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# Coping responses to intimate partner violence: narratives of women in North-west Tanzania

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## ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the variety of coping strategies that women employ in response to intimate partner violence. Coping strategies can help women tolerate, minimise and deal with difficult challenges or conflicts in their relationships, such as learning to be independent from their husbands and surviving trauma. Drawing on 18 in-depth interviews conducted in Mwanza, Tanzania, we examined two different coping strategies – engagement and disengagement coping – with respect to how women react to economic, emotional, physical and sexual intimate partner violence. While the choice of coping methods remains a complex issue, most women employed engagement strategies as a response to economic violence and disengagement coping for sexual violence. We explore the implications of gender and societal roles for coping decisions and analyse how access to resources may provide women with the tools to limit future violence.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Intimate partner violence;  
coping; Tanzania

## Introduction

Intimate partner violence is a pervasive global public health and human rights issue, with one in four women globally experiencing physical and/or sexual violence by a partner during their lifetime (World Health Organization 2021). A 2021 study reported that about 25% of women in sub-Saharan African countries reported intimate partner violence, with a higher prevalence in rural areas with lower education and lower access to economic resources (Wado et al. 2021). In Tanzania specifically, the lifetime prevalence of physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence was reported to be 44% in 2015 (DHS 2016). The consequences of intimate partner violence, regardless of

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whether it is defined solely as physical and/or sexual or also includes economic and psychological intimate partner violence, drastically affect women's mental and physical health, their participation in social and economic activity, and the wellbeing of their children (World Health Organization 2021).

To design and implement effective interventions, it is important to understand how women respond to intimate partner violence. Previous literature has distinguished two main forms of coping with intimate partner violence: engagement and disengagement coping (Tobin et al. 1989). Women may utilise engagement strategies to change the abuser's behaviour as well as shift the balance of power and maintain agency (Iverson et al. 2013). Engagement strategies include help-seeking, active opposition, leaving, covert resistance and violence (Tobin et al. 1989). Covert resistance also includes women setting limits with their perpetrators, for example through discussion, and utilising their support network. Disengagement coping is often described in terms of passive reaction patterns, palliative reactions and avoidance (Compas et al. 2001). Disengagement strategies are usually passive attempts to avoid violence such as remaining quiet or ignoring the situation while engagement strategies actively address the violence and disrupt relations (Taft et al. 2007). Disengagement coping has been associated with higher rates of depression and a lower sense of control, while engagement strategies are associated with lower levels of victimisation and better mental health outcomes (Tobin et al. 1989). Discerning the use of coping strategies is critical to creating programmes and interventions and mitigating the health consequences of intimate partner violence (Waldrop and Resick 2004).

Social Norms Theory, the Theory of Gender and Power and Empowerment Theory can be useful in understanding the reasons why women choose disengagement or engagement strategies when dealing with intimate partner violence. Social norms theory explains why social expectations exert a strong influence on how individuals behave (Perrin et al. 2019). Individuals comply with social norms for group belonging and outcome expectations, anticipating rewards and punishments when choosing to obey social rules (McDonald and Crandall 2015; Lilleston et al. 2017). Therefore, social norms may inform the use of disengagement behaviours to remain compliant with traditional power structures and prevent further violence.

According to Connell's theory of gender and power, the internalisation of gender norms takes place through socialisation (Wingood and DiClemente 2000). Connell's theory identified three distinct structures that characterise gendered relationships: (a) the sexual division of labour (economic inequalities); (b) the sexual division of power (imbalances in control) and (c) the structure of cathexis (social norms). Together, these three interlinked structures help understand the gender-based expectations that lead to intimate partner violence and the constraints women face to opposing their partner (Maharaj 1995), particularly in a context where gender inequality and intimate partner violence against women in Tanzania involves male dominance, traditional gender roles, and access to economic resources (Gashaw et al. 2019).

