Women’s Experiences of Gender Based Violence in Tigray, Ethiopia.

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Women’s Experiences of Gender Based Violence in Tigray, Ethiopia.

A Report for the Vincentian Lay Missionaries (Ireland) and the Daughters of Charity (Ethiopia)

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Section 1: Introduction

This study of women’s experiences of oppression and violence, including intimate partner violence, was conducted using focus groups in two areas of the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia. The findings are outlined in this report, which focuses on the types of violence, as well as its impact and causes. These findings are reported through the words of the participants themselves. In addition, the report outlines the participants’ suggestions as to how they feel they can be supported and assisted in their efforts to end this violence. Arising from these suggestions, recommendations for the Vincentian Lay Missionaries (VLM) and for the Daughters of Charity (DOC) are outlined.

Research Rationale and Methodology

The idea of conducting this research arose following one of the authors’ experiences as a VLM volunteer in Ethiopia. Following her return to Ireland, she engaged in consultation with the VLM volunteer coordinator and with the DOC regarding several possible areas in which research could take place in order to inform the work of the DOC and VLM. The issue of gender based violence was identified as something that the DOC wanted to know more about.

The study utilised a qualitative research methodology, involving focus groups with local women. Five focus groups took place, 3 in an urban setting and 2 in a rural setting. The focus groups were divided into three age groups: 18-25 years, 25-35 years and 35+ years. Purposive sampling was used whereby the DOC invited women they knew to participate in the groups. As such, the participants are not representative of the broader population. In fact, given that they were known to the DOC and given that the Daughters primarily offer services to the most marginalised members of the community, it is likely that the women who participated came from poorer backgrounds and may therefore have been more at risk of violence. In addition, some of the participants were known to the DOC because of the violence and oppression that they had experienced. These are important points to consider while reading the study’s findings.

Three local women were employed to facilitate the focus groups. The women were selected by the DOC on the basis that they spoke both English and the local languages and that they had experience of working with women in the area. The facilitators participated in two days of intensive training provided by the authors. The training focused on two primary topics: Gender-based violence and conducting focus group research. Given the huge cultural differences between Ireland and Ethiopia, the training involved an important exchange of information between the authors and the facilitators, with the discussions informing the data collection and data analysis that subsequently occurred.

Before conducting the research, the authors obtained ethical approval from the UCD Human Research Ethics Committee. As some participants were unable to read or write verbal consent for participation in the study was obtained. In total 39 women took part in the focus groups. The discussions were tape recorded. The 3 groups that took place in the urban area were transcribed verbatim by one of the facilitators and were then subsequently translated by a professional translator in Ireland. Unfortunately, the authors were unable to find a professional translator for the discussions that took place in the rural area as the language was much less commonly spoken. However, as this difficulty had been anticipated, the group facilitator had translated the discussion and this translation was therefore used.
A Brief Overview of Relevant Literature: International Prevalence Rates

Before outlining the overall findings of the focus groups and the views and experiences of the participants, this section will outline the prevalence rates in studies conducted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and by other authors within the African context. The Intimate Partner Violence prevalence rates for 48 population-based surveys from around the world have indicated that between 10% and 69% of women experienced physical violence by an intimate partner, at some point in their lives, while between a third to a half of these abused women also experienced sexual abuse (Heise and Garcia-Moreno, 2002). The more recent WHO multi country study (Garcia-Moreno et al, 2006) established the prevalence figures for 15 sites in ten countries internationally. The highest rate of violence was found in Butajira, in the south of Ethiopia, with 71% of women reporting that they had experienced either physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner. The lowest rate was found in Japan, at 15%. The only other African country in this study was The United Republic of Tanzania in which the rates in the city were 41.3% and 55.9% in the rural province. As Garcia-Moreno et al (2006:1265) note, most acts of physical partner violence were part of a pattern of continuing abuse. They also suggest that these figures are likely to be an underestimate as women are commonly stigmatised and blamed for the abuse they receive. Studies in other African countries also report high rates of intimate partner abuse. An earlier cross sectional study in Ethiopia found that 45% of women had experienced physical violence at some point in their life time, 10% had experienced violence in the previous 3 months and 53% of those who were abused experienced injuries (Deyessa et al, 1998). A number of studies from the sub Saharan African region have found that violence against women is widespread (Mann and Takyi, 2009). These studies have found approximately half of all married women in Zambia, 57% in Uganda, 60% in Tanzania, 42% in Kenya, 67% in Sierra Leone, and 81% in Nigeria have experienced some form of violence in their lives from partners or husbands (Coker et al, 2002; Heise et al, 1999; Kishor and Johnson, 2004; Mann and Takyi, 2009; Speizer, 2010). The International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS) found that the rate of physical abuse of women in Mozambique was 48%, while 24% had been sexually assaulted since the age of 16. Furthermore, 22% had experienced violence in the previous year, a rate that was twice the rate for Australia, four times the rate for Denmark, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Poland and ten time the rate for Switzerland (Johnson et al, 2008). Studies in South Africa have suggested that violence against women is endemic to South African society (Boonzaier, 2008; Vogelman and Eagle, 1991). The South African Police Service estimated that 80% of women living in rural areas are victims of abuse (cited in Boonzaier and de La Rey, 2003).

