

“Breaking the Chains; A Case of Urban Violence against Women in Tacloban City”

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ABSTRACT

Women in the city experience numerous forms of violence and harassment practices that have been normalized as part of urban life. Safety or the lack of it may have various consequences in individuals' lives; the fear of violence impedes women's right to a safe environment and constrains their daily lives. Thus, this paper presents echoes of abuse in various forms of violence including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. These acts of violence occur within the urban context, where women face specific challenges and vulnerabilities. This study investigates the underlying factors contributing to women's vulnerability to violence in urban areas and explores the impact of such violence on their lives and well-being. With the different waves of urban violence, the study resulted largely in a framework of recommendations to examine and monitor existing policies and programs that are positively contributing to women's safety interventions to prevent violence. Assessing the complex issue of urban violence against women and providing insights that can inform policy interventions and community initiatives aimed at creating safer and more equitable urban environments for women are part of the picture of this study. One of the most important realizations of this paper is the implementing policies and legislation that protect women's rights, enhancing law enforcement responses and support services, improving urban planning and infrastructure to prioritize women's safety, promoting education and awareness campaigns to challenge societal norms, and fostering inclusive communities that empower women.

This paper concludes with solutions for creating safer urban spaces for women as a collective commitment to challenging societal norms, dismantling gender stereotypes, and fostering inclusive communities where all individuals can thrive free from violence and discrimination. To successfully achieve the objectives of this study, this paper employed qualitative research through phenomenological case study methodology utilizing in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. A researcher-designed interview guide with open-ended, descriptive questions was used to capture each participant's rich, lived experiences.

Keywords: Violence Against Women, Gender Violence, Women Empowerment, Urban Spaces, Policy Making

BIONOTE

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INTRODUCTION

Women experience numerous forms of violence and harassment practices that have been normalized as part of urban life. Safety or the lack of it may have various consequences in individuals' lives; the fear of violence impedes women's right to a safe environment and constrains their daily lives.

Many women have suffered different forms of violence and harassment just because they are women. These include domestic violence, physical violence, sexual harassment, rape, etc. Women, among other gender, most often are the victims of such offensive actions and such case is linked to the manifestation of power relations especially in connection to men. Women are much more likely to be victims of sexual harassment precisely because they more often lack power, are in more vulnerable and insecure positions, lack self-confidence, and have been socially 'trained' to suffer in silence (University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, 2003).

Violence and harassment in any form exist in almost all areas of a city. Even someone's own barangay, someone's own locality, is no exception. Women fear the assaults and so, their concern for their personal safety normally gets high and tense. Hence, for some, a safe environment is no longer imaginable. On one hand, urban cities offer many advantages, including a wide range of job opportunities, low unemployment rates, and abundant transportation options that make it easier to navigate the city. Moreover, they provide ample housing, advancements in technology, quality schools with excellent facilities and professional teachers, as well as access to medical services with top-notch medical facilities. (Walker, 2012) On the other hand, the disadvantages of living in urban cities are the high cost of living, elevated pollution levels due to industries, factories, and vehicles, extensive traffic jams, limited land for construction, overcrowding, a greater spread of illnesses, and high crime rates. (Walker, 2012)

Urban residents are perpetually exposed to unhealthy lifestyles and environments, which increases their risk of developing various health issues. Urbanization is closely linked to inadequate access to clean water, poor sanitation, and heightened exposure to risk factors such as smoking, pollution, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, and excessive alcohol consumption (Couillard, 2014). The poor mental health and substandard living conditions prevalent in urban areas can contribute to increased crime rates. A safe and protective environment is essential for individuals, particularly children, to ensure normal growth, development, and overall well-being. According to Healthy People 2020, exposure to violence can lead to poor long-term behavioral and mental health outcomes in children and adolescents, regardless of whether they are victims, witnesses, or simply hear about the crime.

