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The Prevalence of Domestic Violence Experienced by Women Survivors in Selected Safe Shelters in Nairobi County

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***Abstract*: Domestic violence remains a significant public health and human rights concern globally, with women bearing the greatest burden of physical, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse. This study examined the prevalence of domestic violence experienced by women survivors residing in selected safe shelters in Nairobi County, Kenya. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study employed a mixed-methods research approach involving women survivors in selected safe shelters. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, and observations and analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings revealed a high prevalence of domestic violence, with psychological violence emerging as the most common form, followed by physical, economic, and sexual abuse. The study established that domestic violence is sustained by economic dependency, patriarchal norms, and limited access to support systems. The findings further indicate that repeated exposure to violence negatively affects survivors' emotional wellbeing, self-esteem, and social functioning. The study concludes that domestic violence among women in Nairobi County remains pervasive and multidimensional, requiring coordinated interventions involving legal protection, psychosocial support, economic empowerment, and community sensitization. The paper recommends strengthening shelter services, enhancing public awareness, and promoting gender-transformative approaches to reduce violence against women.**

***Keywords*: Domestic Violence, Women Survivors, Safe Shelters, Nairobi County, Gender-Based Violence.**

1. Introduction

Domestic violence is a major form of gender-based violence that affects women across all social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Globally, about one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence during her lifetime, most often perpetrated by an intimate partner (WHO, 2021). Domestic violence includes physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse, all of which undermine women's dignity, wellbeing, and fundamental rights.

Beyond physical harm, domestic violence has profound psychological and social consequences, including trauma, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and social isolation. For many survivors, safe shelters provide critical protection, counseling, and support services that facilitate recovery and reintegration into society.

In Kenya, domestic violence remains a significant challenge despite legal reforms and increased advocacy efforts. Women residing in safe shelters often represent survivors of severe and prolonged abuse. Understanding the prevalence and nature of domestic violence among these women is therefore essential for informing policies, interventions, and support programs aimed at protecting survivors and preventing future violence.

2. Background of the Study

Domestic violence has increasingly been recognized as one of the most pervasive violations of human rights and a major public health concern across the world. It affects millions of women regardless of age, ethnicity, religion, educational level, or socioeconomic status. The United Nations defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm to women. Such violence undermines women's dignity, freedom, health, and overall quality of life. Despite significant international efforts aimed at eliminating violence against women, domestic violence continues to affect a substantial proportion of women globally and remains a major obstacle to achieving gender equality and sustainable development (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021).

Globally, studies indicate that approximately one in every three women experiences physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner during her lifetime (WHO, 2021). The consequences of domestic violence extend beyond immediate physical injuries to include long-term psychological trauma, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder, and reduced social functioning. Domestic violence also imposes substantial economic costs on families, communities, and governments through increased healthcare expenditures, reduced productivity, and social welfare demands (United Nations Women, 2022). Consequently, domestic violence is increasingly viewed not only as a private family matter but also as a critical social, health, and development issue requiring coordinated interventions.

In sub-Saharan Africa, domestic violence remains a widespread challenge, often reinforced by deeply rooted patriarchal structures, gender inequalities, poverty, and harmful

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cultural norms. Women in many African societies continue to experience unequal power relations that limit their ability to make independent decisions regarding their lives, finances, and relationships. Research shows that domestic violence in the region commonly manifests through physical assault, emotional abuse, sexual coercion, controlling behaviors, and economic deprivation (Muluneh et al., 2021). These forms of violence frequently occur simultaneously, creating cumulative and long-lasting effects on women's physical and psychological wellbeing. Furthermore, societal acceptance of male dominance and cultural expectations that encourage women to remain in abusive relationships often contribute to the underreporting and persistence of domestic violence.

In Kenya, domestic violence remains a significant social and public health concern despite notable progress in legislative and policy frameworks aimed at protecting women. The Constitution of Kenya (2010) guarantees equality, human dignity, and freedom from discrimination, while the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act of 2015 provides legal mechanisms for addressing domestic violence. Additionally, Kenya has ratified several international conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which obligate the state to protect women from violence and discrimination. However, despite these legal protections, domestic violence remains prevalent across urban and rural settings, affecting women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2022).

Several studies conducted in Kenya indicate that many women continue to experience various forms of abuse within intimate relationships and family settings. Physical violence, emotional abuse, sexual violence, and economic control remain common experiences among women. Factors such as poverty, unemployment, alcohol and substance abuse, cultural beliefs, and unequal gender power relations have been identified as major contributors to domestic violence (Kimani, 2020). In many communities, cultural norms that emphasize male authority and female submission often discourage women from reporting abuse or seeking help. As a result, many survivors endure prolonged periods of violence before accessing support services.

