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Developing countries, migration and migrants

Domestic Violence in Africa: A Glance Through the DHS Survey

La Violenza Domestica in Africa: Uno Sguardo Attraverso l'indagine DHS

Micaela Arcaio,^{1*} Daria Mendola,¹ Anna Maria Parroco¹

Abstract Recent data states that 33 per cent of women in Sub-Saharan Africa are survivors of domestic violence. This work aims at assessing the association between women's characteristics, their environment, and their history of violence in fifteen African countries. Three kinds of violence were explored: physical, emotional, and sexual, each one exerted by the current partner. The data are from the Demographic and Health Survey, in which a special module assessed domestic violence in female respondents. Using three independent logistic regression models, we found that experiencing violence of any kind is associated with a history of past violence, and while women empowerment is not protective, partners with high education are less likely to be violent.

Abstract *Dati recenti provano che il 33% delle donne in Africa Sub-Sahariana è vittima di violenza del partner. Questo studio mira a valutare l'associazione tra le caratteristiche delle donne, il loro ambiente, e la loro storia di violenza in quindici paesi africani. In particolare, lo studio si focalizza su tre tipi di violenza: fisica, emotiva e sessuale. I dati derivano dalla Demographic and Health Survey, in cui un modulo speciale indaga la violenza domestica tra le intervistate. Usando tre modelli indipendenti di regressione logistica, emerge che subire abusi di qualsiasi tipo è associato con un passato di violenza e, nonostante l'empowerment femminile non sia un fattore protettivo, partner con un elevato livello di istruzione sono meno violenti.*

Key words: Abuse; Demographic and Health Survey; intimate partner violence

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1 Domestic Violence

Domestic or intimate partner violence (IPV) is defined by the United Nations as a behavioural model of relationships in which one of the partners seeks to either obtain or keep power and control over the other [1]. There are different kinds of domestic violence: physical abuse refers to causing harm; emotional abuse points out not only to verbal abuse but also to social isolation from friends and family; finally, sexual abuse involves forcing a partner into sexual acts without their explicit consent [1]. All countries in the world experience IPV but at different rates and women are overall the most targeted group. Sub-Saharan Africa has the second-highest rate (33%) of lifetime IPV for women aged 15-49, following the 35% in Southern Asia [2].

The analysis of IPV requires more than the study of victims' characteristics [3]. Several studies control for education, both of victims and their partners, with people with higher education being less likely to either perpetrate or suffer IPV [4, 5]. Wealth is also considered a protective factor [6]. There is also evidence of a complex interplay between context and personal characteristics: e.g., as women's access to education and the labour market increases, so does IPV within that nation [7]. Religious women are more protected than atheists, given they can rely on a broader social network; however, there is no clear evidence of differential effects among religious affiliations [12]. IPV is also associated with women's approval of wife-beating [4, 8, 9]. Furthermore, history of violence decidedly plays an important role: women who have a history of violence between parents – i.e., their fathers used violence on their mothers – are much more likely to be abused later in life, due to assimilation of acceptability of this kind of aggressions and perpetuation of the same patterns of violence [10,11]; similarly, men who had violent fathers or witnessed violence become perpetrators as well [6].

2 Data and Methods

This paper focuses on violence against women by their heterosexual partners. Data are drawn from the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), a nationally representative household survey, covering over 90 countries and 40 years. In particular, we focussed on fifteen surveys in Africa for which the module on domestic violence was administered: Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Ethiopia, Gabon, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Malawi, Rwanda, Senegal, Togo, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Surveys range from 2015 to 2018, with some exceptions for some countries where available data were less recent.