The issue of safety is a pervasive concern in urban areas. Statistics indicate that gender-based sexual crimes occur more frequently in urban settings than in rural areas. Urban residents are more likely to be exposed to violent environments, with crimes such as robbery, theft, murder, sexual harassment, physical abuse, and rape becoming commonplace in some cities. In the Philippines, such crimes are frequently reported in the media. Gender-based sexual harassment in public spaces, including unwanted sexual actions or remarks, is a significant concern that affects individuals regardless of the perpetrator's motivations.

To ensure women's well-being, it is essential to establish a safe and secure environment where they can live without fear of assault, abuse, or violence. This entails creating a society where women are protected from harm, both in their homes and public spaces, and are free to participate fully in life without the threat of violence or intimidation.

This study aims to benefit individuals of all genders by identifying effective policies and programs that promote women's safety and prevent violence. To achieve this goal, the study focused on promoting social awareness to challenge norms that condone violence against women, equipping young people with skills for healthy relationships, expanding women's access to economic and social resources, as well as support services, and providing training for health services to better identify and support women experiencing violence, and integrating violence prevention into existing programs. By addressing these areas, the study seeks to create a safer and more supportive environment for everyone

In general, this study will have a significant impact on governance in building a safety strategy framework and creating support services for abused women and programs to sensitize legal systems.

Statement of the Problem

Urban violence against women refers to the various forms of physical, sexual, and psychological harm that women experience within urban settings. It is a pervasive and deeply concerning issue that affects women of all ages, backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses. Thus, this study aims to:

1. Identify the different forms of violence experienced by urban women.
2. Document the strategies, responses, and services that urban women use to cope with violence and abuse.
3. Suggest possible solutions and interventions to address the problem.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the following theories concerning urban violence against women namely ecological model and feminist theory.

Developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, the Ecological Model emphasizes the multifaceted nature of violence and considers how various ecological factors interact to shape individuals' experiences and behaviors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Applying this framework to urban violence against women allows for a holistic analysis of the issue and aids in the development of effective strategies for prevention and intervention. On the other hand, feminist theory emphasizes the power of inequality among the opposite sexes. In a patriarchal society, men are regarded as heads of families, economic providers, and decision-makers, and these social norms are used to justify males' resort to assault to ascertain deference by females (Wallach, Weingram, & Avitan, 2010). Feminist theory supplies a critical lens for recognizing and addressing urban violence against women. It emphasizes the ways in which gender inequality, patriarchy, and power imbalances contribute to violence and oppression experienced by women in urban settings. Feminist theories offer several key insights and perspectives when examining urban violence against women such as gendered power structure, intersectionality, public and private spheres, Victim Blaming and Culture of Silence, and Empowerment and Agency

The theories provide insights into the factors and conditions that necessitate or justify the occurrence of urban violence in society. The theories offer a background understanding of a social phenomenon with women depicted as the typical victims. We can gain a comprehensive understanding of urban violence against women and develop interventions that target multiple levels of influence. Thus, create safer urban environments, challenge harmful gender norms, improve legal and support systems, and promote gender equality, thereby addressing the underlying factors contributing to violence against women.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Violence against women is recognized as a major issue on the international human rights agenda. Domestic violence and abuse can happen to anyone, yet the problem is often overlooked, excused, or denied. Historically, this issue originally came to social attention mainly in the familial sphere. From the early nineteenth century and all the way through to the present, women have been regularly subjected to physical,

psychological, and sexual abuse by their intimate partners. In the past and today, such abuse has involved disputes over autonomy, obedience, deference, sex, money, domestic chores, children, relatives, drinking, and, in general, clashes between intimate partners over the understanding of their reciprocal rights and duties.

Violence against women distinguishes itself from other types of violence in that the gender of the victim relates directly to the motive of the attack (McIlwaine, 2013). While women, girls, men, and boys experience violence differently, both as perpetrators and victims, women and girls tend to be more vulnerable to violence (McIlwaine, 2013; Trenchetal., 1992). The women may not want to divulge the confidential matter for reasons of shame, fear, guilt, or simply because they do not want to be disloyal to their partners. Violence against women is a form of gender-based violence that is perpetrated towards people that socially identify as women because of their identity (Council of Europe, 2011; Shepherd, 2008).

