

“It Was All Wrong and Shameful to Beat Her”: Discursive Analysis of Men’s Talk of Intimate Partner Violence

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Abstract

In this article, our aim is to foreground men’s discourses on gender-based violence as linked to gendered hierarchies, power struggles, and social respectability in Ghana. Situated within decolonial feminist theories and drawing on interviews, we argue that men’s interpretations of masculinity and the possibility of perpetrating violence against women is significantly mediated by such intersectional factors as sociocultural background, education, and broader societal normative requirements. The findings deepen the understanding of the ambiguities and contradictions that characterize men’s talk of violence. The article discusses how these ambiguities and contradictions serve as important domains for engendering critical attitudes toward violence against women.

Keywords

hegemonic masculinities, gender-based violence, decoloniality, gendered hierarchies, Northern Ghana

Here is no doubt that feminist scholarship and activism have contributed significantly in pushing the frontiers of knowledge production on gender-based violence (GBV).

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Although there is a well-established body of literature on GBV in both rich and resource-poor contexts, much of the global literature continues to draw on discourses and theories which may not account for the contextual realities in the postcolonial global South. For example, dominant Eurocentric scholarship continues to approach men, especially those located in the global South as beneficiaries of coercive patriarchy (Boonzaier & van Niekerk, 2018). Such scholarship approaches men as embodying problematic masculinities which trouble feminist values and discourses. Women in the global South have also been approached as passive and oppressed subjects with limited power to effectively navigate patriarchal structures and gender hierarchies (Madhok et al., 2013; Mohanty, 1988). Scholars such as Ratele, Kessi and Boonzaier (2018), and van Nierkerk (2019) have criticized such framing of men and women as gendered categories. These scholars have pointed out that mainstream Western feminist discourses tend to approach the subjectivities of African men through violation-centric and damage-causing lenses. Such an approach ignores and silences other forms of subjectivities beyond violence and aggression. It is important to recognize that approaching men and their gendered subjectivities solely through the lens of violence denies us the opportunity to meaningfully appreciate how notions of gender, especially specific constructions of masculinity and femininity in Africa are deeply entangled in complex colonial and postcolonial heteropatriarchal-capitalist configurations.

Accordingly, approaching the everyday gendered subjectivities of African men without paying close attention to how these subjectivities are shaped by intersecting inequalities has the tendency to foreclose critical insights on alternative notions of masculinity within a global southern context. Eurocentric models and theories may not have the capacity to offer a critical understanding of how “black” and economically marginalized men may become potential victims of ongoing economic struggles in ways that complicate processes of becoming men in accordance with dominant cultural norms and standards. Consequently, “black” and economically marginalized men’s everyday negotiations of hetero-capitalist world order, growing social injustices, economic precarity, intractable unemployment, and other structural inequalities which constrain men’s aspirations in attaining credible masculine ideals are often ignored (Dery, 2019; van Nierkerk, 2019). There is merit in understanding the complex ways through which economically precarious “black” men may enact masculinities that contradict culturally hegemonic masculine ideals. What it may mean to be a “man” within a global southern context is a much more complex construct full of internal inconsistencies, conflicts, and ambiguities (Ratele, 2008). Researchers interested in understanding the complexities of being a man in a postcolonial global southern context must invest in understanding these inconsistencies, conflicts, and ambiguities in ways that allow for fuller theorization of African men and their masculine subjectivities. Therefore, the focus of this article is to foreground an understanding of how complex power structures, hierarchies, and struggles are entangled in producing specific forms of violence. Understanding the social context in which violence is produced may shape the kinds of social support systems and responses available to those experiencing such violence. Focusing on the social context in which violence is made sense

of by those who perpetrate it and those who experience it (Bennett, 2010; Dery, 2019; 2021; van Niekerk & Boonzaier, 2015) has the potential to bring to the fore the mundane and practical situations that may normalize violence. Therefore, the contribution of this article is to add some culturally grounded nuances to dominant Eurocentric narratives which continue to approach African masculinities as an extensively negative, barbaric, violent, and homogenized set of behaviors.

Researching the Violence of Men in Ghana

Ghana represents one of the most legally progressive countries in Africa, at least on paper—progress largely attributable to Ghanaian feminists' relentless activism (Bawa, 2018; Dery, 2021; Tsikata, 2009). Influenced by persistent pressure and lobbying from various feminist-inspired initiatives in the early 2000s, notably, the Women's Manifesto for Ghana and the National Coalition for the Passage of the Domestic Violence Bill (Anyidoho et al., 2021; Tsikata, 2009), successive Ghanaian governments have enacted and implemented a number of potentially progressive legal policies and reforms in fulfillment of its national and international commitments to protect and uphold the rights, security, freedom, and dignity of citizens irrespective of gender orientation. In 2007, for example, the Domestic Violence Bill was passed into law (Act 732) after a fierce "state-feminists" battle on the passage of the Bill had endured since 2003. GBV has since been criminalized and persons found guilty of perpetrating or facilitating the perpetration of any form of GBV are punishable by law. However, there has been slow implementation of the Act and its auxiliary apparatuses/bodies. For example, Anyidoho et al. (2021) have argued that there is a poor political commitment on the part of the Ghanaian government in sustaining the Domestic Violence Fund.