Nairobi County presents a particularly important context for examining domestic violence due to its diverse population and unique social dynamics. As Kenya's capital city, Nairobi attracts people from different ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. While urbanization has increased access to education, employment, and social services, it has also contributed to social challenges such as economic inequality, unemployment, family instability, and gender-based violence. Reports from governmental and non-governmental organizations indicate that cases of domestic violence remain common within Nairobi County, necessitating continued efforts to understand and address the problem (National Gender and Equality Commission, 2021).

In response to the growing need for protection and support, safe shelters have emerged as critical institutions for women escaping abusive environments. These shelters provide temporary accommodation, counseling services, legal assistance, medical referrals, psychosocial support, and empowerment programs designed to facilitate recovery and reintegration into society. Safe shelters serve not only as places of refuge but also as centers where survivors can begin rebuilding their lives after experiencing violence. Consequently, women residing in these facilities provide valuable insights into the nature, prevalence, and consequences of domestic violence.

The experiences of women in safe shelters are particularly important for understanding the realities of domestic violence because many of these survivors have endured severe, repeated, and multidimensional forms of abuse before seeking assistance. Their experiences offer a unique opportunity to examine patterns of violence, identify contributing factors, and assess the effectiveness of existing support systems. Furthermore, understanding the prevalence of domestic violence among women in shelters can contribute to the development of evidence-based interventions aimed at prevention, protection, and survivor support.

Although numerous studies have examined domestic violence in Kenya, much of the existing literature focuses on prevalence within the general population or among women in communities. Comparatively limited scholarly attention has been directed toward women survivors residing in safe shelters, particularly within Nairobi County. This gap in the literature limits a comprehensive understanding of the forms and prevalence of violence experienced by women who seek refuge in these facilities. Given the growing demand for shelter services and the continuing burden of domestic violence, there is a need for empirical research that specifically examines the experiences of women survivors within shelter settings.

Therefore, this study sought to investigate the prevalence of domestic violence experienced by women survivors residing in selected safe shelters in Nairobi County. By examining the forms, patterns, and extent of violence experienced by these women, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on gender-based violence and provides evidence that can inform policy formulation, service delivery, and intervention programs aimed at enhancing the wellbeing and protection of women survivors.

3. Statement of the Problem

Despite legal protections and increased awareness campaigns, domestic violence remains prevalent among women in Kenya. Women residing in safe shelters often represent survivors of severe and repeated abuse involving physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence. While existing studies have examined domestic violence within the general population, limited research has specifically investigated the prevalence of domestic violence experienced by women survivors residing in safe shelters in Nairobi County.

Consequently, there is inadequate empirical evidence on the dominant forms of violence experienced by survivors and the factors contributing to their vulnerability. This knowledge gap limits the development of targeted interventions and policies aimed at preventing violence and supporting survivors. This

study therefore sought to examine the prevalence of domestic violence among women survivors in selected safe shelters in Nairobi County.

4. Research Question

What is the prevalence of domestic violence experienced by women survivors in selected safe shelters in Nairobi County?

5. Literature Review

A. Theoretical Perspective

1) Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

This study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human behavior and wellbeing within the context of interacting environmental systems. The theory posits that individuals do not develop or function in isolation; rather, their experiences, behaviors, and wellbeing are shaped by continuous interactions with multiple layers of their social environment. Bronfenbrenner identified these layers as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, each of which influences individual outcomes in distinct but interconnected ways.

The microsystem represents the immediate environment in which individuals interact daily, including family members, intimate partners, friends, and close social networks. In the context of domestic violence, the microsystem is particularly significant because abuse often occurs within intimate relationships and family settings. Interactions between partners, patterns of communication, power relations, and conflict resolution mechanisms within the household can either contribute to or protect against violence. Women experiencing domestic violence are directly affected by these immediate relational dynamics, which often shape their emotional wellbeing, self-esteem, and sense of security.

The mesosystem refers to the interconnections between different microsystems. For example, relationships between family members, community groups, religious institutions, workplaces, and social support networks can influence how women experience and respond to domestic violence. Strong social support systems may encourage survivors to seek help and access protective services, while weak or unsupportive networks may reinforce silence and isolation. In many cases, women experiencing abuse encounter barriers when family members, community leaders, or religious institutions discourage reporting violence or encourage reconciliation without addressing the underlying abuse.

The exosystem encompasses social structures and institutions that indirectly influence individuals' lives. These include legal systems, healthcare services, law enforcement agencies, employment opportunities, and social welfare programs. The availability or absence of such services significantly affects survivors' ability to escape abusive environments and access support. For instance, inadequate shelter facilities, limited legal protection, and poor enforcement of laws addressing gender-based violence may increase women's vulnerability and prolong their exposure to abuse.