Empowerment theory emphasises how despite intimate partner violence being a complex social issue, women will make independent decisions when they are provided sufficient support and opportunities to do so. Women in Tanzania are gaining higher levels of education and economic opportunities, moving away from traditional social

and gender constraints, giving them more social power to navigate inequalities and strategically oppose violence from their partners (Fox 2016; Larsen and Hollos 2003).

While literature from the USA and Australia has outlined various coping strategies in relation to intimate partner violence, there are few studies that have directly investigated differences in coping strategies for the four forms of violence within an Eastern African context (Tarzia 2021). Previous research on intimate partner violence in Tanzania has largely focused on understanding the prevalence of violence, manifestations of violence, and the pathways leading to abuse (Mahenge and Stöckl 2021). Furthermore, they stress the importance of help-seeking from official institutions (Palermo, Bleck, and Peterman 2014). These studies, however, do not explain how women navigate different forms of violence from their partners and the gender inequalities that impact coping decisions. This study therefore aimed to understand the utilisation of disengagement and engagement strategies across different forms of intimate partner violence.

## Methods

### *Study setting*

The study took place in Mwanza, Tanzania's second largest city. Mwanza is a major business and commercial trade hub for neighbouring countries and the Lake Victoria region (DHS 16). In 2015, according to the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), 30% of women in Mwanza had no formal education, 46% had completed primary and 23% had higher education, and 67% were currently employed (DHS 2016). The main source of employment for women in Mwanza was in agriculture (52%), followed by unskilled manual work (23%) (DHS 2016).

Levels of intimate partner violence are high in Mwanza, with about 61% of women reporting ever experiencing physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence and 34% reporting economic abuse during the past 12 months (Kapiga et al. 2017). The largest ethnic group in Mwanza are Sukuma people, yet inhabitants of Mwanza come from many different ethnic groups across the country due to its strategic location as an economic hub. As in other parts of Tanzania, patriarchy is common, with clear gender expectations for men's and women's roles. Intimate relationships formed in this context thereby confer more power and authority to men (Wight et al. 2006). Intimate partner violence is still perceived to be a private issue in Tanzania, with only half of the women who reported physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in the DHS seeking help from anyone, with most of them only seeking assistance from their families and only very few involving official services (Mahenge et al. 2020).

The study was conducted between May and July 2019 in Mwanza. The study was part of the MAISHA longitudinal study – a mixed-method cohort study investigating predictors and consequences of intimate partner violence in Tanzania building on the MAISHA trials (Kapiga et al. 2019). As can be seen in Table 1, 18 women aged 27–57 were randomly sampled from 85 women who reported changes in their experiences of sexual intimate partner violence, defined as being forced to have sex against their will, between the baseline and endline survey of the MAISHA trial (Kapiga et al. 2019). The interviewers called the women to seek consent to participate in this additional qualitative study and scheduled appointments with those who consented. The women

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic profile of women interviewed.

Participant ID	Age	Marital status	#Children $\geq 18$	Level of education	Occupation	Religion
Mary	43	Married	4	Form 4	Tailor	Christian
Zaina	45	Married	5	Std 7	Farmer	Christian
Linda	44	Married	2	Form 4	Farmer	Christian
Neema	48	Widow	3	Std 2	Florist	Muslim
Eliza	43	Married	1	Form 2	Unemployed	Muslim
Christina	32	Divorced	2	Std 7	Unemployed	Christian
Sarah	37	Married	3	Std 7	Entrepreneur	Christian
Grace	27	Single	1	Diploma	Entrepreneur	Christian
Tabitha	45	Married	1	Std 7	Entrepreneur	Christian
Destiny	37	Divorced	4	Std 2	Unemployed	Christian
Esther	45	Married	none	Std 7	Entrepreneur	Christian
Ana	30	Married	2	Std 7	Entrepreneur	Christian
Faith	57	Married	1	Std 7	Entrepreneur	Christian
Diana	36	Divorce	3	Diploma	Hotelier	Christian
Melissa	43	Married	2	Std 7	Entrepreneur	Christian
Anna	41	Married	2	Std 7	Entrepreneur	Muslim
Laura	49	Married	1	Std 7	Unemployed	Christian
Agnes	43	Married	2	Std 7	Entrepreneur	Muslim

in this study have been residents of Mwanza for at least two years and were fluent in Swahili, the language of the interviews.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in the UK; the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich in Germany; and the National Institute of Medical Research Ethics Committee in Tanzania.