Despite what seem to be progressive legal initiatives, some of which are highlighted above, a particular kind of paradox is evident in Ghanaian society. Part of this paradox, we suggest, is that it has become increasingly clear that policy frameworks alone have been less successful in building and promoting a gender-equitable and nonviolent society. In line with this implementation limitation, Medie (2019, p. 2) has pointed out that "girls and women rarely benefit from the progressive laws on the books." To address violence more comprehensively and sustainably, Ratele (2013) and Medie (2019) insist that there is much work that needs to be done in Africa beyond solely focusing on legal frameworks and policies. In this study, we contend that such work demands new, innovative, and contextually driven empirical research through which the complexities of men's and women's everyday subjectivities and struggles in the global South are attended to. Attempting to engage and reflect on the complexities of men's and women's everyday gendered subjectivities, including intimate partner violence, has the potential to nuance critical understanding around best approaches to tackle the violence of men.

Although there is a growing body of literature on GBV in Ghana since the 1990s (e.g., Anyemedu et al., 2020; Adjei, 2018; Coker-Appiah & Cusack, 1999; Dery, 2019; Dery & Diedong, 2014; Ofei-Aboagye, 1994; Sedziafa et al., 2017; Tenkorang et al., 2013), this article argues that part of the concerns raised by Ratele

(2013) and Medie (2019) above is how research, media engagements, and advocacy on gendered violence have largely been framed, analyzed, and presented over the years. Most of the existing research and media engagements have been heavily weighted toward understanding gendered violence from the perspectives and lived experiences of women. For example, there is much focus on women's help-seeking behaviors, women's navigation of shame and stigma associated with victimhood, women's awareness of the availability of support systems and services, and women's coping strategies in abusive relationships in Ghana (e.g., Anyemedu et al., 2020; Sedziafa et al., 2017; Tenkorang et al., 2013). What makes such research problematic is that their analyses may inadvertently diminish men's responsibility in perpetrating such violence.

Another stream of scholarship also constructs GBV as influenced by "risk factors" such as poverty, unemployment, and crisis of masculine identities (e.g., Adjei, 2018; Dery and Diedong, 2014; Institute of Development Studies (IDS) & Ghana Statistical Services, 2016). This body of scholarship foregrounds violence as frequently used by men to reestablish a sense of deflated manhood, which has been perceived to be caused by poverty, social exclusion, and economic marginalization. Understandably, men's lack of basic ingredients of hegemonic masculinity—of being a self-assuring breadwinner—may deny men the ability to control women as a key requirement for performing hegemonic masculinity, especially in a patriarchal context (Adjei, 2018; Dery, 2019). When men perceive that their inability to control their wives may deny them access to privileges associated with being breadwinners, acts of violence may be used as a recuperative alternative to resuscitate deflated manhood (Dery, 2019).

Although the language of "risk factors" as deployed by most of the existing scholarship in Ghana and elsewhere is very important, particularly in making sense of the widespread nature of GBV, a shift in understanding men's violence against women from feminist intersectional and decolonial lenses may be more helpful and necessary in imagining new possibilities. Against this backdrop, the main intervention in this article is to offer a contextually nuanced understanding of men's meaning-making and/or talk of violence against women as linked to the broader context of gendered power hierarchies and relations. Guided by decolonial feminist ontological considerations (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018), the article pays close attention to how men's violence or their talk of violence is shaped and mediated by complex structures of power, domination, and struggles unique to the cultural context of interest. By using this theoretical lens, the current article is not only interested in understanding the violence of men but more importantly, exploring the possibility of using men's narratives and stories as a useful starting point for consciousness-raising among men themselves.

Methodology and Analytical Framework

This study was interested in gaining a greater understanding of how constructions of masculinity may shape young men's talk about intimate partner violence. In view of this, a narrative research design was adopted (e.g., Riessman, 2008). Although there are multiple epistemological debates in choosing methodologies for specific research,

the current study draws on methodological insights advanced by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 20) define narrative methodology as “a way of understanding experience,” “a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus.” We adopted this methodological approach because of its ability to offer a greater understanding of how researchers can be part of the lives and stories of participants. Informed by our own positionalities as researchers from the same cultural context, the stories that participants decided to share with us in a social space such as interviews shape our analyses. What makes narrative methodology particularly useful for our analysis is that it enables us to contribute to shaping how the stories of participants are told and the meanings associated with what is being told and not told. Informed by our interest in decolonial research and praxis, we are part of living and telling the stories that our participants as coproducers of knowledge decided to entrust to us. As indigenous researchers, we have a responsibility to ensure that such stories are captured and analyzed in the closest possible way, although we acknowledge the apparent difficulty in translating narratives from a rich local language (Dagaare) into English without compromising the depth and richness of such narratives.

In view of the concern raised above, the current study draws on decolonial feminist ontological considerations of social subjectivities (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018). A decolonial feminist ontology allows us to take seriously the everyday gendered subjectivities of participants in becoming masculine in contemporary Ghanaian society. One advantage of such an approach is that it allows participants to retell complex stories and processes of becoming men. As men in this study recollect and share stories embedded in their journeys in becoming masculine, they are simultaneously reflecting on their politics, histories, and lived experiences as a useful starting point for consciousness-raising beyond participating in formal programs to end violence.