This violence against women by their intimate partners has been identified as a major cause of injury to women (Ellsberg et al, 2008). Epidemiological and clinical studies have demonstrated that physical and sexual abuse of women is consistently associated with a broad range of negative health outcomes, such as gynaecological disorders, adverse pregnancy outcomes, gastrointestinal disorders and chronic pain syndromes, as well as serious and ongoing mental health disorders (Ellesberg et al, 2008; Loxton et al, 2006; Plichta and Falik, 2001; Romito et al, 2005). For example, a study of rape victims attending a hospital in Adigrat – a town in the Tigray region of Ethiopia – found that physical injuries, genital injuries, sexual and psychiatric problems were common consequences of rape (Gessessew and Mesfin, 2004). While there is considerable debate about the causes of violence against women, it is now universally accepted that while there are a range of risk factors, such as poverty (Heise and Garcia-Moreno, 2002) and alcohol and drug use (Fals-Stewart, 2003), the primary underlying factors which facilitate such abuse are beliefs about gender and the respective roles of men and women in society and in family life.
This qualitative study enabled the authors to explore, in more depth, the reasons underlying the very high level of abuse experienced by women in Ethiopia as reported by the WHO study (Garcia-Moreno et al, 2006). Few qualitative studies of this nature have been conducted. As will be seen by the findings of this study, there are a range of abuses experienced by women in Tigray and a range of reasons why women experience such abuse.
Section 2: Findings

Forms of Violence and Oppression

The participants’ accounts suggested that violence and oppression against women is a very common problem. Indeed, in the focus groups that took place in the rural area, all of the participants believed that almost all women in the area experience violence. When asked about the forms of violence that were experienced by women in both the urban and rural settings many different types were mentioned. The participants’ accounts suggested that physical violence, sexual violence, emotional abuse and coercive control were all frequently experienced either by themselves or by other members of the community. However, in addition, the women recounted experiences of more general oppression. In responding to questions about violence, the participants spoke about husbands having multiple sexual partners, about contracting HIV and living with the virus, and about the unequal responsibility that women took for child rearing and household life (sometimes including forced labour), thus suggesting the general inequality and oppression that they encountered.

A strong overlap exists between the forms of violence and oppression and the impact of these experiences. For the purpose of clarity, the main types of violence will be discussed here with the impact of this violence being discussed later.

Sexual violence

Sexual violence was the form of violence that was spoken about in most depth. It was unclear why this was the case. It cannot be assumed that it was the most common form of violence experienced. However, the stories of the participants suggested that sexual violence was, in fact, commonplace. Many forms of sexual violence – both within and outside of marriage – were discussed.

In Ethiopia rape within marriage is not considered a crime, thus suggesting that what happens between husbands and wives is considered a private matter. This situation poses great risks for married women. In the focus groups the women talked about the expectation that a wife would satisfy the sexual needs of her husband. For example, one participant told of her personal experience in this regard:

“My husband likes sex too much; he is also elder and more experienced than me. And he knew all sorts of sex acts. He was demanding much sex that I couldn’t cope with, it was a tormenting experience. Earlier, I have informed my uncle about my situation and he has discussed the issue with my husband. His answer was: ‘The reason I chose a very young girl was in order for her to satisfy me.’ ...I have informed my uncle and elders that I am being sexually abused. Then I got divorced for it was beyond what I can bear. Such types of offences do occur but they are not known because they are not talked about.”