Information on IPV is collected only among women ever partnered, selected at random in those households involved in the main survey. Questions are both referred to violence perpetrated by the respondent's current partner and to past violent experiences. We restricted our analyses to a sample of almost 40,000

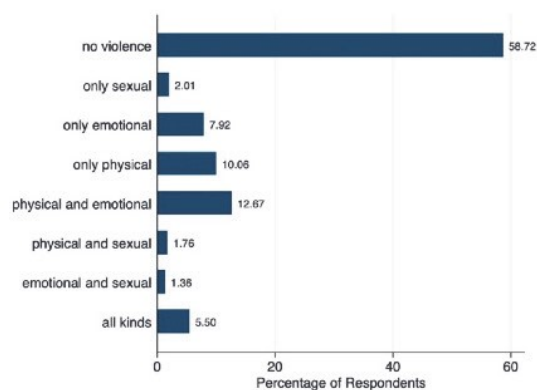
Domestic Violence in Africa: a glance through the DHS survey 5
 currently partnered women, aged 31 years on average, pooled across the 15 countries.

Domestic violence, our response variable, is assessed via three indicators, made dichotomous:

- “Physical Violence”, which takes value 1 if the respondent has been pushed, shook, slapped, punched, threatened at gunpoint by her partner;
- “Emotional Violence”, which takes value 1 if the respondent’s partner has ever humiliated, threatened with physical harm or insulted her;
- “Sexual Violence”, which takes value 1 if the respondent has ever been forced into sexual acts by her partner.

Figure 1 shows the percentages of women who might have experienced any form of the three types of IPV by their partner. More than 40% of respondents have experienced at least one form of abuse by their partner, with almost 6% of them having experienced all three and more than 15% having experienced two.

Figure 1: Occurrence of the three kinds of violence – percentages



Given the nature of the phenomenon, and of the response variables, three logistic regression models were defined to assess the effect of the selected regressors, which are the same for all models to improve comparability. These were classified into five different dimensions: 1) *History of Violence*: father used violence on mother; respondent has ever been raped (not by her current partner); no. of people who used violence on the respondent (except for partner); 2) *Respondent’s characteristics*: education level, employment status, age, age at first intercourse, religious affiliation, no. of justifications for wife-beating;¹ 3) *Partner characteristics*: partner’s age (in terms of age difference among partners), education level and no. of partner’s control

¹ Her husband is justified in beating her for: burning the food, arguing, going out without telling him, neglecting her children, refusing sex.

issues;¹ 4) *Household characteristics*: she is the head of the household, quintiles of household's wealth, no. of living children under five years of age; 5) *Context variables*: whether the respondent lives in a rural/urban setting, and the country she lives in. These last country dummies account for regional specificity.

3 Results

The models provide the odds for women to have experienced at least one physical, emotional, or sexual violence by their current partner (estimates in Table 1). History of violence plays a crucial role in predicting every kind of IPV [10,6,11]. Noticeably, women are almost twice as likely to be physically abused if their father harmed their mother, and thrice as likely to be sexually violated by their partners if they had been previously raped. The greater the number of abusers in women's lives the higher the odds to be abused by the current partner.

As for the respondent's characteristics, older women are more likely to experience violence, while there are no significant effects of their education, nor of their age at first intercourse. However, as debated above, women who work are 10% more likely to experience physical or emotional abuse. The religious environment also matters despite but not for every kind of violence: atheist women are 25% more likely than Christian women to be physically abused by their partners, whereas Muslim women are 25% and 30% less likely to be physically or emotionally abused than Christian women respectively. Interestingly, the number of justifications that women provide for wife-beating does contribute to increasing the odds of each form of violence.

Partners with a higher education level are also associated with women being 20% less likely to be physically or emotionally abused, and almost 30% less likely to be sexually abused. Those who tend to control their partners more are more likely to act violently. When he is older than her, the odds of being abused lower by about 2% per year but only for physical and sexual violence.

When it comes to household characteristics, women in the richest quintile are less likely to be either physically or sexually abused. Moreover, when the respondent is herself the head of her household, her odds of experiencing physical abuse lower by 10%. The presence of young children affects the odds of physical violence, by increasing it by about 5% for each child. Finally, women who live in rural areas are less likely to report physical and emotional abuse than those who live in a city.