Selection of Participants

This study is an extension of a larger qualitative study conducted in northwestern Ghana between 2015 and 2016. The larger study explored men’s constructions of respectable masculinities and intimate partner violence in heteronormative marriages. In the current article, the focus is on the narratives and reflections of eight men who successfully took part in the larger study. The article draws on insights from this cohort of the larger population for two reasons. First, the narratives of these participants were radically different from those of their older colleagues who were married in the larger study. Fairly young as they were, this cohort of participants presented intriguing narratives on how men may progress in imagining gender-equitable, nonviolent masculine subjectivities. Second, two years after the larger study, the first author went back to the field to conduct follow-up interviews as part of a research project exploring how peaceful, nonviolent masculinities may be imagined, practiced, and negotiated among men in heteronormative marriages. At the time of the follow-up interviews (i.e., in 2019), these eight men were married. Besides being married, these men had recently

assumed the positions of breadwinners and heads of their households—patriarchal positions that accord greater power, authority, and privileges to men than women. In a rapidly changing context such as Northwestern Ghana and the difficulty that may confront men in trying to meet cultural demands associated with respectable masculinity, especially those anchored on being economic providers and breadwinners, gender tensions and conflicts are likely to emerge in the process. In view of this possibility, the authors wanted to understand how these men who identified themselves as allies to feminist values are likely to navigate potential gender tensions and conflicts that may arise from their new status as heads of their households. It is important to understand whether participants still hold onto their earlier reflections on equitable masculine ideals or their assumption of new roles and status have altered their perspectives over time, place, and space. The participants were between the ages of 30 and 35 years. At the time of the interviews, three of them described themselves as professionally employed teachers, one was a nurse, and the rest were subsistence farmers.

Data Collection

A narrative style of interviewing was used to elicit responses from the participants. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face in the community's school premise. Having already built rapport with these participants in the previous research, the first author initially contacted each of the eight men to invite them to participate in the study. After ensuring that the purpose of the study was clearly explained to each of them in the native language (Dagaare), interview days were arranged. Open-ended questions such as the following were asked: "Can you share with me your thoughts and experiences growing up as a man?," "Were you treated differently from your sisters by virtue of being a boy?," "How do such experiences shape your relationship with your partner?," "How would you imagine a 'proper man'?," "What qualities define such men?," and "What are your thoughts on men who abuse their wives?" Asking questions in an open manner enabled the participants to speak to their stories and experiences. The flexibility afforded by the open-end approach to interviewing enabled the participants to determine the direction and content of their stories.

Analytical Strategy

Interviews were transcribed and translated from Dagaare into English by the first author (a native speaker of Dagaare). After transcribing the data, the second author (also a native speaker of Dagaare) cross-checked the transcripts against the audio recordings. The analytic process adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach; namely, familiarization with the data; generating initial codes; searching for relevant themes; reviewing initial themes; defining, naming, and grouping of themes; and finally, producing the report.

Following these six steps, the authors read through the data repeatedly to gain familiarity with participants' responses to the individual questions. The transcripts were independently coded by both authors. These codes were collated and read several

times against the data in its entirety to ensure that translation biases were minimized. After cross-checking the various codes and transcripts, a narrative analytical approach was deployed. A narrative approach allows the authors to read the stories of the participants in the study as forming part of complex processes of becoming men which are both historical and contemporary. Keeping in mind this ontological consideration, a narrative approach was used in order that the analysis may stay close to the contextual meanings of the narratives and stories that participants reproduced through interviews. Participants may have shared with the authors specific experiences and stories in order to enact preferred versions of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, it is important to read the evidence in this study as not representing the perspectives of the whole population, but instead, it reflects the views of a small sample of men regarding men's perspectives on GBV.

Ethical Considerations

As already alluded to earlier in this article, participants were invited to participate in the study after the author had explained the purpose of the study to them. Participants were informed that their involvement in the study was purely voluntary and that there were no negative consequences for those who may wish to decline. Appropriate ethical approval was obtained from the University of Cape Town Institutional Review Board or Ethics Committee for the study. Each participant also gave verbal informed consent. As a measure to protect their identities, participants are identified in this article through the use of pseudonyms.

Results and Discussions

Constructions of Traditional Masculinities

All eight participants in this study suggested that they aspired to be role models for other young men in their respective communities. Even as these young men complained of economic hardships, they indicated that they had aspired to what could be described as traditional models of masculinity. These models of masculinity were associated with men's ability to provide the material and social needs of a family. Being able to provide for one's family appears to give men some cultural validation. All participants confirmed that their ability to provide for their families enables them to exercise control over them, including their female partners. This was captured by Dennis who argues that:

You become a man when you own a home. When you have a home and is able to provide shelter for your family, society respects you. This gives you some form of authority and control over your family.

For other participants, to be a man is to be heteronormatively married. This was highlighted by the narrative of Ashong:

A man who has everything in this world but has no wife is not a proper man. He is a boy by all standard. That is the fact; you must have a wife, build a house, and get more money to take care of your family. Where you lack these ingredients, you have no respect in the eyes of society. You are a failure.