The UN (1993) defines VAW as:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

Considerations need to be made regarding the different expressions of violence against women and what each of these types of entail. According to the WHO (2005, p.3), “one of the main challenges facing international research on gender-based violence against women is to develop clear definitions of different types of violence, that permit meaningful comparisons among diverse settings “as well as to understand the consequences, prevalence and offering legal protection to victims” (Owens, 2016, p.2198). These different types of violence overlaps with each other and can occur both in public and private domains of life and in various levels such as community, work environment, and event at home. The three main types are physical, sexual, and psychological (OAS, 1994)

Psychological violence is similar to emotional abuse. This type of violence is rooted in the power and control which a person exerts over another (Mechanic et al., 2000). It is a gendered crime mostly perpetrated by men against women (Scott et al., 2015, p.3309). This violence covers the following behaviors, threats, insults, yelling, belittling, constant humiliation, isolation and domination, intimidation, harassment, and threats of harm.

Physical violence is the most understood form of abuse. Exercised in an aggressive act such as hitting, beating with fists or weapons, kicking, slapping, biting, and strangling. While sexual violence can take many forms which include sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, and attempted rape/rape (WHO, 2007; IASC, 2005). One of the major problems of abused women is fear of violence and perceptions of risk, lack of empowerment, and absence of programs offered by the state. As a result of fear and perception of safety, many women adopt coping strategies for self-protection such as not going out, avoiding the public, and sharing experiences with others.

Urban violence takes many shapes and includes gender-based violence (GBV), such as street harassment, unsolicited comments, verbal abuse, physical proximity violations or physical assault is one of the most pervasive issues that women face. Women often face outright aggression while navigating public spaces. This type of violence is not only an immediate threat but also a psychological burden, causing massive modification in women’s behavior. These everyday forms of harassment are frequently underreported, as they are normalized in many urban environments, thus creating an unsafe atmosphere where women feel constantly at risk.

In addition to gender-based violence, urban violence can also take the form of more organized criminal activities that disproportionately affect women. Women are particularly vulnerable to sexual assault, robbery, or trafficking in areas with high rates of organized crime. These crimes are often exacerbated by a lack of proper law enforcement or inadequate response to the safety needs of women. Furthermore, structural issues,

such as poor urban planning and inadequate lighting, contribute to unsafe spaces that make women more susceptible to violence.

The visibility of gender-based violence in cities has grown, highlighting the need for inclusive policies and social movements to address these issues.

In this changing environment, the ability of society to withstand, cope with, and adapt is essential for understanding when violence is more likely and when it can be avoided (Elfversson, 2023). Gender dimensions of violence, and especially women's experiences in settings of urban violence have been the subject of important feminist research, including those that highlight gender as essential for comprehensive analyses of security and urban violence, and for promoting solutions and positive change.

Urban violence is a broad concept encompassing urban warfare, terrorism, gang violence, and riots, as well as psychological and structural violence (Glass, et al, 2022). The significance of studying urban violence lies in its impact on the street safety of women, displayed in myriad forms that contribute to a heightened sense of insecurity. Urban violence, when viewed through the lens of gender-based violence, refers to acts of aggression or harm that occur within urban settings and disproportionately affect individuals based on their gender. This concept often encompasses physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence, which can be exacerbated by urban factors such as overcrowding, socioeconomic disparities, and limited access to resources (Moura and Cadiera, 2021)

A growing research field is devoted to understanding the conditions that shape risks of urban violence (Elfversson, 2023). A primary contribution of feminist research indeed has been to demonstrate that there are both visible and invisible aspects of urban violence (Moura and Cadiera, 2021).

Spurred by the urgent need for action, the United Nations General Assembly set Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 5.2—to eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls. This has put renewed emphasis on violence prevention and response approaches, with countries being encouraged to monitor change in prevalence over time using quantifiable indicators such as those measuring intimate partner violence.