Another participant stated:

“Even if she gives birth, even in this situation, they expect you to serve sexually.”

The stories of the women suggested that there was often little or no consideration for the woman’s consent to engage in sexual intercourse with her husband. Instead, it was expected
that sex would take place whenever men wanted it. This was clearly a form of sexual violence and it was recognised as such by the women who participated. It seemed that when women objected, force and violence were sometimes used, as is evident from the story told by another participant:

“...the injustice among women is, they are forced to have illegal inappropriate sex. It happens during the night, there is beating, it is dark, and what can they do? They have no choice but to give in, and then they end up with womb disorder. After the incident they won’t go out for a week, for fear of people that may ask. I had a friend. I found her at her house making coffee. I asked her what happened. Her man is older than her and strength-wise man and woman are not equal. When I asked what happened to her, she told me that she was beaten and her entire story. I advised her to seek medical treatment, that she shouldn’t wait that long. She was too shy and had a belief that she should keep the secrets of her husband.”

Related to the issue of being forced to have sex, the women felt that they had no control over how many children they had:

“There are many types of attacks that occur on women such as under age marriage, raping and forcing the wife to have many children. The husband decides for the wife whether to use birth control or not. In general, the woman is under total control of the husband. The men also consider women as servants of male. Particularly around Tigray married women are the most abused compared to unmarried ones. Unless otherwise they get permission from the husband, women have no right to decide the number of children they would like to have.”

Similarly, another participant stated:

“Of course on top of this we have less chance to manage the menstrual cycle, even if some people have awareness, she has to serve anyway...”

Very frequent reference was also made to rape outside of marriage, with many of the women telling stories of women they knew who had been raped. This type of violence took many forms. According to the participants, some women were raped by people they knew – friends, boyfriends or people acquainted to their families. Others were raped by complete strangers. Regarding stranger rape, several references were made to girls being kidnapped. While at first it was unclear whether the word kidnap was being used in a different context, it became evident that in at least some instances kidnapping referred to the taking of a girl against her will for the purpose of raping her. For example, one participant told about a time when she lived in Addis Ababa and her friend was kidnapped while walking with her to the pharmacy. She was taken away in a car and returned ten days later having been “cruelly raped”.

Indeed, the narratives of the women suggested that kidnapping was not an uncommon occurrence. In fact, one participant went so far as to state that that kidnapping was “not considered as taboo” and instead that “to kidnap a woman is considered as braveness.” This participant told of a girl whom she had supported as part of her job:

“She told me when she was collecting firewood three men came to her, they kidnapped her and then took her virginity forcefully. That time she was too young and was supposed to be engaged sooner. After she was kidnapped she kept the problem secret
and left her parents and came to Mekelle. Therefore, in the country side there is no change in behaviour towards women. The mentality of men towards practicing kidnapping is still there and in the rural areas kidnapping is not considered as taboo... I asked, [this girl] why she did not tell the problem to her parents. She told me that the people who kidnapped her and her parents have acquaintance so that she was afraid to tell the incident to her parents. According to her, rather than her own health, she was more worried about not ruining the family relationship.”

Another participant also talked about rape within rural areas and how sometimes the perpetrators are known to those who are raped. She suggested that at times girls become pawns in disputes involving their fathers:

“For example, let’s say there is a man who has an adversary. If his adversary has a daughter, that man would follow his adversary’s daughter and rape her. He is not directly facing her father or his adversary. But he destroys the whole life of the girl.”

Several participants distinguished between ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ rape, with one participant stating that rural rape is “accompanied by force” while “in towns rape is done in a modern way” through deception. Girls were sometimes lured by false pretences. For example, one participant talked about how someone might approach a girl on the street and tell her that a family member was sick and offer her a lift to the hospital. This was simply a means of getting the girl into the car. Such examples suggested that the rapes had been planned, as the person luring the girl had gathered specific information about her in advance.

