Gender-based violence in the context of urban poverty: Experiences of men from the slums of Nairobi, Kenya

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Background

The term gender-based violence (GBV) is used to distinguish violence that targets individuals or groups of individuals on the basis of their gender, from other forms of violence. When GBV is mentioned, many think of women as the victims and men as the perpetrators [1]. Little is known about GBV towards men; this is because the patriarchal system in many societies isolates women and gives men more control over economic resources. This makes it difficult for men to come out and report violent incidences due to embarrassment, stigma, stereotypes around masculinity and cultural expectation [1, 2]. Further complicating the issue of VAW is emerging evidence that women in developing country contexts are reversing the former economic model in which the job market and other economic activities were predominantly undertaken by men, with some now occupying better financial positions than their male partners [3-5]. These changes in economic, cultural, and geo-political spheres have been noted to constitute a threat to men's power [3, 6], and, by extension, a threat to women's sexual and reproductive health [3]. The threat emerges from the patriarchal system, within which gender roles and expectations are such that men have pervasive control of wealth, power, and decision-making, and women are continually isolated and dependent on men. Within this rigid frame of gender roles, men are especially expected to comply with certain 'masculine' roles as defined by society. Changes in economic, cultural, and geo-political spheres that promote women's economic independence and advancement do reduce men's powers, resulting in vulnerability for women, who are then seen to be in competition with the men. [3,6]. However, there has been little follow-up on the effects of such changes on men's own vulnerabilities, resulting from socio-economic and geopolitical changes, especially in the context of gender-based violence.

There is a relative paucity of knowledge about what constitutes men's power and what it means to be male in urban informal settlements, where men, as well as women, equally face severe livelihood insecurity, unemployment and poverty. Studies to date have failed to adequately explore the gendered experience of economic and geo-political marginalization of men in slum

contexts, and the impacts on their relationships with women and other men. Indeed, patriarchal structures and stereotyped notions of gender may obscure the increasing disempowerment of many men in urban poor contexts [3]. An understanding of the politics of masculinity in urban slums can clarify the linkages between violence and the allocation of political, economic, and cultural power within the male sphere, as well as between men and women in the unique context of urban poverty. The uncertainty generated by poverty, destabilization, exclusion and the degree of violence in urban slums may affect personal wellbeing [7]. The daily quest for "livelihood security" of the urban poor and their inability to access resources are closely linked to the cycle of violence in an environment where security provision by the state is minimal [8]. A recent study by APHRC based on slum settings in Nairobi, for instance, indicates that intentional injuries are growing in epidemic proportions, especially among men, with injuries accounting for 18% of the adult mortality burden [9]. An ethnographic long term study in urban slums in Dhaka city found various levels of structural violence operating on the lives of urban poor men, where there was continuous violence by the police, and young men were regularly picked up, beaten and jailed. Furthermore, politics over drug businesses led to physical violence of gang wars, on-going feuds and counter feuds and some cases of fatalities, as well as injuries of men [10].

Men and women in slum settings may have limited access to the social and economic resources needed to pursue and realize their rights. Little research evidence or synthesized programmatic knowledge is available on how to best provide services to address violence in slum settings of developing countries. While it's necessary to focus on the implications of gender-based violence for health, there is urgent need for information on the dynamics and perceptions of GBV, especially among men in urban poor slums of developing countries. This context is particularly important, given the unique social and economic environment in which urban slum residents find themselves. The gap between levels of deprivation between men and women is narrower, compared to the situation in other parts of cities. Thus, slum men face a bigger challenge of sustaining their status as 'breadwinner', and with it, the power and control that is culturally associated with the role. In this light, this paper seeks to explore the vulnerabilities experienced by men, especially those resulting in violence at the individual and community levels. The two main questions to be addressed in this paper are:

i. What are the forms of violence that men experience?
ii. How do men respond to the various forms of violence that they experience?

Data and Methods

The data used in this study were collected using screening interviews with 100 younger and older men in Viwandani slum of Nairobi. The screening questionnaire was exploratory, thus providing a snapshot of the types, forms and common experiences around violence and sexual and reproductive health service/support needs. Although the screening tool was used to identify participants who experienced violence, which in turn provided a sampling frame for the in-depth qualitative investigation, the data collected is sufficient to provide insights into the participants' experiences with violence. The questionnaire had more than sixty questions, ranging from those seeking basic socio-demographic information about the participant and the community, to more specific questions focusing on GBV. A similar questionnaire was administered to both men and women, but, given the focus of this paper, the data used here are obtained only from the men's screening questionnaire. In this paper, descriptive data are used to discuss the findings.

Viwandani slum is a settlement located about 7 km from the Nairobi city center and covers an area of 3 km length and 1 km in width. The slum is characterized by overcrowding, insecurity, poor housing and sanitary conditions, and lack of social amenities (APHRC 2009, UN HABITAT 2003). To the north of the settlement are industries where many Viwandani residents work. The slum is characterized by a high number of men compared to women, most of whom are employed in the neighboring industries.

