



“Learning to stay silent”: Coping, help-seeking and mitigation strategies for intimate partner violence against men in Kenya

Jacinta Mukulu Waila^{a,*}, Olaf Horstick^a, Domnick Onyango Mitiro^b,
Christine Wayua Musyimi^c, Michael Lowery Wilson^{a,d}

^a Section for Oral Health, Heidelberg Institute of Global Health, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany

^b Department of Publishing, Journalism, and Communication Studies, Moi University, Kenya

^c Africa Mental Health Research and Training Foundation (AMHRTF), Nairobi, Kenya

^d Injury Epidemiology and Prevention (IEP) Research Group, Turku Brain Injury Center, Department of Clinical Neurosciences, Turku University Hospital and University of Turku, Finland

ABSTRACT

In heterosexual relationships, intimate partner violence (IPV) affects both men and women. However, women are more likely than men to seek help. This study used a qualitative approach to describe community perceptions on the coping and help-seeking behavior of male victims of female-perpetrated IPV. Love for their children and wives, and fear of shame, losing property and breaking the law makes men stay in abusive marriages. Avoidance, silence, submission, finding another partner, and being religious are some of the coping strategies employed. Both formal and informal reporting avenues are utilized but the latter seemed preferable. Internal and external barriers to male IPV reporting and help-seeking were underscored. Help-seeking by male IPV victims seems a taboo in a society that expects exaggerated masculinity inadvertently hindering reporting. Our findings reveal that both men and women appreciate the need for a gender-inclusive response to IPV. Despite reported shortcomings, leveraging existing easily accessible support systems such as family, community leadership, local administration, and religious institutions could be an ideal approach to start conversations about male IPV recognition and mitigation.

1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a problem of public health importance and takes the form of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse (Ali et al., 2016). Psychological, social, and interaction factors influence IPV patterns with most incidents being characterized by mutual aggression, often in self-defense (Babcock et al., 2019; Dokkedahl and Elklit, 2019; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012). Although there are similarities between men and women with regard to physical IPV perpetration (Spencer et al., 2016), literature shows that female-perpetrated acts of physical violence are more linked to self-defense and that men are the main perpetrators of sexual violence (Hamberger and Larsen, 2015). Moreover, there is overwhelming evidence indicating that women who are subjected to IPV experience increased severity of harm compared to their male counterparts (Caldwell et al., 2012; Hamberger and Larsen, 2015). This might shape the framing of IPV as primarily a form of male-perpetrated abuse against female partners in heterosexual relationships. However, emerging evidence reveals that men also experience IPV, challenging this

conventional understanding (Bates, 2020b; Oyediran et al., 2023; Scott-Storey et al., 2023; Waila et al., 2022).

One significant gender difference among IPV victims is their help-seeking behavior. Research consistently shows that, compared to men, women are more likely to seek help (Ansara and Hindin, 2010). For instance, a study in Canada revealed that about 28 % and 53 % of male and female victims of IPV sought help from formal sources, and 55 % and 80 % from informal sources, respectively (Barrett et al., 2020). A similar trend was observed in Hong Kong where women were nearly four times more likely to seek help compared to men (Choi et al., 2015). Indeed, a study on help-seeking among male IPV victims in Japan found that only 3 % (43/1466) of them sought help (Morishita et al., 2024).

Failure of men to recognize abusive situations sometimes marked by minimization of victimization has been identified as a reason why men do not seek help (Arnocky and Vaillancourt, 2014; Huntley et al., 2019; Wallace et al., 2019). In one study, 65 % of the participants did not report being subjected to IPV because they faced difficulties in self-identifying as victims (Machado et al., 2016). Furthermore, the societal expectation that men should be strong physically and emotionally

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: jmkibs@gmail.com (J.M. Waila), olaf.Horstick@uni-heidelberg.de (O. Horstick), mitirodomnick91@gmail.com (D.O. Mitiro), christine.musyimi@amhf.or.ke (C.W. Musyimi), michael.wilson@uni-heidelberg.de, michael.l.wilson@utu.fi (M.L. Wilson).

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reserved makes it difficult for male IPV victims to reconcile masculinity with the experience of abuse perpetrated by their female partners (Bates, 2020a). For men who do recognize abuse, shame related to the perceived loss of masculine identity presents a significant barrier to disclosure and help-seeking. This shame is often rooted in societal and gender norms that frame male victimization as inconsistent with traditional masculinity (Hogan et al., 2021; Huntley et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2016; McCarrick et al., 2016). Negative reactions from family and friends, including surprise, disbelief, or outright dismissal, further reinforce the perception that male victimization is improbable (Hogan et al., 2021; Machado et al., 2016). Additionally, ridicule or dismissive treatment by law enforcement officers discourages men from utilizing formal support systems (Bates, 2020a; Hogan et al., 2021; Machado et al., 2017). Consequently, many men turn to anonymous online social networks and seek high levels of confidentiality when disclosing their IPV experiences (Gueta and Shlichove, 2022; Huntley et al., 2019).