At other times rapes seemed to be entirely opportunistic. One participant identified homeless women as particularly vulnerable to being raped and her story again suggested that rape was in some way considered an acceptable thing to do:

“With regard to raping, the sick homeless are victims of rape. For example if someone has seen somebody committing a crime against these desperate women, instead of reporting to the legal body, he himself again does the same crime in his turn. Sometimes it is very hard to believe this is really happening. It is very difficult to imagine those men are mentally normal, they drag them to dark places and rape them there, they did not even try to differentiate between sick and homeless women. It is also common to see civil servants committing similar attacks on women. Therefore, we women are living in conditions where we curse ourselves for being born as women.”

Overall, the extent of which stories of rape were recounted by the participants was unexpected and quite shocking. One participant summed the situation up by saying:

“Therefore, whether it is in towns or in rural areas raping is still common. Particularly if the girl is beautiful and with good conduct, the men don’t want to miss her.”

Another form of sexual violence that is common in many African countries is female genital mutilation. In all of the focus groups, female genital mutilation was only mentioned on three occasions. When spoken about, it was recognised as a form of violence against women. It was considered uncommon for it to take place within the area but it was recognised that it still occurred in other parts of Ethiopia. The comments of one participant suggested that female genital mutilation was rarely practiced in urban areas. She did not mention more rural areas.
“At this moment it can be said that female circumcision is getting rare. In the old time, if a female is not circumcised, she used to be labelled as a prostitute. ... now it is known that circumcision hurts the female... there might be few in urban areas who practice circumcision secretly, but largely the practice is getting rejected in urban areas.”

Another participant seemed to suggest that the practice was rare in rural areas also:

“With regard to circumcision, nowadays, it is getting less practiced. Especially in the city of Mekele including rural areas the practice has nearly ceased. But it is widely present in Afar1 areas.”

Participants attributed the decline in the practice of female genital mutilation to an increase in awareness of the dangers that it posed for girls and for women. Female genital mutilation was not mentioned at all in the groups that took place in the rural area. It was unclear whether this was due to it not being practiced in the area, due to women feeling unable to speak about it, or due to some other reason. However, it is noteworthy that, in consulting with the DOC in relation to the research, the sisters had informed us that Female Genital Mutilation was rarely practiced in either of the two areas where the research was taking place.

Physical violence

Physical violence was not discussed in the same level of depth as sexual violence. It was not clear why this was the case. For example, was it because physical violence didn’t happen as much? Or was it because it was so common an experience that it was accepted in some way and therefore not considered to be important to discuss? Or was there some other reason for its absence? Unfortunately this research cannot throw light on these questions.

Nonetheless, it was evident that physical violence was a common form of violence within the communities in which the research took place. One woman in the 25-35 year old focus group succinctly stated the following:

“Domination and attacks on women are common practice.”

In contrast to the discussion of sexual violence which related to violence both within and outside of marriage, physical violence was always discussed in relation to intimate relationships, particularly relationships between married couples. No reference was made to women being physically attacked by strangers or by people other than their husbands or boyfriends.

Many of the participants gave examples of physical violence. In speaking about this form of violence some of the women spoke of their own personal experiences, while in speaking about sexual violence the women tended to speak about the experiences of friends or acquaintances. Regarding the physical abuse that she suffered, one woman simply stated:

“Every time he came home he just beat me.”

Another woman spoke in more depth. She described how she had been married with two children by the time she was 18 years old. She described herself as having come from a “poor

1 ‘Afar’ is the name of a region of Ethiopia.
family” but her story suggested that her husband was relatively wealthy. They built their own house and owned a number of businesses. However, she experienced various types of abuse and oppression within the marriage, including forced labour and physical violence:

“I was always living in fear. He frequently hit me and forced me to wash clothes the whole night ... I had no right to decide on my own life. It was the worst and painful repression period for me.”