And for participants such as George, to be a respectable man is to be independent. He explains further:

When I was growing up, I aspired to be a responsible and independent man. When you are responsible and independent thus not appearing to be a burden on others, society accords you respect. When you have your own house, your dignity is secured. People treat you well.

A similar opinion was evident in the narrative of Yelfglo:

A respectable man in this community is one who carries himself well. I mean, he behaves well [not violently] and respects others, including his wife. He supports his wife at home. The fact that he has a wife does not mean that you cannot wash dishes after eating. He listens to and talks well with his wife and children.

Overall, young men in the study suggested that they had aspired to embody more traditional conceptions of masculinity anchored predominantly on economic provision and independence. Such versions of masculinity discursively confer power, social dominance, and control on men. These qualities create hierarchies of masculinities, where both traditionally hegemonic and marginalized masculinities were evident. Young men, however, acknowledge that traditionally hegemonic masculinity is deeply aspirational. Although young men may struggle to achieve traditionally hegemonic masculinity—of being a responsible and economically independent man—they described how they are likely to be perceived as having failed.

Reproducing Problematic Constructions of Traditional Masculinity

Throughout the eight interviews, some of the participants expressed interest in supporting their wives in undertaking domestic chores such as childcare, home management, and culinary activities. In the context of this study, these activities are customarily regarded as the primary responsibilities of women. Participants suggested that their desire to participate in performing domestic chores was part of attempts to redefine dominant constructions of masculinity. However, their willingness seemed to be constrained by their social location and pervasive cultural norms that police heteronormative masculinity and femininity. Most participants expressed frustrations about how cultural metaphors, idioms, and messages are often mobilized and deployed by community members to cast doubt and/or threaten the masculinity of men who challenge the gendered status quo. This situation was described by all eight participants, as challenging as it did not allow them to perform what seems

to be supportive and progressive masculine ideals in their view. Although the extract below emerged out of the first author's interaction with Yelfoglo, a 32-year-old farmer, similar accounts were offered by other participants throughout the interviews. The views of Yelfoglo are privileged here because of what his narratives stand to offer to a broader understanding of masculinity and femininity in contemporary Ghanaian society. At the age of 30 years, Yelfoglo was forced to drop out from school in a tragic turn of events. Yelfoglo's father had passed on, creating a big vacuum for him to fill. Even though Yelfoglo described his academic performance as once promising, being the only male child of his parents meant that he had to abort his education in order to assume the position of the head of his family. Even as Yelfoglo continues to regret this premature end to his goal of becoming a banker, all was not lost. He may not have become a banker as he had earlier imagined, but he still plays an important role in his family as the breadwinner. Yelfoglo lives with his mother, wife, and younger siblings. The first author asked Yelfoglo to reflect on his new position as the head of his family and what that may mean for imagining alternative masculine subjectivities.

Author: How do you feel about your new position as the head of your family? Are you excited about it? And why?

Yelfoglo: I am really excited because I have become the pillar of the family. Things have not been easy for me, but I am trying my best because my family looks up to me as the breadwinner. In the absence of my father, I am the new boss. You know what that means? I take decisions and manage the affairs of the family.

Author: Are you suggesting that being the head of the family entitles you to decision-making in the family?

Yelfoglo: Absolutely! When my father was alive, he was in charge of taking decisions. In his absence, I must continue with that as usual. That defines me as the man of the house.

Author: Would you ever imagine your wife taking part in decisions that concern the family in your presence as the man of the house? Is this something you think will ever happen?

Yelfoglo: That will be pathetic. I mean, it will be something else. In our culture, women do not take certain decisions. It is a man's thing. In separate interviews, the author asked participants to share their reflections on why it may be considered pathetic when a man involves his wife in the decision-making processes. One participant, Yelfaanibe, a 33-year-old farmer, argues as follows:

When a man allows his wife to control decisions, he will lose his manhood. We don't respect enough such men.

Author: Meaning, you would never allow your wife to take such decisions because others would not respect you enough?

Yelfaanibe: My mother has been a *pɔg menga*, [proper/ideal woman]. She has never competed with my father in decision-making. Now that my father has passed on, my relationship with my mother is like husband-wife kind of thing. I'm the man and I take the main decisions. In some cases, I consult her.

From the exchanges above, both participants make a direct connection between male headship and authority. They draw on an essentialized discourse to position men as holders of the seat of power and decision-makers within the context of the family, illustrated by Yelfoglo's statement that "in the absence of my father, I am the new boss." It seems clear from participants' reflections that allowing a woman, particularly wives, to usurp a position of power and authority constitutes a threat to the prevailing patriarchal status quo. Accordingly, patriarchal norms and ideologies accord men and masculinity greater power, currency, and authority over women and femininity. All the participants suggested that women who are perceived to challenge the gendered patriarchal status quo were disqualified from the character of a *pɔg menga*. Depending on the context, a *pɔg menga* could mean a "good and respectable woman." It could also mean a "good and respectable wife." Across most interviews, the image of a *pɔg menga* was contrasted with the image of a *pɔg gandraa* (see Akurugu 2020). Similar to the contextual interpretations of *pɔg menga* as explained above, *pɔg gandraa* could mean a "dominant, assertive, disrespectful, and powerful woman." It could also be used to mean "dominant, assertive, disrespectful, and arrogant wife." Even though the authors have tried as much as practicable to stay close to the true interpretations and meanings of these rich local concepts, it must be admitted that their meanings are potentially compromised by the English translation. According to most participants, a *pɔg menga* (herein refers to a good and respectable wife), by her personality, shows no interest in contesting the patriarchal hegemony and authority associated with male headship, illustrated by Yelfaanibe's comment that "My mother has been a *pɔg menga*." Yelfaanibe's account seems to reproduce some form of epistemic authority and body of knowledge associated with traditional masculinity, particularly male headship and its highly privileged authority.