The uncertainty of involving third parties, especially those within formal support systems, is an established deterrent to help seeking because it has the potential of making the situation worse for survivors (Lippy et al., 2020). For men with young children, the fear of losing custody is real, exacerbated by abusive female partners who exploit gender biases in the justice system by threatening to deny child access if the abuse is reported (Bates, 2020a; Hogan et al., 2021). This fear is compounded by potential retaliatory abuse, which can intensify if the abusive partner feels their control is threatened (Machado et al., 2016). Paradoxically, children can also motivate some men to report IPV to protect them from adverse childhood experiences, particularly when violence directly threatens their well-being (Gueta and Shlichove, 2022). At the same time, men hesitate to report abuse out of a desire to preserve their relationships, driven by love, familial commitment, or the hope for reconciliation, often fearing that formal intervention might criminalize or attract financial repercussions (Gueta and Shlichove, 2022; Huntley et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2016).

Based on the pervasive yet misguided ideology that men are immune to female-enacted IPV, most social support systems and interventions have been developed for women in response to women's experience of violence perpetrated by their male intimate partners, which has for a long time been recognized as a crime in many jurisdictions (Bates, 2020a; Ogbe et al., 2020). Therefore, men who seek support often encounter stigma and discrimination, particularly among service providers, related to gender stereotypes, which make them appear as inappropriate beneficiaries of victim support (Gueta and Shlichove, 2022; Lysova and Dim, 2020; Machado et al., 2017). Moreover, there is evidence that men who report IPV victimization are sometimes branded and treated as the perpetrators by the justice system, with some even facing wrongful arrest (Machado et al., 2016; McCarrick et al., 2016). Abusive female partners, aware of these systemic flaws, have been shown to exploit them, using law enforcement to inflict secondary abuse on their partners (Machado et al., 2016). Unsurprisingly, male victims report feeling that no reliable sources of help exist for them, having found formal ones unresponsive or harmful (Hogan et al., 2021; Lysova and Dim, 2020). For instance, a study in Portugal found that out of 89 men who self-identified as victims of female-perpetrated IPV, not a single participant cited police, justice, or social support services as helpful (Machado et al., 2016). In contrast, healthcare providers have been reported to be most supportive among the formal sources of help, possibly because men often seek help when the frequency and severity of physical IPV escalate significantly hence attention is focused on care (Ansara and Hindin, 2010).

In light of these barriers to help-seeking among male IPV victims, the formulation of all-inclusive policies and design of responsive, IPV interventions is crucial (Lysova and Dim, 2020; Machado et al., 2017). Effective responses should include the design and implementation of specific services targeting male IPV victims and the reorientation of service providers to appreciate their needs (Machado et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2020). However, for this to be successful, men ought to

recognize and report abuse because unless men learn how to voice their grievances, their plight will remain unrecognized. Indeed, disclosure and help-seeking have been presented as the differentiating factor between helpless victims and empowered survivors who take action to get out of the abusive state and mitigate the negative effects of exposure to violence (Dunn, 2005; Hoff, 2016; Lysova and Dim, 2020). Additionally, supportive policies and mitigation strategies can only be developed with a deep contextual understanding of male IPV, which is missing in many countries (Scott-Storey et al., 2023). This study, therefore, sought to describe perceptions on help-seeking behaviors of male IPV victims in an informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya.

2. Methods

We collected qualitative data through focus group discussion (FGDs) to describe community perceptions of the help-seeking and coping strategies of male IPV victims. The study was conducted in Kibera, the largest informal settlement in Kenya located in Nairobi City County about 5 Kilometers (KM) from the central business district. The settlement is densely populated occupying 2.38KM² yet home to about 275,000 residents representing all ethnic groups in the country (KNBS, 2019). The settlement comprises semi-permanent structures made of mud and corrugated iron sheets organized in close proximity to one another. Many of the residents rely on casual labor for a living and lack of basic amenities such as water and sanitation facilities, access roads and high crime rates are common features of the settlement (Shikuku et al., 2018).