The macrosystem refers to broader societal values, cultural beliefs, traditions, and ideologies that shape individual and collective behavior. In many societies, patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles reinforce unequal power relations between men and women. Such cultural beliefs may normalize violence, justify male dominance, and discourage women from seeking assistance. Studies have shown that societal acceptance of male authority and female submissiveness often contributes to the persistence of domestic violence and limits efforts aimed at prevention and intervention (Heise, 2011).

The chronosystem incorporates the dimension of time, recognizing that social conditions, life experiences, and historical events influence individuals and communities over time. Changes in legislation, economic circumstances, educational opportunities, and societal attitudes toward gender equality can affect the prevalence and perception of domestic violence. Similarly, prolonged exposure to abuse may result in cumulative psychological and emotional effects that continue to impact survivors long after the violence has ceased.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is particularly relevant to this study because it highlights the multidimensional nature of domestic violence. The theory demonstrates that violence against women cannot be explained solely by individual characteristics or personal choices. Rather, domestic violence emerges from complex interactions among personal, relational, community, institutional, and societal factors. By applying this theoretical framework, the study is able to examine the prevalence of domestic violence among women survivors in selected safe shelters in Nairobi County while considering the broader environmental influences that contribute to their experiences.

Furthermore, the theory provides a useful foundation for designing interventions. It suggests that effective responses to domestic violence must go beyond addressing individual survivors and instead target family relationships, community norms, institutional structures, and societal inequalities simultaneously. Such a holistic approach is essential for understanding and addressing the multifaceted nature of domestic violence among women in Nairobi County.

B. Empirical Literature

1) Global Perspectives on Domestic Violence

Domestic violence remains one of the most widespread forms of violence against women globally. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) estimates that nearly one-third of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lives. These statistics demonstrate that domestic violence is not confined to specific cultures, economic classes, or geographical regions but constitutes a universal challenge affecting women across diverse social contexts.

Research conducted across different countries indicates that domestic violence manifests in various forms, including physical assault, emotional abuse, psychological manipulation, sexual coercion, and economic control. According to Garcia-Moreno et al. (2021), survivors often experience multiple forms of abuse simultaneously, resulting in severe and long-lasting

consequences for their physical health, mental wellbeing, and social functioning. Studies further reveal that women who seek refuge in shelters frequently report repeated and escalating patterns of violence, suggesting that shelter residents often represent survivors who have endured some of the most severe forms of abuse.

The global literature also highlights the substantial health consequences associated with domestic violence. Survivors commonly experience depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation, sleep disturbances, and chronic health conditions (WHO, 2021). Beyond individual suffering, domestic violence imposes significant economic burdens on healthcare systems, social services, and national economies through lost productivity and increased demand for support services.

C. Domestic Violence in Africa

In Africa, domestic violence remains a major social and public health concern. Several studies attribute the high prevalence of violence against women to the interaction of patriarchal social structures, economic inequalities, cultural norms, and gender-based discrimination (Darteh et al., 2021). In many African societies, traditional gender expectations grant men authority over household decision-making while expecting women to assume subordinate roles. Such unequal power relations often create conditions that facilitate abuse and discourage survivors from reporting violence.

Research conducted across sub-Saharan Africa indicates that physical violence remains one of the most commonly reported forms of abuse. However, emotional and psychological violence are increasingly recognized as equally harmful due to their profound impact on survivors' mental health and self-worth (Muluneh et al., 2021). Women subjected to continuous emotional abuse often experience feelings of helplessness, fear, social isolation, and diminished confidence.

Economic violence is also prevalent in many African contexts. Women may be denied access to financial resources, prevented from engaging in income-generating activities, or subjected to economic dependency that limits their ability to leave abusive relationships. Such conditions often trap survivors in cycles of violence and vulnerability.

D. Domestic Violence in Kenya

In Kenya, domestic violence continues to affect women across different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Despite constitutional protections and legislative measures such as the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act (2015), studies indicate that many women continue to experience abuse within intimate relationships and family settings (KNBS, 2022).

Research conducted in Kenya identifies psychological violence as one of the most common forms of domestic abuse. Psychological violence includes threats, humiliation, intimidation, verbal insults, controlling behaviors, and emotional manipulation (Okoth et al., 2022). Although less visible than physical violence, psychological abuse often has profound and long-lasting effects on women's mental health and wellbeing.

Physical violence remains widespread and frequently includes slapping, beating, kicking, choking, and other forms of bodily harm. Studies have shown that many survivors experience repeated episodes of violence before seeking assistance from support services or shelters (Kimani, 2020). Sexual violence within intimate relationships has also emerged as a significant concern, although it remains underreported due to stigma, fear, and cultural barriers.