### **Data collection**

Two trained Tanzanian female interviewers conducted the interviews – the preferred language of participants. Interviewers received training on issues specific to this study including ethical issues related to qualitative research and intimate partner violence. The Principal Investigator (HS), with extensive knowledge and expertise on intimate partner violence research, developed the first draft of the topic guide, informed by discussion with the study team and preliminary quantitative findings from the MAISHA endline survey. The topic guide was revised based on expert input and field-tests and adapted after the first interviews. Data saturation was ascertained by reviewing the data and fieldwork notes on a daily basis and was reached when the interviews did not reveal new information.

The interview guide itself (see online supplemental file 1) initiated a broad conversation on how women would portray their perfect relationship to discuss behaviours they like or do not appreciate in their partner. If women did not start conversations about the different forms of violence themselves, they were introduced by questions such as: Does your partner want to have sex when you do not? What do you do? In a later section, participants were also queried what they considered to be economic, psychological and sexual abuse and asked to relate this to their own experience. Interviewers also asked specific questions to explore behaviours and actions in response to intimate partner violence and explored narratives surrounding coping. Interviews lasted between 60–90 min, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. They were conducted at a place and time of the participants' choice such as their homes and at restaurants that was sufficiently private to ensure

that others could not overhear the conversations. The interviewer also paused the audio recording and changed the topic when privacy was a concern and ensured the comfort and privacy of the woman before continuing the discussion. Full information about the study was provided to participants verbally, and written consent obtained. Participants were reimbursed a total of 8,000 T-shillings (about 3.4 USD) after participating in each interview. After the interviews, all participants were provided with referral options for intimate partner violence services if needed.

### ***Data analysis***

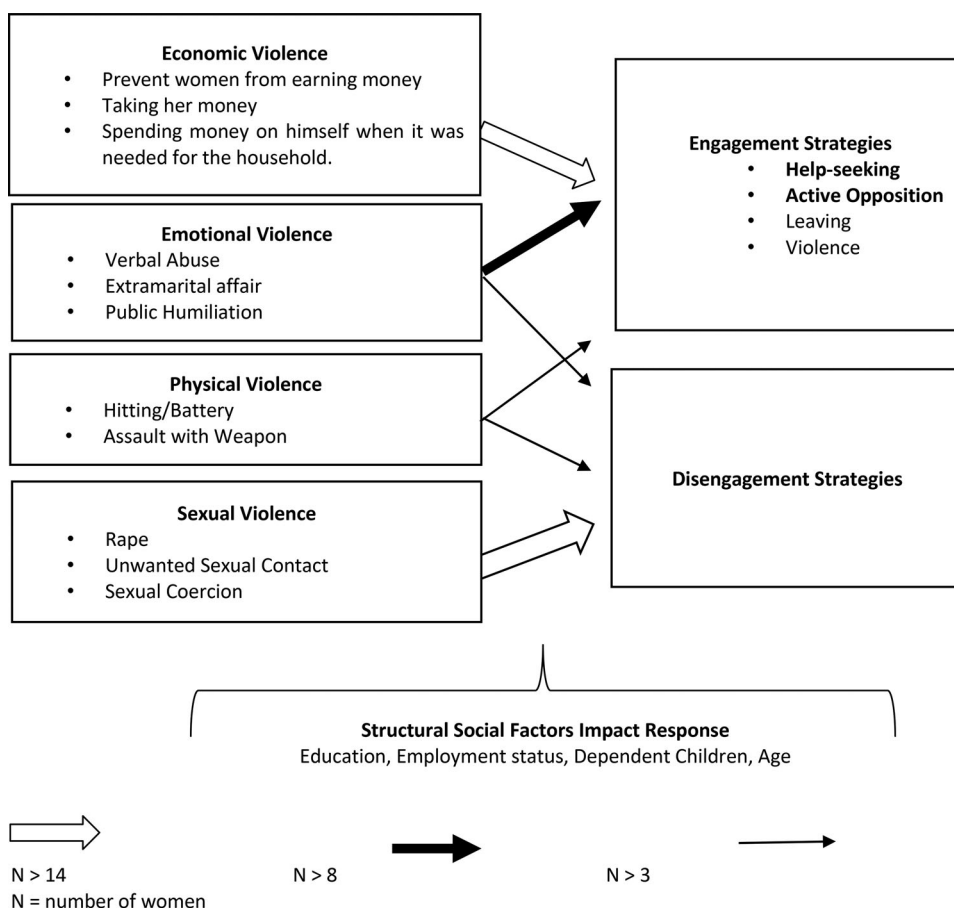
Personal identifiers from the interview transcripts were removed prior to data analysis. Data analysis was undertaken in multiple stages. First, DM and EP, who also conducted the interviews, read half of the transcripts line by line to identify key topics and patterns that were discussed and refined together with by GM, ZM, DM, and HS into a codebook. Second, for the planned analysis of coping with intimate partner violence, AD read and re-read all translated manuscripts and subsequently developed codes on women's coping based on what emerged from the interview data. After immersing herself in the literature, AD investigated in how far the concepts of the chosen theories and literature aligned with her initial codes and in how far they went beyond. AD also cross-checked her codes with those of the codebook and combined them if possible. Third, AD and the team identified patterns and relationships between the codes and synthesised the main themes and chose corresponding quotes until consensus was reached in multiple meetings. Participants were provided with a pseudonym to protect their identity and quotes were derived from interview responses.

