remains incomplete if the associated norms and behaviours are not addressed.² This is because while developing laws is an important commitment as they create enabling environments for change, prevailing social norms present several obstacles to its effectiveness. If socio-cultural tolerance of IPV persists, victims will remain unlikely to report it for fear of the social consequences of doing so,²⁴ then the law cannot be enforced and perpetrators would remain unsanctioned and unpunished.² This is particularly pertinent for EA as evidence suggests that the main predictor for reporting abuse is its severity and for a lot of women, they do not consider money as being important enough to disrupt their home and so continue to suffer in silence.^{25,50} Moreover, in some countries like Nigeria where the law co-exists and is even preceded by customary and religious laws, national legislation on IPV may be ineffective if they are inconsistent with prevailing customs and religions.¹¹

Unlike some other forms of IPV, an appropriate response to EA entails more than short-term, crisis-oriented services to involve longer-term career and educational opportunities^{12,14,16} which are currently not available in many developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa probably on account of non-recognition of EA and resources.³⁸ In addition, the poor

conceptualization of EA makes it possible that survivors of EA may not be believed²⁵ because, unlike the physical forms of abuse, the EA survivor might be unable to provide any documentary evidence of abuse⁵⁰ and some abusive partners may go to great lengths to present the 'right image' in public.³ Furthermore, available evidence suggests that the police and courts require a more developed understanding of EA for protections introduced by legislation to be fully enacted. Hence, there is a need to explore how the criminal justice system can best respond to EA and provide survivors with economic justice. It must be noted that there are almost no empirically supported interventions for perpetrators of IPV globally.⁵¹

One of the promising ways that current evidence suggests for reduction of the risk of IPV especially EA is community activism to shift underlying patriarchal norms, attitudes and beliefs.^{2,52} This is in recognition of the fact that many of the victims in developing countries such as sub-Saharan Africa may lack access to or even avoid contact with formal IPV services, preferring to seek support from community and religious leaders.²⁵ Historically, religious organizations have played a paradoxical role in addressing IPV as some women report experiences of empowerment through religious communities while others report that religious teachings have been used as a justification for abuse. Nevertheless, this community activism has been tried in sub-Saharan African countries including Uganda and Rwanda with

demonstrable success^{53,54} which suggests high chances of success if replicated in other countries. Finally, an appropriate response to IPV will not only reduce the risk of women experiencing it currently but also reduce the risk for the next generation as childhood exposure to abuse is a recognized risk factor for experiencing and perpetrating IPV in adulthood, the so-called 'intergenerational violence'.

CONCLUSION

This review consolidates the fact that EA is of public health significance in sub-Saharan Africa and a form of IPV with vicious effects that can linger long after the abusive relationship has ended. While it establishes that there have been remarkable developments in measuring, understanding, and responding to EA in recent years, it also demonstrates the gaps left and how any meaningful response aimed at tackling the phenomenon would require commitment from all sectors of society and the political will to ensure enforcement.

Recommendations

Researchers in sub-Saharan Africa need to develop or adapt context-specific scales for

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measuring EA that can be used to determine the true nature and extent of the problem in the region, including longer-term research on its impacts which would provide an evidence base for appropriate context-specific response. There is also a need for policymakers to make research-informed policies that recognize EA at all levels and are supportive of responses being made to curtail it. Finally, government agencies that enact or enforce legislation such as the police and courts should undergo special training to enable them to recognize and respond appropriately to survivors of EA, making sure they are supported, and abusers are held accountable.

Conflict of Interest: None to declare.

Authors Contribution: CCN: Conceptualization, design, literature review, writing of manuscript and review of manuscript; VO: Conceptualization, review of manuscript and manuscript draft revision; TA and DO: Review of manuscript and manuscript draft revision. All authors read, reviewed, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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