Study participants were recruited from six out of the 14 villages comprising Kibera informal settlement. Simple random sampling was used to select the six villages. Potential study participants were approached through community health volunteers (CHVs) working in the study area. Each CHV is assigned 100 households under the community health strategy and is familiar with the people he/she serves hence purposive sampling of participants was done at the household level. Eligible participants included ever or currently married/cohabiting males and females who were at least 18 years of age and expressed willingness to participate in a discussion with fellow men or women. The sampled participants did not have to disclose their IPV victimization or perpetration status, since our focus was community perceptions and not subjective experiences. A total of 12 FGDs were conducted; six FGDs with female and six FGDs with male participants. Each FGD had between seven and 12 participants except one which had 14. A semi-structured guide with open-ended questions was used to steer the discussions which were predominantly in the Kiswahili language. The guide contained 4 open-ended questions: 1) How can we describe the relationship between married/cohabiting couples in Kibera? 2) Are there times when violence is directed at men and how does it manifest? 3) What action do abused men take? 4) How can such violence be prevented in this community? With consent from the participants, audio recording of the discussion proceedings was done. More information about the sampling procedures and the methodology is available in another article (Waita et al., 2025).

The audio files were transcribed verbatim, translated into English language and thematic analysis performed as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Two qualitative data analysts who were proficient in both Kiswahili and English languages and familiar with the research area read through the transcripts and each developed a code book, the two of which were merged into one coding scheme which guided data coding/organization with the aid of NVivo software. The two coded the 12 transcripts collaboratively and the coding scheme was revised iteratively. The coding process produced seven main themes which were further split into two subsets for ease of presentation of the findings. The first subset focusing on male IPV triggers, manifestations and consequences can be accessed elsewhere (Waita et al., 2025). This article presents three themes on perceptions encompassing coping strategies and help-seeking among male IPV victims.

3. Results

Participants' characteristics: Our sample was made up of 118 participants (59 male and 59 female). The participants' age range was 19–70 years with a median of 38 years (interquartile range: 30–47). Only 9.3 % had attained tertiary level of education and 65.25 % were married at the time of data collection. Majority of the married participants were male at 91.53 % compared to 38.98 % among the females. The main occupation among participants was casual labor comprising doing laundry among women and construction work for men. For further information on the study participants, cf. (Waila et al., 2025).

Themes and subthemes: The aim of this study was to describe the community perceptions of male IPV. However, we ended up gathering information on perceptions as well as experiences of IPV from the study participants who openly shared their personal experiences or those of other community members. Despite their openness, we refrained from probing further on the experiences for fear of exposing discussants to stigmatization by their fellow study participants or affecting the discussion flow, hence we did not establish how many of the male participants were victims of IPV. Our findings do not therefore represent mere perceptions but also actual experiences of male IPV, as depicted by the illustrative quotes. The findings are presented in three main themes: i) Coping strategies, ii) Help-seeking and reporting, and iii) Possible solutions and mitigation strategies. Each theme has subthemes and select quotes have been used to support the narratives. The quotes have been identified using the FGD numbers and participants identified by sex (M for male and F for female) and number, e.g. M3 or F5, to illustrate diversity of views.

3.1. Main theme 1: Coping strategies

This theme presents reasons men gave for persevering and choosing to remain in abusive intimate relationships and the tactics they employ to avoid victimization or to minimize its adverse effects. Since men are the violence targets hence best positioned to explain their plight, it presents men's views hence only male participants are quoted.

Subtheme 1a: Reasons for persevering: Love and fear were presented as the main reasons men stay in abusive marriages.

Commitment to family demonstrated through love for their children and wives makes men want to remain close to them to provide and protect them. Such men desire to see children enjoy love and attention from both parents which they feel shields them from some adverse childhood experiences such as neglect. "We men have some mercy, when we look at our families, we think that our children will suffer when we leave" – FGD4:M9. Love for their spouses hinders men from abandoning them despite being abusive:

Another thing is love. Like some women are beaten and hurt, even taken to the hospital, but they don't leave their husbands. When you ask her, she says, "I love this man, even though he beats me up." That is the same way some of us, men, are. You cannot leave the marriage because you love your wife - FGD2:M4.

Fear was another deterrent to leaving and it was presented in three ways. First there was the fear of societal shame if men were abandoned by their wives or if the men ran away from their homes. "We also have shame; we feel it would be shameful for people to hear that we have left our homes" – FGD4:M9; "... they may say, "he got married and the woman ran away". The shame makes you to stay so that you have a name that you have a wife in the house as a man – FGD12:M7". Second, there was the fear of losing assets acquired during the subsistence of the marriage as expressed by this participant, "I have got some property which I have registered in both my name and her name so if I quit ... we will be forced to split assets, so we also persevere because we have assets" – FGD10:M7. Finally, the fear of the law seemed to force men to exercise restraint even under provocation, "we also respect and fear the law of the land so that makes us to ... even if you are abused you tell her,

"control a bit"" FGD12:M2.