### ***Findings***

Women in this study reported multiple accounts of violence in their relationships, including experiencing the co-occurrence of various forms of violence. While physical violence was the least often reported, sexual, economic, and emotional forms of violence were common experiences. All participants reported a variety of coping strategies to intimate partner violence that can be classified as either engagement or disengagement strategies, with disengagement strategies, help-seeking and active opposition being the most commonly chosen ones ([Figure 1](#)).

### ***Coping strategies in response to economic intimate partner violence***

Active opposition and help-seeking were the two forms of engagement strategies most used for economic intimate partner violence. The women in this study displayed active opposition to economic violence by verbally standing up to their partners and communicating their frustration to actively address the violence. Reported help seeking behaviours included out to family members or close friends for advice, resources or interventions. For example, one participant, Zaina (45, farmer) described how she relied on family members to address economic abuse from her partner who would steal money meant for their children's needs to buy alcohol.



**Figure 1.** Outline of coping patterns across four types of violence.

I used to share with my elders when the abuse got too much. For example, I used to tell my mom, but before, I would tell the woman who owns the house that I had rented. I would tell her that I did not like my husband's behaviour around money. She would try to call him and talk to him about his behaviour. He would accept but then he repeats after a few days. – Zaina, 45, farmer

Active opposition and help-seeking were not only used in response to economic violence when the partner stole their money, but also when he did not support the children or pay loans. In this sample, women who commonly opposed their husbands usually also had their own business, had finished primary education, and had children to support, alluding to the crucial impact of economic empowerment, education and maternal responsibility on women's responses to intimate partner violence. Women also reported a reduction in economic intimate partner violence because of active opposition.

I told him, "I do not want to borrow other people's money for you anymore. You do not help with payments. Don't you see that you are abusing me economically...To the extent that I am stressed all the time" Now, he doesn't ask me to take loans under my name for him. - Neema, 48, Florist

Women commonly used engagement strategies to protect against economic violence, yet some remained quiet and played a passive reactionary role due to a perceived lack of control or fear of punishment. When her previous partner did not financially provide for the family, a participant, Destiny decided to seek an independent income source to pay for her children's needs instead of confronting her partner.