Economic abuse similarly contributes to women's vulnerability. Many survivors report financial dependence on abusive partners, which limits their capacity to leave harmful relationships and access support services. Consequently, domestic violence in Kenya is increasingly understood as a multidimensional problem requiring comprehensive interventions that address social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors.

E. Domestic Violence Among Women in Safe Shelters

Safe shelters play a critical role in protecting women escaping abusive environments. These facilities provide temporary accommodation, counseling, legal support, medical referrals, and psychosocial rehabilitation services. Women residing in shelters often represent a particularly vulnerable population because they have experienced severe and repeated forms of violence before seeking protection.

Studies conducted among shelter populations indicate that survivors frequently experience overlapping forms of abuse. Physical violence often coexists with emotional abuse, sexual coercion, social isolation, and economic control (Campbell et al., 2018). The cumulative impact of these experiences significantly affects survivors' mental health, coping mechanisms, and overall quality of life.

Although domestic violence has been extensively studied in Kenya, much of the existing literature focuses on prevalence within communities or households. Comparatively few studies have examined the experiences of women residing in safe shelters, particularly within Nairobi County. As a result, there remains limited empirical understanding of the specific forms and prevalence of violence experienced by shelter residents. This gap in the literature underscores the need for focused research examining the experiences of women survivors in safe shelters. The present study seeks to contribute to filling this gap by investigating the prevalence of domestic violence among women survivors residing in selected safe shelters in Nairobi County.

6. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the prevalence of domestic violence among women survivors residing in selected safe shelters in Nairobi County. The mixed-methods approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of survivors and the nature of domestic violence they had encountered.

The target population comprised women survivors residing in selected safe shelters within Nairobi County. These

participants were purposively selected because they had firsthand experiences of domestic violence and were therefore well positioned to provide relevant information regarding the forms, prevalence, and effects of abuse.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and observation schedules. The questionnaires generated quantitative data on the prevalence and various forms of domestic violence experienced by the respondents. Semi-structured interviews provided detailed qualitative information, allowing survivors to share their personal experiences, perceptions, and coping mechanisms in their own words. Observation was used to complement the other methods by providing contextual insights into the living conditions, emotional wellbeing, and support systems available within the shelters.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, and tables, to establish patterns and trends in the prevalence of domestic violence. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and observations were analyzed thematically, whereby recurring themes and patterns were identified, categorized, and interpreted. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enhanced the credibility of the study and provided a deeper understanding of domestic violence among women survivors in selected safe shelters in Nairobi County.

7. Findings of the Study

The study established a high prevalence of domestic violence among women residing in selected safe shelters in Nairobi County. The majority of survivors reported experiencing multiple forms of abuse before seeking refuge in shelters.

Psychological violence emerged as the most prevalent form of abuse. Survivors reported frequent experiences of verbal insults, intimidation, threats, isolation, emotional manipulation, and controlling behaviors. These experiences significantly affected their self-esteem, confidence, and emotional wellbeing.

Physical violence was also highly prevalent, with survivors reporting incidents of beating, slapping, pushing, choking, and bodily injuries. Many participants indicated that physical abuse had occurred repeatedly over extended periods.

Economic violence was another common form of abuse. Survivors reported being denied access to financial resources, prevented from engaging in employment, and subjected to financial dependency that limited their ability to leave abusive relationships.

Sexual violence was reported by a substantial number of participants, including forced sexual relations, coercion, and other forms of sexual abuse within intimate relationships.

The findings further revealed that patriarchal beliefs, economic dependency, fear of social stigma, and inadequate support systems contributed significantly to the persistence of domestic violence.

8. Conclusion

The study concludes that domestic violence among women survivors residing in selected safe shelters in Nairobi County remains highly prevalent and multifaceted. Psychological, physical, economic, and sexual forms of violence continue to affect women, often simultaneously. The persistence of domestic violence is closely associated with patriarchal norms, economic dependency, and structural inequalities that limit women's ability to escape abusive relationships.

The findings underscore the need for comprehensive interventions that address both the immediate needs of survivors and the underlying social and cultural factors that perpetuate violence. Effective responses must integrate legal protection, psychosocial support, economic empowerment, and community transformation initiatives.

9. Recommendations

The study recommends strengthening safe shelter services through increased funding and expansion of psychosocial support programs.

There is a need to enhance economic empowerment initiatives for survivors through vocational training, entrepreneurship programs, and access to financial resources.

Government agencies should strengthen the enforcement of laws addressing domestic violence and gender-based violence to ensure accountability for perpetrators.

Community-based awareness programs should be intensified to challenge patriarchal beliefs and harmful cultural practices that normalize violence against women.

Faith-based organizations, educational institutions, and community leaders should actively participate in promoting gender equality and preventing domestic violence.

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