Most participants imagine a stable and fixed future in which boundaries between masculinity and femininity remain uncontested and operate in naturally hierarchical arrangements. The naturalness of this is captured in the statement, "I must continue with that as usual." Even as most participants demonstrate interest in continuing patriarchal systems and structures that afford greater currency to traditionally hegemonic masculinity (of always being the pillar and boss of the family), it is important to be attentive to how power politics are played out between men and women in the family. Being sensitive to how men and women of different age categories may negotiate and bargain with patriarchy within the family allows for a much more nuanced engagement with agency (Amaduime, 1987; Dery, 2019). Participants' comments capture the complexity of gender performativity and agency

as it intersects with age, cultural capital, and marriage. The age of a woman may function as a form of cultural capital that allows or constrains her from bargaining with patriarchy in better and enhanced ways. Participants' reflections should also be understood within the cultural context in which they emerged. Northwestern Ghana is a patrilineal society, meaning that inheritances are passed down through the male line.

In all eight interviews, participants suggested that when women, particularly wives, ascend to a position of power and authority through resource accumulation, such women embody transgressive femininity, which allegedly contaminates the gendered, patriarchal social order. Participants have specific ideas and expectations about who qualifies as a *pɔg menga* (good wife) or a *pɔg gandraa* (bad wife). The two descriptors operate on a spectrum with differentiated moral values and social capital. From his own cultural orientation and observation of his mother's relation with his late father in her capacity as a wife, Yelfaanibe is clear in his mind that his mother personifies a *pɔg menga* (a good and respectable wife) because she has never competed with her husband in decision-making. Since this is the disposition that Yelfaanibe has formed over the years about idealized femininity, it is almost certain to expect that he would be less interested in welcoming different behaviors from other women within his family, including his own wife.

Yelfoglo's use of "we" in the phrase, "We don't respect enough such men," highlights that men in this cultural context are likely to coproduce a shared discourse that maintains hierarchies between masculinity and femininity and among masculinities themselves. This shared disposition also ensures that boundaries between respectable masculinity and disruptive femininity are forged and sustained. Yelfoglo's use of "we" over "I" could be understood as a relational and sociological construct that allows him to discursively activate a sense of shared commitment in maintaining boundaries between respectable masculinity and failed masculinity. Yelfoglo's choice of "we" over the personal pronoun "I" is also important in understanding how a specific body of knowledge on gender identity is promoted and sustained over time. His narrative captures the continuity of this body of knowledge when he says, "In our culture, women don't take the main decisions. It is a man's thing." By making reference to "our culture," Yelfoglo strategically positions himself and the behaviors of his fellow men as not being responsible for promoting a system that is less receptive to more egalitarian notions of gender. The use of "we" allows him to construct and position himself as only forming part of this system. Yelfoglo's reference to the phrase "In our culture" is equally problematic; he imagines culture to be fixed, with no possibility for alternative imaginations. Our work lends credence to the findings of Helman and Ratele (2016). Helman and Ratele grappled with constructions of gender inequitable relationships in South African families amidst contestations around alternative discourses on gendered identities. In the next section, we engage the contestations, ambiguities, struggles, and disclaimers that accompanied men's talk of themselves as men of the house.

Contestations and Ambiguities in Men's Talk of Masculinity

In all eight interviews, there were several instances in which participants' narratives reveal moments of profound ambiguity and ideological dilemmas around the acceptability of acts of violence. In responding to the question on whether participants have ever imagined violence to be justified in any sense, most participants rejected violence against female partners upfront without hesitation. However, participants would qualify that violence may become necessary in specific situations, especially when the social order is perceived to be threatened by the behavior of a woman. Men's talk of violence highlights that it may become an important cultural apparatus in recuperating masculine power, dominance, and control. The excerpt below resonates with dominant concerns and articulations presented by participants across interviews. The excerpt speaks to the ambiguities and normative framing of violence. In the extract, Kuusoyir, a 30-year-old farmer who stays with his wife and mother, explains that violence may be morally justified when the behavior of a woman seems to provoke the man:

Personally, I am of the view that it is wrong for a man to beat his wife, but sometimes, women are something else; it is difficult to understand them. It is even difficult to predict what they are always looking for in relationships. So, if I hear that a man has beaten his wife, I know that the woman has done something wrong. If she knows that her husband doesn't like what she is doing, she must stop, otherwise there will be disagreements. Over little disagreement, the woman may scream at him or even insults him. We all know that this is unacceptable. If I were the man in this case, this would provoke me; I would be angry. I may use my physical strength to hit her because she has made me angry. I hit her because I've an image to protect in the eyes of the community.