This lady described how she was eventually forced to leave her home with her children and how she subsequently built her own house and took a legal case against her husband. Others, however, were still enduring violence. One of the older focus group participants told of her experience of being married to a man who frequently left her to spend time with other women. She experienced various types of abuse and oppression throughout her marriage. For example, when she went into labour with her sixth child and started experiencing complications, her husband could not be found. When he was eventually found he refused to sign the consent for her surgery to take place. The woman cried as she reflected on her situation:

“So I have been through many sufferings, I still do. ... While he still treats me badly, I am living with him until today. All my neighbours know my problems. Sometimes he beats me with a stick accusing me of locking the house when I leave. When you are especially empty handed the abuse gets worse.”

Her final comment – about being empty handed – suggests that she felt that there was a link between poverty and the violence she experienced. This will be discussed in more depth later.

One woman who was herself divorced due to her husband’s physical violence, also had childhood memories of her father’s ill-treatment of her mother.

“I myself ran away to town and all my problems that followed are the end results of divorce and the cruelty of my father. Whenever I hear about my father I feel very sick. He was intimidating and he was biting my mother. Along with my elder brothers we would tell each other ‘dad is coming, come let’s hide’. Because we were very terrified of him.”

Other participants spoke about the experiences of women whom they knew. They spoke about women who were subjected to physical abuse or who were threatened by their partners. One woman stated:

“I know one married women with 4 children, her husband is always quarrelling and beating her. When she was waiting on him, preparing or drinking coffee, he would hit her on her eyes or anywhere on her face... The husband is worthless, he always gets drunk and even sometimes stays outside overnight. He does not want to divorce her but is repeatedly harassing and beating her.”

Another said, in relation to a friend:

“... he was threatening her. She also saw when he loaded the gun. She wouldn’t cry out in case he kills her.”
On several occasions the participants drew attention to the fact that various types of violence often occur simultaneously. For example, sexual violence often involved physical violence too. This was evident in our discussion of sexual violence. Indeed, one participant stated:

“If we consider these females who were raped, they are also physically abused.”

Overall, the findings suggest that physical abuse was common, with many of the participants speaking about the abuse that they themselves had experienced. The lack of in-depth discussion is likely to reflect a wider social acceptance that this form of violence happens frequently within the family home. Perhaps it was less likely to be discussed because it usually took place within intimate relationships, whereas sexual violence took place both within relationships and outside of them, hence making it more obvious and visible within the community.

**Emotional abuse and coercive control**

There was evidence that women in the area also experienced emotional abuse, again, particularly within intimate relationships. Emotional abuse included being denigrated, being blamed unfairly, being disrespected and being humiliated. At times, this amounted to coercive control, a term used to describe the limiting of women’s freedom (e.g. to visit friends or family, to work outside the home, to have input into family finances).

Being put down, ridiculed or humiliated was mentioned by some participants. One woman told the story of a girl she knew who had been disowned by her parents when she became pregnant. At first her boyfriend treated her well and she began living with him and with his parents. However, with time his treatment of her changed:

“While she was living with the boy, he changed his mind in the middle and started treating her differently. He was looking down and denigrating her. He was bothering and harassing her by saying ‘you came to my house yourself, uninvited’. Then she fell in to a state of depression and worrying.”

A similar story was told by another participant whose boyfriend starting seeing different women and even bringing some of them back to the house in which they lived. He became angry with her when she asked for her name to be put on his property too. According to the participant, he responded by saying:

“I brought you in as a housemaid, not as a wife, and there is no one as evidence.”

There were also examples of emotional abuse in the form of blaming. According to the participants, wives were blamed for various family tragedies and difficulties including children not being conceived, children dying or teenage daughters who were perceived to be behaving inappropriately. One participant told the story of a woman who was not aware that her husband was HIV positive although he himself was aware of his health status. When the lady became pregnant her husband would not allow her to go to the hospital for check ups. The lady gave birth at home and her baby became very ill. Her husband blamed her for the illness. According to the participant, he said:
“‘My child was born big and healthy. You made her sick, because you are Buda\(^2\), you are eating her!’ He added: ‘You took her everywhere and made her sick. You bewitched her!’ He told her not to go out any more and he was doing the shopping for the household.”

Subsequently, when the child died, he deserted his wife, saying:

“My child died. From now onwards I don’t know you.”