Despite the emergence of violence against women on international and national agendas, investment remains woefully inadequate. Violence against women and girls is a global phenomenon that historically has been hidden, ignored, and accepted

METHODOLOGY

This research used qualitative research employing phenomenological case study methodology, thus utilizing a researcher-made interview guide as the main tool in capturing lived experiences of each participant through open-ended, descriptive questions.

This study was conducted in Tacloban, City, a 1st class highly urbanized city in the Eastern Visayas region of the Philippines. The city is composed of 138 barangays.

There were five participants in the study. The criteria for the selection of the participants included the following: (1) living with their legal or common-law husbands (2) having experienced any form of violence by their husbands, (3) having at least one child with the husbands, and (4) having given the consent to serve as participants of the research. Before the interviews were conducted, the participants confirmed that they met the criteria.

The research participants were selected using snowball and purposive sampling techniques and ethical and safety considerations were followed in the conduct of this study. The units of analysis of this study were the participants' actual responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study involved five urban mothers who met the criteria for the selection of participants. In this study, the participants are residents of Tacloban City, Philippines. Their ages range from 45 to 65 years old. All five husbands are working in the informal sector 2 are fish vendors, 1 is a construction worker and 2 are laborers. Of the five participants, only one graduated college and the remaining are high school graduates. All the participants depend mainly on the meager income of their spouses. Four central themes emerged in this study namely: (1) recurrence of abuse, (2) disempowerment of women, (3) love for family, and (4) lack of programs and services. The themes were based on the interview transcripts and the literature and studies reviewed.

Recurrence of Abuse

Urban violence against mothers can take various forms, including physical, emotional, and economic abuse. This theme pertains to different forms of abuse suffered by the five participants for a long period of time. As victims, the women have been accustomed to the violent and controlling behavior of their husbands. Participant CB cited,

“My husband doesn’t give me money. I am a housemaid; lady washer and I do all the household chores. I have been experiencing physical abuse for a long time.”

A similar experience was shared by participant JR,

“I experienced physical and psychological abuse but it’s okay it only happens sometimes. He also doesn’t give me money or even buy me gifts.”

These statements of CB and JR only show passive submission of being physically, psychologically, and economically abused. Though they wanted to free themselves from these chains, financial capacity has always been a hindrance. Hence financial or economic stability serves as a crucial factor for women seeking separation. Participant JB cited,

“He does not give me money, but there is nothing I can do. He provides food and pays the bill. If I leave him, I don’t have the money to support my children. I think it is okay if he provides food, and my children can go to school.”

A similar experience was contended by participant BR.

“I can’t leave him; I don’t have a job that can support my children.”

The statements above are reflections of justifying their ordeal. They exemplify the Filipino value of considering future consequences of present actions. Rodriguez (2011) asserts that women consider not only their own survival but more importantly their children’s. This principle of saving family relationships undermines the victims’ dignity as human beings.

Disempowerment of Women

The second theme reflects the participants’ subordinate existence and helplessness. The women suffered violence in various forms, yet they have conditioned their minds to the dysfunctional situation. According to participant CB,

“I just watch TV after my husband physically abused me, in that way, I can forget the pain and suffering.”

The woman is said to believe she has no control over her situation as manifested by her submission toward punishment and violence. She blames herself for her own inability to change the situation which leads to low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. JB cited,

"I hate it when my husband scolds and nags me. So, what did I do, I pretend to listen so that he would shout less. Sometimes to get even with him, I pretend to do some household chores or pretend to fetch some water outside."

A similar experience was shared by JR,

"I sometimes went out of the house or visit my friends and relatives so that I will not be abused again."

These statements of the participants show fear and hatred about their miserable conditions, especially toward their abusive spouses. Leaving the family household can sometimes be their way of expressing defiance. In contrast, there were participants who simply endured their miserable conditions. They contended that they love their husbands and children and that they are willing to endure the pain. Participant AB stated,

"I still love him even if he beats me, he is the father of my children."