When I asked where he spent the night, he would tell me that it is none of my business. I decided to stop asking him for anything and let him decide himself whether to leave us with money or not ... So I was providing for myself. I didn't depend on a man's income. I used to do casual works like laundry for money. – Destiny, 37, Unemployed

### ***Coping strategies in response to emotional intimate partner violence***

As seen in economic intimate partner violence, engagement strategies such as active opposition and help-seeking were also commonly used in response to emotional intimate partner violence, with women actively confronting their partners verbally or utilising informal support systems to demand a change in emotional abuse.

Women were keen to have a positive reputation and therefore expressed feelings of humiliation and anger when arguments with their partner happened in a public setting, revealing abuse to the community. As a result, women were more likely to actively confront their husband if he emotionally abused them in public.

However, disengagement or avoidance were also prevalent in responses to emotional violence. Women stated that they were afraid that resisting emotional violence would provoke argument and intensify emotional intimate partner violence or lead to other forms of intimate partner violence. They claimed that it was not beneficial to resist their partners. If they remained quiet and not engaged, their partners would likely realise their abusive actions.

He used to beat me when I asked him where he had spent the night. I got used to the situation. So, when he was home, I did not say anything because doing so resulted in fights. Our communication was not like a real one. It was full of fear. – Tabitha, 45, Entrepreneur

Other women also described how they remained quiet to express their anger and frustration towards their partners. Another participant, Christina revealed that when she got angry at her husband, she would stay quiet to provoke a response, thereby forcing him to acknowledge his actions.

I become furious and quiet. When I become quiet, he will recognize his mistake and from there we will have to sit together and discuss where he went wrong, and after that he will end up making an apology. – Christina, 32, Unemployed

### ***Coping strategies in response to physical intimate partner violence***

Despite not being mentioned as frequently as economic, emotional and sexual intimate partner violence, women who experienced physical intimate partner violence also reported actively resisting through their own acts of violence. This did not occur very often, because women feared that this decision would result in escalated abuse and



incite more arguments. For example, Ana (30, entrepreneur) reported that she had hit her husband back after he had poured water on her in public, but in hindsight, she considered this engagement strategy unsuccessful as it resulted in an increase in physical violence.

### ***Coping strategies in response to sexual intimate partner violence***

Active opposition was not commonly observed in sexual intimate partner violence. Cases of sexual assault were viewed as shameful, and women usually kept these experiences secret from family and friends to prevent further humiliation. Most of the women in the sample reported having sex with their husbands when they did not want to. For example, Sarah also stated that while she did not want to have sex, she felt like it was her duty as a wife to yield and allow pleasure to her husband.

As a wife, you just give him what he wants just for the sake of it even though you have already informed him that you are not in the mood. Since he keeps complaining, you just let him have his way. – Sarah, 37, Entrepreneur

While most women chose to play an inactive role during sexual intimate partner violence, some reported informal help-seeking in which they solely sought out emotional support from family and friends rather than active ways to cope or stop the sexual violence.

After a long time, I told my friend about the rape. She advised me and told me that this is the way it is always done. When men have sex with first-time ladies (virgins), they usually use force. – Christina, 32, Unemployed

When sexual intimate partner violence occurred, women remained silent and did not actively oppose their partner to keep the peace in the relationship. Even women who actively opposed their partner when economic or emotional intimate partner violence occurred tended to play a passive role in their reaction to sexual intimate partner violence. For example, Esther (45, entrepreneur) who actively confronted her husband when he borrowed her money had a passive reaction to all the experiences of sexual intimate partner violence she described, sexual intimate partner violence being regarded as a normal part of marriage.

### ***Barriers to leaving abusive relationships***

Leaving the partner was a strategy that three women used to address recurring and severe forms of violence. Other women chose alternative ways to distance themselves from their partners, for example by living in separate rooms or houses while being married instead of seeking a legal separation. Another participant, Neema, who wanted to get a divorce decided instead to live with her parents for a short period due to the intimidation and fear she experienced from her partner.