The ethical committee of the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI), the internal Ethical Review Committees of the African Population & health Research Center (APHRC), and DFID's Research Program Consortium (RPC) approved the study. Signed informed consent was obtained from the respondents before the interviews begun. This study covered very sensitive interview topics, some of which might be regarded as intrusive and personal, especially considering the nature of the subject such as violence against women/men. Therefore, careful steps were taken in the study and instrument designs to minimize potential discomfort or harm (in the form of backlash from spouses, and community members) to our informants. Our approach was informed by the specific recommendations made by WHO (1999; see also

Jewkes et al, 2000) to minimize discomfort to women victims of violence, from which we adapted our approaches to address the same issues with male participants.

Prior to the study, representatives of community-based or non-governmental organizations that work with survivors of violence were contacted and asked to review the study tools in order to provide advice on whether the proposed techniques for gathering information were appropriate and/or if any questions might cause distress and should be modified or removed. The study tools were also be pre-tested among a small number of men with similar characteristics as the study population to identify potentially negative consequences, and modified accordingly. Community leaders and community-based/non-governmental organizations were contacted for guidance on mechanisms to ensure the safety of respondents. In addition, given the structure of slum housing, which may not always guarantee confidentiality, concerted efforts were made to conduct interviews at venues that allowed for privacy.

Only one respondent per household was recruited to participate and the interviews were conducted by male ethnographers. The researchers were trained to minimize the risk of distress or discomfort that might be posed to the informants and the relationship was built over time to increase informants' comfort level. The respondents were assured that no one would access their information and they were given the opportunity to refuse to answer questions that made them uncomfortable. At the end of the interviews, the respondents were provided with a list of free services in and around the community and transport was provided by the counseling facilities with advance arrangements with APHRC. Since it was anticipated that field staff could be affected through repeated exposure to distressing accounts, periodic meetings were organized with them to discuss their field work experiences and any troubling emotions. To further ensure anonymity, each participant was assigned a unique identifier and no names appeared on the study tool.

Results

In Viwandani, the 97 men who were interviewed using the screening questionnaire were of diverse socio-demographic characteristics. The respondents were aged between 12-49 years with majority being those aged 20-29 years. Majority of the men had secondary level education, while there was almost equal number of men who were in a marital union at the time of the study, as were those who were unmarried. Considering ethnic affiliation, majority of the men,

40, were from the Kamba community; and majority (66) viewed themselves as heads of their households. The common sources of livelihoods were petty trade, formal employment and agricultural activities. Participants with Christian Protestant affiliation were the majority.

There were various forms of violence experienced by men in Viwandani. Gang violence emerged as the most witnessed type of violence, as it was cited by 33 out of the 97 men interviewed. Most gangs were observed to be of young men from the slum (13), with a few (7) involving unidentified external groups whose aim was believed to be robbery. Other gang activities involved members of an outlawed cult-like group called Mungiki, among others. Most men participating in this study were either witnesses to or victims of gang-related violence. Robbery with violence was reported to be the most witnessed form of gang violence by 14 of the interviewees, with some of the violence reported to involve guns (4), arson attacks and deaths (2). Only 4 participants reported being victims of robbery with violence, while only 1 participant said he had witnessed rape/attempted rape. While there was near-universal reporting of the existence of gangs, none of the participants reported having been involved in gang-related activities.

Physical violence from within households

Violence from a girlfriend, partner or wife was also reported by men participating in the study. It ranged from verbal abuse (19) and continued monitoring of the man's movements and associations; to physical abuse involving kicking (3), chocking (3) and slapping (2).

How men respond to the different forms of violence

In response to the violence witnessed in the slum of Viwandani, men responded differently, depending on the type of violence. A few men responded to verbal abuse by physically fighting back, while others insulted the perpetrators in response. With regard to physical abuse, some men physically resisted attacks by gangs or partners/girlfriends/wives. Very few men sought counseling from other people. One man sought help from an NGO/CBO about his experiences with emotional, verbal and physical abuse, while another spoke with other people who were unrelated to him. There was no report of men seeking legal redress, religious counseling, health care, or family and social network support.

Discussion and conclusion

The results shown above indicate that men in Viwandani do indeed experience gender-based violence from within their households, as well as from external sources. While it is not clear from the data why these forms of violence are meted against these men, the physical and emotional effects on the men are evident. In many such situations, as is the case in patriarchal systems, it would be difficult for men to acknowledge that they experience such abuse, as it would indicate that they are weak and unable to fulfill their role as men in the household. Given that there are men in Viwandani who easily acknowledge that they have been emotionally of physically abused, it is indicative of the extent of the problem in this community, such that the men are not concerned with the stigma and stereotypes associated with abused men as much as they are about their safety and well-being. Their response to abuse and violence may be influenced by the unique situation in the slums, where they are constantly threatened by the poor security system in place, as well as their waning power and control within the household, resulting from their perennial inability to fulfill their role as primary economic providers for their dependents. While the acknowledgement of abuse is indicative of a shift towards destigmatizing violence, the evidence in this study suggests that there is still a long way to go. The ways in which men in Viwandani respond to violence are limited to retaliatory violence, and a few cases of counseling. None of these steps involve other family members, friends, or legal or religious sources, which suggests that there is still a high level of stigma that many men experiencing violence would not like to expose their experiences with their social network.

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