Furthermore, other things being equal, violence is not equally spread across countries, with Burundi being the riskiest country for physical and sexual violence and Senegal for the emotional violence (with respect to Rwanda, assumed as reference).

¹ The respondent's partner is jealous, accuses her of unfaithfulness, does not allow her to visit female friends, insists on knowing where she is at all times, does not trust her.

Table 1: Logit models for the presence of violence acted by the partner (odds ratio estimates)

		<i>Physical Violence</i>	<i>Emotional Violence</i>	<i>Sexual Violence</i>
<i>History of violence</i>	<i>Father used violence on mother</i>	1.924***	1.633***	1.446***
	<i>She has ever been raped</i>	1.517***	1.776***	3.052***
	<i>No. of abusers in her life (except for partner)</i>	1.285***	1.337***	1.217***
<i>Her characteristics^b</i>	<i>Age</i>	1.543***	1.742***	1.567***
	<i>In paid work</i>	1.128***	1.145***	1.042
	<i>Religion (ref. Christian)</i>			
	<i>Atheist</i>	1.267**	1.094	0.845
	<i>Muslim</i>	0.766***	0.687***	0.930
	<i>Traditional/Animist</i>	1.157	1.073	1.337
	<i>Other</i>	0.726	0.784	0.376***
	<i>No. woman's justification for wife-beating</i>	1.089***	1.049***	1.108***
<i>His characteristics</i>	<i>He is older (age difference)</i>	0.987***	1.002	0.990***
	<i>Education (ref. None)</i>			
	<i>Primary</i>	1.046	1.055	1.024
	<i>Secondary</i>	0.986	0.919	0.904
	<i>Higher</i>	0.797**	0.774**	0.690**
	<i>No. of control issues</i>	1.924***	1.633***	1.446***
<i>Household characteristics</i>	<i>She is head of the house</i>	0.876***	0.947	0.899
	<i>Wealth Index (ref. Poorest)</i>			
	<i>Poorer</i>	1.001	0.995	0.991
	<i>Middle</i>	0.970	1.079	0.980
	<i>Richer</i>	0.881**	0.955	0.893
	<i>Richest</i>	0.844**	0.983	0.730***
	<i>No. of her own children under 5</i>	1.047**	1.032	1.010
<i>Con- text^a</i>	<i>Rural area (ref. Urban)</i>	0.875**	0.905*	0.869
	<i>Constant</i>	0.191***	0.0944***	0.0431***
	<i>Observations</i>	38,953	38,959	35,705

*** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.10

a) controlled for country dummies; b) controlled for covariates found not statistically significant: Respondent's education; respondent's age at first intercourse

4 Conclusions

Domestic violence against women is a worldwide issue. However, it is much more pervasive in some regions of the world, like Sub-Saharan Africa, where social and economic systems in place allow the persistence of discriminatory norms and inequalities. Our analysis offered a glance over factors associated with reported

violence, pointing out the relevance of the phenomenon in some African countries. Our findings indicated that women who have lived in a violent environment in the past tend to be more involved in the same kind of violence.

Noticeably, in contrast with our expectations, women's empowerment (in terms of education and employment) does not act as a protective factor. Indeed, having a paid job outside her house increases women's odds of being abused, and education is not statistically significant. This was observed in some other studies (see [7]) and should deserve further investigation. On the other side, richer families, with highly educated male partners, show less violence.

This study is not free from limitations, the main one likely being the reliability of collected data on violence, often biased by social desirability and the tendency of victims to deny experienced violence. However, we believe that the results offer an interesting contribution to the development of policies to fight violence against women. They suggest that the promotion of a model of women's emancipation in accordance with the cultural and social environment of the country could be successful in reducing violence only in association with more inclusive education and general better living conditions.

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