"When I told him I wanted to formally separate, he called me and told me that I was a fool and that he will slaughter me and leave. I could not live in peace ... I stayed with my parents for a month and came back." – Neema, 48, Florist

The women in our sample who chose to leave or informally separate from their husbands were younger, had higher educational levels, and social and financial support. Agnes, who experienced emotional intimate partner violence felt able to leave her husband due to her independent financial means, demonstrating how economic resources and family support can help in choosing engagement strategies.

When I found out that he was using that same money to get other women and have affairs, it really hurt me so much, and I was very angry. I then decided to leave him and left. I told him that this is my money and property from my sweat and God blessed my efforts. I was also given capital from my father. – Agnes, 43, Entrepreneur

Earlier in the relationship, this same participant also faced economic and emotional violence from the same partner and chose to stay in the relationship at that time point due to discouragement from the family and concern for her children. Agnes's initial reluctance to leave her partner suggests that repeated accounts of violence can have a compounding effect and that women may encounter have a critical threshold or turning point at which they shift towards choosing engagement strategies.

A considerable number of women had considered leaving their partners but were discouraged to do so because of the negative effect this would have on their children, economic dependence, and concerns about their partner's reaction. Women worried that if they get divorced, they might not find another partner due to social censure.

The moment you get divorced and get married to another man, people tell that you are a whore. You are regarded as an immoral person. – Woman, 43, Unemployed

Women who did not leave their partner relied on disengagement strategies, reported lower self-esteem, and chose more harmful coping mechanisms. Due to the abuse they experienced some reported looking for love elsewhere by engaging in extramarital affairs or partaking in alcohol use.

That (violence) is what made me get into another relationship. It was like a way to find comfort, which is how I found myself into that (extra-marital relationship) – Tabitha, 45, Entrepreneur

In contrast, Grace (27, Entrepreneur), the youngest woman in the study with one child, had left her husband, and was seeking an educational diploma. She also had the support of her family and was able to move in with her parents. Her networks and background were crucial in her decision to leave her marriage.

### ***Barriers to help-seeking and disclosure***

Help-seeking is a broad form of resistance in which women seek help from either formal or informal networks to help reduce or address intimate partner violence. Help-seeking was a strategy that women in this study used across the different forms of violence.

However, participants rarely described reaching out to law enforcement and health-care professionals. Most depended on informal channels such as family members, friends, religious figures, and street leaders to speak to their partner, obtain advice and receive emotional support. Women stated that family and friends they asked for advice would tell them to be patient with their husbands, suggesting the limited efficacy of informal help-seeking.

I used to tell them, the women mostly, if his behaviour becomes excessive, I tell them, he does this and this and I don't like it. They just advise me to be patient, they tell me to be patient. – Lisa, 37, Unemployed

While many women were willing to seek help from informal networks, a minority remained unwilling to share their violent experiences with anyone, including close relatives and friends. These women shared the perception that matters of abuse should stay within the private and confidential sphere of the relationship. They believed that disclosure or help-seeking was not constructive and that conflict within the marriage should be resolved with the partner privately instead.

Whether we have gone out or whether we have argued we act as if nothing has happened when somebody visits. You can resume your brawl when she leaves because if you share your experience with her, she may in turn share that with her loved one. You will be humiliated further if you share with someone that ... you have been beaten ... or you have had your clothes torn from you. – Melissa, 43, Entrepreneur

Women who declined help-seeking services also showed an underlying fear that rumour would spread in the community, damaging their social reputation. Women reported fear of punishment from their partners if they revealed abuse to outsiders. The perceived shame, social backlash, and the wish to retain privacy were reasons why women behaved in this way.

Some conversations signal violence. For example, my partner may talk harshly to me alone or in the presence of our children. That is humiliation or violence directed to me. The next day, my child may ask me, "why did dad say ... one ... two ... three to you?" It's one of the things I hate in my life. Why can't he wait until we are alone ... just the two of us instead of arguing over a phone while other people are listening on. That's abusing or violating your partner. Abuse has many faces ... See? – Faith, 57, Entrepreneur

Additionally, in this study community, discussing sex is perceived to be taboo. Thus, women reported discomfort in discussing sexually violent behaviours.