This study shows that becoming a victim of violence is a humiliating and demeaning condition. Physical abuse by a husband lowers a wife's self-esteem. Leaving home is also construed as a sign of giving up, admitting defeat, and yielding to the situation. The participants were ashamed to admit that they have chosen the wrong persons as lifetime partners. JR cited,

"I am ashamed if my neighbors will know I am being physically abused."

Filipino family relationships and their nature forces the participants to keep domestic violence within the confines of the home. Hence, the silence of the participants about their experiences prevails for fear of degrading their family's reputation. The social stigma attached to the situation may jeopardize the security of children's future. Thus, the aftermath of the condition of the abused urban women takes place gradually and silently with the attempt of keeping families intact. In this regard, upholding family interest is a value that preserves the honor of a few Filipinos and their Asian counterparts (Estrellado & Loh, 2013; Jack, 2014; Loke et al., 2012). A great number of cultures in Asia strongly condemn divorce which demeans women and their families (Buchbinder & Karayanni, 2015; Deitz, Williams, Rife, & Cantrell, 2015)

Love for Family

In the Philippines, separation or divorce is a stigma. Separated or divorced women are treated as failures or women who were not able to fulfill their roles as mothers and wives. Thus, they are constrained to raise their children and stay with their husbands who manifest violence and abuse. Marriage can be maintained as long as problems will be kept private, hence Filipino women make sacrifices to save their children and family and make efforts to make the marriage work. Participant JR stated,

"I still love my husband even though he shouts and beats me, I cannot leave him. What will happen to my children if we will be separated?"

Similarly, participant AB cited,

"Even though he beats me, I know he still loves me. He is my family."

Women tend to endure all the pains and sufferings, taking the responsibility of making the marriage work. They do not view separation as an option, keeping the family as a whole prevails over their personal desire to break the chains of abuse and violence.

Lack of Programs and Services

The lack of programs and services to combat violence against women is a significant challenge in many states and countries. This issue hinders the ability to effectively support survivors, prevent violence, and hold perpetrators accountable. Participant JB stated,

“I haven’t seen any info desk or VAWC desk in our barangay, making it more difficult for me to report my condition.”

Weak institutional response and coordination among government agencies, law enforcement, and social service providers can contribute to the lack of comprehensive programs. Insufficient training limited inter-agency collaboration, and inadequate protocols for addressing violence against women can hinder effective service provision. JB added,

“There should be a security/ response from the barangay when such violence or abuse occurs”.

Inadequate public awareness and education about violence against women can result in a lack of understanding and prioritization of the issue. Insufficient public campaigns, school-based programs, and community awareness initiatives may contribute to a lack of demand for comprehensive programs and services. Participant CB shared,

“A seminar or info drive can be a solution for minimizing abuse and violence”.

Addressing the lack of programs and services to reduce violence against women requires a multi-faceted approach. It involves advocating for increased funding, comprehensive legislation, and stronger institutional responses. It also necessitates raising public awareness, challenging gender norms, and promoting gender equality in society. Collaboration between government agencies, civil society organizations, and international stakeholders is crucial for developing and implementing effective programs and services to support survivors and prevent violence against women.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Efforts to address women’s violence in urban cities require a comprehensive approach involving various stakeholders. Ultimately, creating safer urban spaces for women necessitates a collective commitment to challenging societal norms, dismantling gender stereotypes, and fostering inclusive communities where all individuals can thrive free from violence and discrimination.

The findings reveal a range of forms of violence faced by women, including physical, psychological, and economic abuse. The study also identifies themes such as (1) recurrence of abuse, (2) disempowerment of women, (3) love for family, and (4) lack of programs and services as key contributors to women's vulnerability to violence.

Therefore, from the response from the participants, the researchers would like to recommend the following

1. Involvement of women in decision-making, as women to be known as experts on their own safety, programs designed should recognize and utilize perceptions about women.
2. Recognition of the value of knowledge generated from the lived experiences of women to abuse and violence.
3. Involvement of community, men and boys, and stakeholders.
4. Assess existing policies and programs that can help in reporting and responding to abuse and violence.

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