Subtheme 1b: Coping mechanisms: The mechanisms men employ to cope in the face of IPV victimization include:

Avoidance of the home environment to minimize time spent with a stressful spouse and minimize the likelihood of starting an argument. For example, those who are denied food at home could eat out to avoid confrontation when they demand it at home. This avoidance is aptly expressed by these participants: "When you go to work then your stress subsides, you relax and by the time you come back home, the woman has also calmed down" – FGD12:M3. "You stay out until so late since you don't want to get home early because of pressure because of violence from women" – FGD12:M2.

Silence was presented as another way of avoiding verbal abuse, "in many homes men are just surviving. If they try to speak, they realize that beans is also vegetables (a slang way of saying they will be in trouble)" – FGD4:M6. In addition, it seemed silence was also used as a psychological weapon since sometimes women interpret it as conceding defeat, "Learning to stay silent. When she is emotionally high you go low. This is what keeps my marriage going. Whenever she tries to quarrel, I coil my tail so that she sees she has beaten me" – FGD2:M3.

Male submission seemed an effective strategy promoting peaceful co-existence in marriages including in cases where the woman was more financially stable than the man, "what we are trying to avoid is being found without a wife. To avoid this what you are going to do is to come into your home as a guest. When you come into that home you are a guest, and you keep quiet when there is good or bad you are silent" – FGD6:M7. However, the likening of submission to slavery which was presented as acceptable for women gave the impression that men held women in low regard:

You as a man have nothing and you are forced to submit like a slave to the level of a woman so that you can stay with her, because if you remain up there, she will pack her bags and leave – FGD6:M5.

Remarrying or finding another partner who is deemed to be more understanding was also fronted as a coping strategy. Men expressed that the new partner would not only serve as a source of solace but also meet the sexual needs in cases where denial of conjugal rights was one of the forms of abuse.

Men go and cheat since they are not getting their (conjugal) rights at home, it's just a lot of noise and violence. So you decide, let me go out and look for someone, I might meet someone who will calm me down. Someone I can even share ideas with – FGD12:M2.

Though presented as a strategy that was deemed to restore peace by humbling the female partner, this clearly points to carefully calculated tactic to demean female spouses through isolation, "I will marry another one and keep somewhere, where I can have peace ... When you marry another woman your wife who may have been very stressful will become very humble. Peace is restored" – FGD2:M9.

Religious teachings and prayer seemed to be an approach that depicted helplessness as stated by this participant, "So challenges exist but we just pray to God about them" - FGD2:M9. On the other hand, there seemed to be a belief that exposure to religious teachings can foster behavior change among their female spouses, "... when you go to church hold her hand and take her. At least when they go, they get teachings and are able to change" – FGD12:M2.

3.2. Main theme 2: Help-seeking and reporting

This theme describes perceptions of the avenues male IPV survivors use to report or seek help and the barriers they may experience during the process. Male and female participants shared their views hence illustrative quotes include views from both.

Subtheme 2a: Avenues/channels: These majorly represent the categories of people men report to when victimized.

Friends and peers who are trustworthy such as those who have been

close since childhood, or those with whom one underwent circumcision as a rite of passage, hence belong to the same age set and are considered confidants.

I am Kipsigis (ethnic group), so there are people I was circumcised with, so I invite them aside and tell them there is a problem in the marriage so we talk and they say when they will come. So they come and we clear the issue. ... They are my age group so we conclude issues at that level - FGD10:M12.

In other instances, men were said to confide in and get advice from the peers they hang out with like in entertainment joints. "There is somewhere they go to report and are assisted by other men at the side even if it is at the club he will go and share what you have done to him at home" – FGD7:F6.

Family members and elders preferably drawn from both sides to assure impartiality. This was deemed possible in situations where formal introductions of partners had taken place, as is the tradition, hence parents/elders from either side were no strangers to each other. "Some men speak out. When they can no longer handle their wives, they go to elders... It is like a council of elders. The elders could be older brothers, fathers, or grandfathers" – FGD11:F1. Some men seemed to prefer reporting to their mothers whose intervention was not always taken kindly by the women. "Some report issues to their parents ... especially mothers-in-law. Since you can't beat them or do anything else, you just accept... You just find yourself being summoned by mother-in-law. And they say so many things. No peace" – FGD5:F5. For those with older children, they too seemed to be a helpful resource. A participant stated:

... So, you just stay and talk to your kids, especially if they are adults like mine, you tell them "you know your mother talks a lot, sometimes, even when I'm not present, please try and talk to her. Even if she uses some drugs, tell her not to speak to me like that sometimes since it raises up tempers that may bring issues. The tempers may one day cause one of us to be hurt" – FGD4:M9.