These experiences ... (sounding sad). When you sit with most women experiencing sexual violence you will find that it is hard to disclose about what someone is going through. Only confident women will discuss this matter with you. That's why a person who has confided in you will tell you that you are one of her closest people. – Mary, 43, Tailor

## Discussion

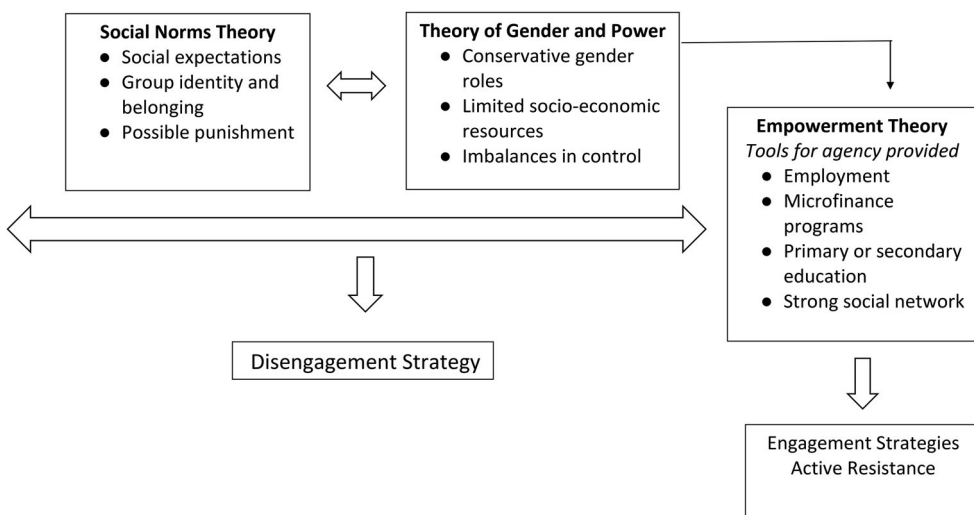
This study found that women use a variety of coping strategies to deal with physical, sexual, emotional and economic intimate partner violence. While women utilised a mix of engagement and disengagement strategies for emotional and physical intimate partner violence, women primarily relied on engagement strategies for economic intimate partner violence and primarily resorted to disengagement strategies to cope with sexual intimate partner violence.

Women in this study were generally reluctant to disclose intimate partner violence or to actively seek help, in particular those who experienced sexual violence, an attitude that continues to be commonplace throughout sub-Saharan Africa. In a study in Nigeria, over 50% of women reported that they would not disclose violence, and

among the women who were willing to do so, about 70% would choose to report only to close relatives not formal institutions (Okenwa, Lawoko and Jansson 2009).

Figure 2 outlines how the different theories used in our analysis help explain women's choice of coping strategies. Women's tolerance of intimate partner violence and conformity to dominant understandings of gender roles and relationships are likely to be an expression of their experiences and expectations as well as a reflection of prevailing social norms (McCleary-Sills et al. 2016). At the individual level, our study, as well as existing evidence suggests that a woman's willingness to disclose abuse or seek help is influenced by her level of adherence to gender roles, decision-making autonomy, social empowerment, and perceptions of available social services (Sardaryan 2017). As suggested by social norms theory, community values that promote violence, financial dependence and social discrimination impede women's decision to disclose violence (Liang et al. 2005). An in-depth qualitative study in Mwanza, Tanzania showed that women may agree to have sex with their husbands even though they are not in the mood, given that sex in marriage is framed as a man's right (Mchome et al 2020). These barriers to help-seeking illustrate how female agency is restricted by social norms and systems that are not responsive to their needs. In Tanzania, for example, there is a pressing shortage of primary care physicians who can identify victims of intimate partner violence and offer culturally sensitive and appropriate services for coping (Dienye, Gbeneol, and Itimi 2014).