In a different interview with Bobtuo, a 31-year-old teacher, similar narratives of contradiction and denials of responsibility for violence were evident. When asked to reflect on the possibility of imagining alternative ways of resolving intimate disagreements besides the use of violence, Bobtuo replied that there is very little any man could do in a situation in which his manhood is being insulted by the behavior of a woman. Like Kuusoyir and many other participants, Bobtuo does not approve of men's violence against their female partners. However, he qualifies that violence could be a morally productive tool, particularly in situations in which the behavior of a woman becomes "unmanageable." He went on to share how he would never regret grabbing the shirt of his wife and giving her a few slaps because he perceived that she went off limits in their interaction. He narrates:

Me, I don't like violence because of my own experiences growing up. I didn't have any quality relationship with my father. He was kind of aggressive because he was always drunk. I want to see myself in a different image. Because I don't like violence, whenever I see that the behavior of my wife is likely to cause confusion, I walk away. However, she took things for granted. She thought that I was weak or something. She was completely

clueless. So, one day, there was conflict between us. I attempted walking away as usual, but she was shouting and shouting. What was she trying to achieve? To tell people that I was weak or something? I became angry. I came back, grabbed her shirt and hit her. I don't regret hitting her. Since then, she has learned to respect the limits of others. You researchers should always get closer to the bottom of men's violence.

In the extracts above, both Kuusoyir and Bobtuo issued disclaimers of their disapproval of the violence of men against women, illustrated by "Personally, I am of the view that it is wrong for a man to beat his wife" and "Me, I don't like violence," respectively. Immediately after issuing such strong disclaimers, both speakers clarified that violence could be an important resource to maintain preferred versions of masculinity, especially in situations in which men's manhood is at stake. Illustrated in both accounts above is how some men may use violence as a legitimate tool to negotiate and make sense of a morally disturbing situation. Situated within discourses of morality and popular ethics that govern intimate relationships, both participants employ the discourse of blame to support the violence of men in specific situations. The order in which both participants arrange their stories and the language that underpins each story is intriguing. The language of denial employed by these participants allows them to shift the focus from labeling their behaviors as problematic to a question of the morally deficient behavior of women which has the potential to provoke men. Accordingly, both men and women are likely to be involved in disagreements/conflicts at the intimate level. Violence may not necessarily be the immediate consequence of such disagreements, but the final outcome or how intimate conflicts/disagreements end is determined by the extent to which emotions and identities are perceived to be affected in the process.

The narratives of both participants reproduce victim-blaming discourse, which allows them to claim moral dignity while simultaneously portraying the behavior of women as morally and culturally questionable. Participants' claims of moral decency perform a political function here which unburdens both speakers of responsibility in perpetrating violence. Their narratives reproduce a problematic discourse that positions women as being responsible for their violent experiences illustrated by "If she knows that her husband doesn't like what she is doing, she must stop" and "she was shouting and shouting." By focusing on women as "difficult to understand," unmanageable, and always taking things for granted, both Kuusoyir and Bobtuo seem to be implying that men should not be held accountable for their violent behaviors and actions. Our findings support the existing literature, which foregrounds how men's accounts of their violence often seek to diminish their own responsibility and culpability in perpetrating violence (e.g., van Nierkerk & Boonzaier, 2019).

Additionally, both interlocutors thought that men always need to maintain masculine respectability, and violence may become one of the ways to maintain masculine face captured in the following excerpts: "I hit her because I've an image to protect in the eyes of the community" and "She thought that I was weak or something." In the event that a woman screams, shouts, or insults her husband over a little disagreement, a situation both speakers interpret as "unacceptable," there is reasonable ground

that men's use of violence in such circumstances may be perceived as morally justified because their masculine identities are at stake. At once, both Bobtuo and Kuusoyir shift the debate from critically interrogating their violent behaviors to eliciting sympathy and attention on the need for men to always maintain a stable masculine face. Kuusoyir's narrative, in particular, is full of contradictions. His narrative suggests that it is perfectly acceptable and justifiable for a man to hit his wife for provoking him, but it is almost impossible to imagine a woman questioning and confronting the violence of men that arises out of disagreements. Kuusoyir referenced intimate partner violence as emerging from disagreements which eventually escalate into a verbal and more physical confrontation. He frames such confrontation through the language of mutuality, a discourse which has similarly been foregrounded by van Nierkerk and Boonzaier (2019). Although both interlocutors reproduce stereotypes on gender, especially equating femaleness with physical weakness, they believe that men are physically stronger than women and, hence, the greater tendency of men to inflict acts of physical violence against women.

From the analysis above, both Kuusoyir and Bobtuo construct some women as embodying disruptive feminine ideals which demand immediate actions by their husbands in order to forestall further damage to their manhood. In order to appreciate the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in Kuusoyir's and Bobtuo's narratives offered above, it is important to note their exposure to violence while growing up as children. Both speakers recollected that they grew up in violent homes. This may have informed their lack of regret in condemning their own acts of violence. It was not surprising to learn that when a man hits his wife, he does it for practical and morally defensive reasons that enable such men to restore masculine balance ("she has learned to respect the limits of others"). A man may use his physical strength to hit a woman when she screams or insults him. A woman screaming or insulting a man could be read as constituting a humiliating moment in which a man's masculine identity is brought into disrepute. In previous studies conducted by Adjei (2018) and Dery (2019), participants thought that when the behavior of a woman has the potential to ridicule the masculinity of a man, the latter may enact violence and other controlling behaviors in order to reestablish masculine balance and credibility.