Religious leaders were also an avenue in cases where partners attend the same institution. "Some of them report to their pastors. This is for those who go to church. They also experience challenges in their marriages. I have witnessed one such case" – FGD5:F5.

Local authorities such as village elders, chiefs and police officers were mentioned as available reporting channels, but participants felt that they were biased, favoring women: "For example, she does something bad to you and take it to the chief, he inclines so much on the side of the woman" – FGD6:M2.

Subtheme 2b: Barriers to accessing support: Factors that seemed to hinder or make it difficult for male IPV survivors to report and or seek help were at the individual level (internal) while others were structural or system (external) related.

i) Internal barriers

Shame, which is strongly related to cultural norms and social expectations, was one of the barriers to reporting: "It is so shameful for a man to report being beaten up by his woman. You yourself see that it is shameful that I come here to the chief and say that my wife did this to me or even invite the clan. That is so difficult. I would rather I die with that in my conscience" – FGD4:M6;

Ego and stubbornness seemed to make some men unwilling to accept external support to address IPV since they feel they are men enough to handle their situations: "... when you invite an extra party, he asks, "why do you call another person? How many do we live here? We are two of us" – FGD9:F6. Others struggle with admitting mistakes and apologizing: "What happens is that a man, even if you say a man has made a mistake, for him to just say sorry, that's very difficult to say" - FGD4:M6. Similarly, some women also turn down assistance. They walk away, make the house untidy and refuse to prepare a meal so that any invited guests find it uncomfortable. "She just said, "I don't want those

people here", even though she attends church services" – FGD4:M4; "I will not accept that a man who feels mistreated invites his family to come and solve the issue" – FGD5:F3.

Fear of retaliation by an abusive wife which was supported by female participants who narrated how they threaten their husbands with abandonment or more abuse if they dared to report them:

There are elders nowadays who are not elders since when you take your issues to them and you open up in a sitting like this gathering, they spread your issues and the woman gets to hear of them. The wife starts questioning that so and so was saying you said this and that, why did you take our issues to other people? Fighting becomes a lot at home. ... That is why we are trying to manage by ourselves in our home – FGD6:M5.

Fear of losing their wives after exposing their weaknesses to third parties who might take advantage of the situation. This fear was well expressed by this participant, "Even the chief turns against you, when he sees that your wife is beautiful, issues arise" – FGD8:M1. One female participant narrated how she reacted to her husband's threat of reporting her to his area chief:

My husband tried it sometime back when we went home for a December holiday. He was like: "Don't be too mouthy. I am home now. These are my people. I will report you to the chief." And I was like, "You do that so that I can find a man in this area. You will see us live right here." And he has never repeated the same threat – FGD5:F8.

Perception that reporting is inconsequential majorly due to IPV stereotypes which favor women. It appeared like even seeking help from trusted family members was not always helpful as the matter would not be taken seriously.

Sometimes we have to die silently like sheep because no one listens to us. Even if you invite families, yours and hers, they discuss but things end there. As soon as they step outside the door things return to how they were. There will be no change so you choose to die silently and you leave things as they are – FGD4:M4.

ii) External barriers

Trivialization/minimization by society and authorities making men feel their plight is not taken seriously and their reporting is handled casually:

When you are abused and you go to the police station to write your statement about how you have been violated by your wife even the police officers will laugh at you because they don't consider it a normal thing for a man to report that he has been beaten. That makes you, even when you are abused, to just keep quiet because taking that a step further is shameful - FGD4:M5;

Even the men don't go to tell the parents because when they get there, they find that they are told, "I bore you as a man, what is wrong with you that you are being beaten by a woman?" So it is not easy for them to go and tell the parents they become hard hearted – FGD9:F6.

Survivor victimization because men's version of the story is not believed, "Even if you go to the police, they will call the wife who will just rant and the man ends up being seen by the police as the villain in the home" – FGD8:M2. Worse still, they are sometimes branded the aggressors and punished, "When the women come here at the chief's camp they turn everything against the men. They say the men are the ones who started the violence. That's obvious. I have seen many such cases here" – FGD11:F5.

Gender-biased justice/legal processes that make reporting male IPV

a complex and futile endeavor since participants felt that the laws are tailored to protect women. “The laws we have in Kenya as many have said incline to the women, and as they have said, whenever there is an issue between a man and a woman, the woman will be heard, the men won’t be heard” – FGD8:M4.