In line with the Theory of Gender and Power, women in this study described how inequitable societal gender role prescriptions and socialisation contributed to the acceptance of intimate partner violence in communities that made it difficult for them to gain support against intimate partner violence (Nyamhanga and Frumence 2014). In a study in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, young women described their role as one of serving their partner's sexual needs and identified the ideal woman as home-bound, settled, submissive and forgiving (Lary et al. 2004). This cultural norm and associated



**Figure 2.** Developing theoretical framework to understanding women's decision pathways to cope with intimate partner violence.

power differential limits women's ability to negotiate the terms of their sexual relationships and constructively react to sexual violence specifically (Krishnan et al. 2012).

In this study, empowerment theory was useful in explaining why some women in the study were able to choose engagement strategies – typically, the individuals concerned had more economic and social resources at their disposal, an important factor in influencing women's decision to speak up or leave their abusive partner (De Serpa Pimentel et al. 2021).

There were various turning points such as extramarital affairs, financial struggles and recurring abuse, which caused women in this study to choose engagement strategies or oppose their husbands. Previous research has documented how shifts in beliefs and perceptions of themselves, their partners and their situation can motivate women to consider active change (Chang et al. 2006). Rapid and profound social changes are affecting families in Tanzania, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. Women are gaining higher levels of education and increasingly contributing materially to the household (George 2020; Okkolin, Lehtomäki, and Bhalalusesa 2010). As empowerment theory suggests, access to financial resources allows women to make strategic choices concerning their lives, improving their status in the household and community (Idris 2018). With increased decision-making capacity and higher self-esteem, women may be more likely to resist economic violence since this action threatens their newly earned status, income and self-perception (Huis et al. 2017).

Studies have also shown that education enlightens women about their options and empowers them to challenge gendered norms that normalise violence as it has been found in our study. Women with more education, and hence more career options, may be less likely to be abused because they are perceived as more valuable by their husbands; they also may have more power to leave a relationship should their husband become abusive. A study in Mwanza, Tanzania has highlighted how the prevalence of violence decreased with increasing level of education for women (Kapiga et al. 2017). As women's participation in the domestic economy in East Africa increases, investments in women's education and the inclusion of men in intimate partner violence programmes and interventions could interrupt the cycle of violence in Tanzania.

## **Limitations**

This study has certain limitations. Firstly, women in the study were recruited from a longitudinal qualitative study, yet we only interviewed them twice, basing this analysis on the first interviews where how women coped with intimate partner violence was one of the aims of the study. In addition, interviews were conducted only with married women in a heterosexual relationship. It is possible that perspectives may have differed if unmarried women in a relationship had been included. Secondly, even though our sample relied on an ethnically diverse group and reports of intimate partner violence aligned with other studies conducted in Tanzania (DHS 2016), we would have liked to sample a more diverse group including young women and women growing up outside Mwanza. Thirdly, the research assistants conducting the interviews for this study were younger than participants, which may have influenced what the older women said. Fourthly, due to stigma and normative expectations, women may

also have been reluctant to disclose experiences of intimate partner violence, especially sexual violence, and their responses to it.

## Conclusion

Previous studies investigated intimate partner violence coping mechanisms do not generally differentiate between different forms of intimate partner violence or consider the socio-cultural context that may be applicable to women in North-west Tanzania (Mahenge and Stöckl 2021; Palermo et al. 2014) This study identified that capturing the varied experiences of women and differentiating between multiple forms of violence women experience is necessary to understand how women cope with intimate partner violence and develop appropriate policies, programmes and interventions. The notable lack of formal help-seeking in our study suggests that services are either not widely available, or women do not trust formal systems. Community street leaders and members should be supported to act as allies for women, addressing the social norms that normalise violence and perpetuate negative ideas about masculinity. Ultimately, study findings signal the need for interventions that address the individual, interpersonal, and community level determinants of intimate partner violence, including socio-cultural attitudes concerning gender inequity and economic empowerment.

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