Narratives of Ambivalence and Contradiction in Men's Talk of Violence

Building on the narratives of participants discussed above, it was a common thread across the transcripts that participants offered contradictory narratives through which intimate partner violence becomes normalized and trivialized. Most participants were quick to position themselves as being "good" and "nice" men while simultaneously describing other men as violent. However, when the researcher probed further, such participants qualified their narratives to mean that there is a threshold between being a "good" husband and a violent perpetrator. In fact, there is a thin line between being a "good" husband and being a violent perpetrator because each of these embodiments is situational and context-dependent. These narratives of being a "good" husband and the possibility that a "good" husband could simultaneously

become violent when necessary or provoked offer a perspective to understand intimate partner violence within the context of “borders.” Such narratives create space to grasp how individual and systemic accounts work in tandem to make violence largely normative. In this section, the authors draw on the narrative of Yeldifaa, a 32-year-old teacher, who lives with his wife and younger siblings. Yeldifaa’s reflections speak similarly to the narratives of most participants.

I have been a nice man to my wife since we got married. She has also been a good woman, too. I have never laid my hands on her. Everything was working perfectly until she started putting up bad behaviors. She would not do anything that married women are expected to do. She does not cook. She does not fetch water. What was she expecting me to do as the man of the house? And how will society perceive me? As a woman, she must know that it is not the responsibility of a man to do household chores. We are not taught things like that here. She really went on my nerves. I was forced to act as the man of the house. So, on that day, I treated her badly. I think it was all wrong and shameful for me to maltreat her in that manner, but I had to because I needed to put things in order just like any other man would do. If I had not done that, she might think that I am not man enough. I hit her once or twice. Everything is back on track now.

As the interview progressed and a trustful atmosphere had been established, Yeldifaa explained that his violent behavior was influenced by a combination of work-related stress and failure on the part of his wife to appreciate his growing struggles to meet the everyday material needs of his family. Yeldifaa admitted that his violent behavior was unacceptable, considering his reputation at the community level. Yeldifaa was among a few others who received salary from the government payroll in his community. Such people were highly respected. He confided in the author during the interview that he apologized to his wife for hitting her. Apologizing to his wife probably confirms his earlier description of being a “nice” and nonviolent man. He explains further:

I feel so bad and ashamed about the whole thing. I don’t know what came over me. She made me angry, but I should have done better. Of course, I apologized to her. I told her I was sorry for hitting her. She accepted the apology and we’ve reconciled. Each time I think about the incident, I feel so guilty as a man of my caliber. I feel so bad and embarrassed.

From the first excerpt above, Yeldifaa reflects on the fragility of traditionally hegemonic masculinity. He constructs the fragility of hegemonic masculinity as being dependent upon the behavior of a “good woman.” Yeldifaa speaks of his own fear that the failure of his wife to perform gendered wifely responsibilities has the tendency to cast doubts on his masculine credibility. The mere fact that his wife fails to adhere to gendered roles and responsibilities potentially opens his masculinity to ridicule. Yeldifaa’s questions of “What was she expecting me to do as the man of the house?” and “How will society perceive me?” seek to reproduce and amplify gender boundaries. While drawing on essentialized discourse, Yeldifaa makes a direct connection between husbandhood and wifehood and their respective positions and roles in the

family. This connection is captured in the illustration, “She would not do anything that married women are expected to do.” Here, Yeldifaa can be seen to be reactivating a biological discourse that links wifeness or wifely practices to domestic chores and husbandhood to being a breadwinner.

The perceived naturalness of domestic chores to femaleness is further activated in the extract, “As a woman, she must know that it is not the responsibility of a man to do household chores.” Yeldifaa’s choice of the word “must” above serves to convey two important meanings. First, the statement serves to fix husbands and wives, men and women, in inherently unequal positions in the family. By their naturally unequal positions, men and women are culturally socialized to internalize and understand that women are responsible for domestic chores because they are females (“We are not taught things like that here”). Second, Yeldifaa draws on dominant discourses to equate masculinity with power and authority, the lack of which casts doubt on the masculine credibility of a man (“If I had not done that, she might think that I am not man enough”). From these reflections, it seems quite evident that the fear of not being treated as “man enough,” which is contrasted with more respectable masculinity in the eyes of society, is the main reason behind the violent behaviors of most men in this study. By their cultural orientation, men are recognized as “man enough” if they are able to induce behavioral change and compliance among women, even if this may mean using acts of violence and other controlling behaviors. Rather than being critical of his own perpetration of violence against his wife, Yeldifaa reproduces a discourse that pathologizes ordinary men as inherently violent and problematic. This is illustrated in the statement that “I needed to put things in order just like any other man.” The speaker makes this class distinction clearer in the second extract above when he laments that “Each time I think about the incident, I feel so guilty as a man of my caliber.” Yeldifaa draws our attention to the fact that he did not hit his wife for no good reason. His reflection that “I hit her once or twice. Everything is back on track now” suggests that violence may be perceived as an important tool in restoring masculine respectability and authority within and outside the family space.