Another male participant shared his observation of men who report IPV:

But for such cases of men, even if they report, I can tell you that it doesn’t usually go straight. So men are also mistreated but their cases, even if they report to the government, don’t proceed well while those ones reported by women are quickly processed – FGD11:F5.

Gaps in supporting male IPV victims with most organizations, especially non-governmental ones, inclining to violence against women: “We have a challenge especially like the government or many other organizations are only focused on gender-based violence especially on the ladies’ side. They look at women issues not men” – FGD12:M7. It was evident that this gap made some men feel like they had no rights:

You will find many men even here at the chief’s camp. They come to report various cases against their wives. But there is no solution coming here because those wives will run to groups promoting women’s rights. So men have nothing, they don’t have men’s rights – FGD11:F5.

3.3. Main theme 3: recommendations on potential mitigation strategies

This theme covers two main areas: the institutions/organizations participants felt were responsible for mitigating male IPV victimization and the actual activities or interventions that would address the issue.

Subtheme 3a: Responsible institutions/organizations: A description of the organizations considered critical in addressing male IPV including their strengths and limitations is given.

Family was deemed the best because these are people who understand the couple. However, there was a concern that there were couples who cohabit without ever being formally introduced to their spouses’ families making it hard to use this option. “The issue of parents, you will find that someone got married here in Kibera and she has never been introduced to the man’s parents, they don’t know her, so how do they go to solve the case there?” – FGD1:F8. Moreover, mistrust of family members (particularly mothers-in law) was evident with some opining that the family should not be involved at all.

You might go to solve a case, but the mother-in-law insists that you leave and leave his son, so you get no help because you love each other, you will part and then unite so you find that the mothers-in-law don’t help – FGD1:F11.

Religious institutions by promoting marital harmony and embracing reconciliation during conflict resolution. However, it was expressed that these institutions lack the authority to enforce compliance as they can only persuade congregants. Furthermore, they would only benefit those who are members of such institutions, who were said to be mostly women, “I ask a question, we are talking of churches and most men don’t go how can they be assisted?” – FGD9:F6. Moreover, in cases where spouses ascribe to different religions, this would not be an option.

If this is your wife, she is Christian and the man is Muslim so you wake up and leave her as you go there wherever you go and she wakes up and goes to church. How can you advise them? Even if you enter their home, no one is following the other. We have such people here, in the estate – FGD4:M6.

Male-friendly social support institutions, both state and non-state, staffed with personnel who show impartiality when handling IPV cases, “I would urge the government to establish an organization for the men. ... such that whenever they have a problem they report there

for a solution When they do that the men will get a way out” – FGD8:M14. Also, offering male-friendly services within existing organizations which focus on violence against women, an approach which holds the potential of ensuring fairness when partners are heard together and counseled accordingly.

Existing organizations, even the ones that focus on women. I think they should not just look for those who are violated but should also try and find out what really brings about violence. That would allow them to fix what is missing in struggling marriages instead of hurrying to charge the men – FGD2:M2.

Subtheme 3b: Male IPV mitigation interventions: The specific activities that the various institutions can undertake are described under this subtheme.

Creating awareness on the existence of male IPV to counter the notion that domestic violence affects women only, a move that would encourage male IPV survivors to speak out and action be taken to mitigate it, “It is good to create awareness among people who are in marriages ...” – FGD2:M11.

Guidance and counseling for men and women to promote effective communication, understanding and harmony between spouses. Through this, women can be enlightened on their acts which constitute IPV against their men. Moreover, having older couples as mentors to guide the younger ones through the various stages of marriage, each of which has its unique challenges, was cited. There was concern that if left unguided, men were at risk of seeking advice from peers who might mislead them causing more trouble in their homes.

Counseling. You can have sessions where as a couple you go sit and get a talk so that the man can say what he wants the woman to do and the woman too can do that. Many people go through that and it really helps – FGD10:M6.

Managing expectations prior to commitment applicable to young men planning to marry to avoid disappointments and a situation where either or both partners feel abused. This was particularly key as participants expressed that people within their community were fond of marrying while relatively young at times when they were not ready for responsibilities associated with marriage.

What I would urge for those that are marrying, when you marry you should have something which is called “ten commandments”, those laws are what we miss. In missing them when we marry, she will be a bother because you didn’t tell her what you wanted ... – FGD6:M7.

Male empowerment to help men appreciate their rights and the need to utilize social support services. “They should understand that they have rights. That they have a right to live, a right to speak, a right to report me as his wife, when I go overboard, the law must prevail” – FGD3:F1. This empowerment should also extend to improving men’s financial status through job creation so that they are able to provide for their families.

Unemployment is a big problem, especially for men ... Many of them rely on Juakali (informal sector), which only has a 50 % chance that you will get something at the end of the day. With employment you know that you have something consistently at the end of the month, day, or week – FGD2:M3.

Male empowerment was considered critical for strong and stable families as stated by this female respondent, “Now a woman, a widow, and all that are considered but men have somehow been forgotten so we ask that they should be remembered because when they are lifted the family is strong” – FGD3:F7.

Separation/divorce though against cultural, religious and social values, participants felt that dissolution of the marriage union in cases where it is no longer tenable was an IPV mitigation measure. Based on the expressions of the participants, particularly the strategies men employed as coping mechanisms, the bidirectionality of abuse was

evident and women were more open to the idea of being the ones to desert.

The bible says that God hates divorce. If these things happen in marriage, separation is allowed since you cannot live with an unfaithful person. ... when you persevere, there comes a time when you have to decide to save your life – FGD3:F7.

4. Discussion

This study explored coping strategies, help seeking, and mitigation measures for male IPV in an informal settlement. While there exists a wealth of literature on IPV, previous scholarly work has predominantly focused on women as victims with little evidence on male IPV particularly in low- and middle-income countries. It is worth noting that although we set out with a goal of describing community perceptions on male IPV, which informed the decision to use group discussions, study participants openly shared experiences which could be an indication that male IPV is a common phenomenon in the study community.

The deliberate decision by men to remain in abusive relationships is in line with extant literature and may be linked to culturally defined family values that obligate men to honor their marital commitment to love and care for their spouses and children (Gueta and Shlichove, 2022; Huntley et al., 2019). This is of particular significance to our study population, where men are the primary breadwinners (Waila et al., 2025), and our findings indicated that some men fear that their children would suffer if they left. Indeed, leaving would likely plunge their loved ones into financial difficulties, and the prospect of protecting their children from such a predicament would be slim given the higher likelihood of women being granted physical custody of minors in the event of a marital breakdown (Raday, 2019). Moreover, the fear of losing matrimonial assets, which would most likely comprise household items, may sound unfounded because men seemed to be the main providers, but the fact that women's non-monetary contributions count during property division qualifies it (Mutiso, 2019). The decision by men to stay contrasts expressions from women discussants in the same study who stated that they would not hesitate to abandon men who do not fulfil their financial provision obligation (Waila et al., 2025). This observation contradicts literature which presents stigma as a well-established factor trapping both men and women in abusive relationships (Murray and Crowe, 2017; Murvartian et al., 2023). The gender difference may be due to the societal expectations that men, as heads of the family unit, should strive more to keep it intact.

Comparatively, we find that, broadly, the strategies men employ to cope with IPV mirror those of female victims: relationship-focused, emotion-focused and avoidance-focused coping, and maladaptive mechanisms (Rizo et al., 2017; Scott-Storey et al., 2023). However, the specific mechanisms, socio-cultural context, and implications differ significantly in our study setting. For instance, although female IPV victims also use silence (Duran and Eraslan, 2019), in a highly patriarchal society, this strategy aligns with social norms, including religious expectations which prescribe obedience and submission. On the contrary, avoidance, silence and submission by men may point to a feeling of helplessness linked to perceived lack of social support and financial resources to challenge deeply rooted gender norms and societal values (Herrero-Arias et al., 2021). Amidst such helplessness, seeking solace in the supernatural through prayer and religious teachings is not surprising, despite evidence indicating that some forms of religious coping are associated with negative psychological adjustments (Ano and Vasconcelles, 2005; Schieman and Bierman, 2011). Furthermore, while women have been shown to use legal protection, retaliation and resistance, or desertion to evade IPV (Apatanga and Tenkorang, 2023), these were not cited in our study, probably because they would attract serious consequences on male survivors. Ultimately, some of the coping strategies employed by men in the face of IPV, including finding another partner, seem to be detrimental with the risk of exacerbating spousal conflict

with subsequent IPV escalation (Conroy, 2014; Johnson and Anderson, 2013; Milek, 2015). This is particularly so because coming home late and or drunk, and confirmed or suspicions of infidelity were some of the triggers of male IPV reported by the study participants (Waila et al., 2025).