What makes for an interesting read is how Yeldifaa transitions from being a “nice” and nonviolent partner to becoming an abusive partner, and the circumstance under which such transition became necessary. In the early part of the interview, Yeldifaa disassociated himself from men who abuse their female partners, thus creating a discourse of “good” and nonviolent men versus “bad” and violent men. Much like young men’s constructions of gender-equitable manhood in South Africa (Helman & Ratele, 2016) and in Ghana (Dery, 2019b), Yeldifaa positions himself as a positive deviant, different from other men. He makes this claim explicit when he states that: “I have been a nice man to my wife since we got married. I had never laid my hands on her.” Later in the interview, Yeldifaa makes an argument to suggest that he could as well become violent “just like any other man.” It seems clear from this expression that his nonviolent behavior was contingent on the “good” behavior of his wife, illustrated by “She has also been a good woman, too.” As the interview progressed, the interlocutor revealed his own struggles in maintaining a more progressive relationship with his wife because the latter had stopped being the “good” woman that she was.

Probably because of the speaker's awareness of the author's interest in fostering pro-feminist masculine subjectivities, he constructed his abusive behavior as "wrong" and "shameful": "I think it was wrong and shameful for me to maltreat her in that manner." Even as the speaker seems to regret his abusive behavior, he warns that violence may become a necessary evil in maintaining social order and cohesion in situations that appear difficult and unmanageable ("I was forced to act as the man of the house"). The necessity for violence is further amplified by the statement, "I needed to put things in order. ... I hit her once or twice. Everything is back on track now." The speaker seems to be creating an impression that his audience, a male interviewer, who shares similar characteristics of class, culture, gender, age, and sexuality, should sympathize with the reason that necessitated his change of behavior but not necessarily his perpetration of violence. In most of the interviews, participants described men's transitions from nonviolent subjectivities to violent dispositions through the adage, "There is no smoke without fire." By this reasoning, participants create a sense of mutual and collective understanding that when the behavior of a woman is perceived to have trespassed the culturally acceptable limit ("She really went on my nerves"), it may be more forgiving for a man to act violently to correct the disorder and salvage masculine face. In this way, participants such as Yeldifaa construct a discourse that reduces the likelihood of offending his audience (feminist researchers), while simultaneously masking his violence as less problematic and even justified.

The implications of such claims close space for a robust and productive conversation on the everydayness of violence as deeply entangled in constructions of masculinity and femininity. Across Africa, researchers have foregrounded that subscription to traditional gender ideologies and patriarchal norms has the tendency to increase the risk of men perpetrating and accepting violence in intimate relationships (e.g., Adjei, 2018; Dery, 2019; Dery & Diedong, 2014; McCloskey et al., 2016; Van Niekerk & Boonzaier, 2015). The findings in this article build on this body of literature by highlighting the role of patriarchal structures and norms in rendering men's perpetration or talk of violence less problematic and normative. This article represents an important scholarly intervention that foregrounds the possibility of men being violent toward their female partners. Our findings suggest that considerations of gendered norms, power, culture, and social credibility entangled in configurations of masculinity and femininity should be taken seriously in any initiative seeking to address the violence of men. For any intervention to generate productive dividends in tackling the violence of men, there is a need to understand the broader sociocultural context and gendered arrangements which make intimate partner violence possible. Such understanding is crucial considering that men's perpetration of partner violence is shaped by cultural constructions of gender as well as men's commitment to upholding particular forms of masculinities. The findings in this study suggest that men may find it challenging to break free from entrenched cultural norms and ideologies, especially those that police notions of respectable masculinity.

Conclusions

The main focus of this article was to explore and understand how men's constructions of masculine identities could be linked to their perpetration and/or acceptance of intimate partner violence. The analysis brings into conversation how men's lived experiences and processes of becoming masculine may underpin their perpetration of intimate partner violence. Importantly, how men talk about themselves as men and their dispositions to become violent emerge to be shaped by intersecting factors such as age, culture, class, family histories, and geographic location. These intersecting factors are further mediated by broader community norms and expectations, especially norms on social respectability associated with husbandhood and wifehood. Although it was widely claimed among participants that intimate partner violence against women is "wrong" and "unacceptable," it was common for most participants to suggest that men's enactment of violence against their wives is more closely associated with threats to the hegemony of husbandhood and male headship, popular characteristics of patrilineal families in Ghana (Akurugu, 2020; Dery, 2019). It seems reasonably clear that men in this study are encouraged by their cultural orientation and gendered socialization to aspire to a position of power and authority. Such stereotypical perceptions reproduce problematic discourses on traditional masculinity which are taken to legitimize forms of violence. Although being men of the house may not entirely be a bad idea, it becomes problematic and troubling when masculine embodiments and ideals put women at significant risk of experiencing violence. As long as women are stereotypically perceived to be the weaker and relatively powerless gender by cultural arrangements, it is almost expected that women must abide by the codes of respectable femininity, of being "good women." Understandably, men are not necessarily violent if women, especially wives, know how to play their cards well in intimate relationships. Men's accounts of violence and how acts of violence are routinely made sense of within the broader socio-cultural context represent ongoing struggles to reproduce preferred versions of hegemonic masculinity linked to the dominance, power, and authority of men.

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