In keeping with literature on help-seeking among male IPV victims (Machado et al., 2016; Morishita et al., 2024; Sylaska and Edwards, 2014), we found that informal channels such as family, peers and friends were preferred. This could be explained by the fact that help-seeking among men has been shown to be more driven by the desire to restore peace in their families than getting justice for abuse committed by their female spouses (Machado et al., 2016). On the contrary and confirming extant literature, use of local authorities such as police and the chiefs was deemed an effort in futility since they were seen to be biased against men, often minimizing male victimization (Machado et al., 2017; McCarrick et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2020). This contrasts with female IPV victimization which is often treated with more seriousness and urgency (Machado et al., 2017). Such negative experiences when male victims seek help constitute external barriers to help-seeking bolstering structures which may instill fear in abused men forcing them to continue suffering in silence, reinforcing the internal barriers we identified. However, we also acknowledge that women survivors of male-perpetrated IPV have also cited difficulties with the use of formal sources of help (Rohn and Tenkorang, 2024), which suggests a lack of appreciation of the impact of violence not just on the victims but also other family members and the wider society.

Potential male IPV mitigation measures particularly the presentation of family and church as institutions responsible for solving and mitigating male IPV problem compliments literature which shows that religion plays a role in marital relationship quality (Carroll et al., 2019). However, we cannot rule out underutilization of the resources linked to these institutions as observed by DeRose and colleagues (2021) who singled out failure to confront IPV openly as a salient promoter of silence among victims. The proposal to establish male-friendly institutions shows men are cognizant of social and economic changes which are not in support of traditional masculine norms of stoicism, and need support in a dynamic society which seems to defy established gender norms. Finally, the link between poverty and violence is indisputable (Waila et al., 2025; Barbosa et al., 2019; Slabbert, 2017) hence economic empowerment of men as cited by the study participants is critical to shield them from IPV triggered by their inability to meet their financial obligations.

4.1. Study limitations

Whereas this study generates nuanced knowledge about the plight of IPV against men, we wish to acknowledge three key limitations. First, the aim of the study was to explore community perceptions of female-perpetrated IPV against men, which informed the use of FGDs for data collection. However, other than perceptions, respondents also discussed their experiences and those of others in the community. Therefore, apart from the quotes that were reported in the first person indicating actual occurrences, it is not possible to tell whether third person narrations were in reference to actual or hypothetical situations. Second, the study focused on informal settlement dwellers within an urban setting which presents a unique social setting limiting its application to other populations which do not share similar socio-demographic profiles. Finally, since the target was heterosexual intimate partners living together as a couple, the findings may not apply to couples in same-sex intimate relationships or heterosexual partners who do not consider themselves united by marriage sharing the same dwelling.

4.2. Study implications

We theorize that men in resource constraint settings are likely to bear the brunt of domestic violence with limited, if any, escape options which

do not attract dire social and economic consequences. Given that existing survivor support systems have been developed for women who suffer disproportionate harm from IPV, this study findings can be used to guide the initial steps in instituting male-friendly approaches to mitigate male IPV especially in resource-constraint settings. For instance, both formal and informal sources of help could be strengthened to recognize men as potential IPV victims and accord them non-judgmental support when they report. Local administrators, law enforcement officers, community members, and religious leaders, who are easily accessible to residents, could be empowered to appreciate male IPV and to be empathetic to men who report exposure to it. This is likely to normalize reporting, encourage disclosure among victims, allowing accurate quantification of the vice to guide an effective response. Moreover, community members demonstrated incredible understanding of a range of context-appropriate support avenues. Therefore, leveraging their knowledge in the design of responsive systems would be a sound approach to boost their (systems') effectiveness. Importantly, we contend that there is need to strike a careful balance in protecting men while at the same time ensuring that the gains made in the fight of violence against women are not reversed.

5. Conclusion

Our study findings reveal that men who remain in abusive heterosexual relationships often do so out of a deep commitment to their children and partners, as well as fear of public shame, and related social and economic repercussions. A combination of emotional attachment, social expectations, and systemic biases contributes to a profound sense of helplessness among abused men, as reflected in avoidance, silence, and submission coping mechanisms cited. Despite being aware of their predicament, help-seeking among male IPV victims is hampered by individual and systemic barriers which are highly linked to deep-rooted social and gender norms. This study findings demonstrate the need for gender-inclusive IPV mitigation strategies which should start at the family level and cascade upwards to the level of policy formulation and implementation to ensure men are not pushed into a state of helplessness.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jacinta Mukulu Waila: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Olaf Horstick:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Domnick Onyango Mitiro:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Christine Wayua Musyimi:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Michael Lowery Wilson:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization.

Ethical considerations

The Ethics Commission at the Medical Faculty of Heidelberg University in Germany (S-754/2022) and the Kenyatta National Hospital/University of Nairobi Ethics Research Review Committee (P-717/09/2021) approved the study.

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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