In addition, women recounted stories of being intimidated by men. One woman remembered feeling scared as a child when her father intimidated her mother. Another woman talked about having gone to court to secure financial maintenance from her former husband. She managed to secure the payment of a small amount of money but after the court case her former husband intimidated her and threatened that he would not pay the amount he was supposed to pay:

“He was intimidating me that he would reduce the 300 Birr\(^3\).”

Others recounted threatening behaviour from their husbands when they did not abide by their wishes. One woman told the story of a man who was in a large amount of debt. He told his wife to give him her jewellery. When she refused, he threatened her, saying:

“Where is your jewellery? Otherwise, I am going to kill you.”

These experiences of intimidation and threatening behaviour suggested that men were attempting to control their wives. The participants told of how their husbands or boyfriends refused to put their names on property, refused to give them money, sold family possessions without any consultation (including property or livestock belonging to the woman), and, as has been described previously, took control of sexual relations within the relationship. In addition, in some instances, men attempted to control the movements of their wives. For example, one woman talked about the coercive control she experienced from her husband even when he was abroad. He kept track of her movements and also took control of financial matters by paying the rent in advance, rather than allowing his wife to pay it while he was away:

“I got married when I was 16 years old. When I gave birth to two children, my husband used to go for field trips. When he is on field trips he would check me by dialing the home land line number. When I am away for shopping and his call is not answered, he would be angry at me. When he returns from his trip he himself would pay house rent for up to 4 months. He would pay rent money, he did not trust me.”

Another participant drew attention to the desire of men to be in control:

“Some few males tell her never to leave the house. It could be for good reason. But most of them do it because they believe that male should be worshipped. They want to be at the top and the female under male control, and they have the attitude of ‘she is to listen to what I say’.”

\(^{2}\) ‘Buda’ refers to an ‘evil-eyed person’. In Ethiopia, people who are considered to have the ‘evil eye’ are believed to have magical powers to harm others by just looking at them.

\(^{3}\) ‘Birr’ refers to Ethiopian Birr, the currency of Ethiopia.
Interestingly, as will be discussed later, it emerged that efforts were made by parents (both mothers and fathers) to control girls from a young age. In contrast, no mention was made of attempting to control the behaviour of boys as they grew up. In adulthood, these efforts to control women seemed to continue. While most of the discussion centred on control within marriages, one participant, who was in her twenties, told of how her uncle attempted to control her following the death of her mother. She talked about the horrific treatment experienced by her mother from her third husband. She contracted HIV and subsequently died, leaving the girl to provide for her three younger siblings. The participant told of how her uncle offered her a job, saying that, having lost his sister he didn’t want to lose his sister’s daughter also. While his intentions may have been good, the young woman experienced him as controlling:

“[My uncle] said: ‘I do not want you to be fully dependant on someone otherwise you will have the same fate as your mother.’ Therefore, he wants to control all my activities. From the time when my mother was dead, I resumed my education so that I can at least survive by myself, yet my uncle imposed strict control on me; he sought to know my every movement and my daily life. He always asked me ‘where have you been? Why are you late?’ His full domination on me didn’t bring any change in my life. Instead, he is using me for his advantage.”

Unequal division of labour

The issue of there being an unequal division of labour between men and women arose frequently within the focus groups, especially within the focus groups that occurred in the more rural area. The participants felt strongly that women took responsibility for an unequal amount of work, including caring for children, cooking, farming and fetching water and firewood. In addition, frequent reference was made to women working to provide for their children in circumstances where husbands had deserted them or in circumstances where husbands simply were not providing any income for the household. For example, one woman stated the following:

“I work as a daily labourer. This is my first time to attend such type of meeting and express myself. I have been through the sufferings. I also have my husband living with me. He never gives me a penny. It is me, working as a daily labourer who looks after the children.”

Another participant – who attended one of the groups in the rural area - spoke more generally about the situation of women and about the burden of workload that fell on their shoulders:

“On top of this she has to work, she has to support the men for the agricultural work. If man has to work, e.g. once a year ploughing- but women’s work is continuous and endless. These years women are told to participate in all work even if pregnant or lactating. She has to work with men outside the home, but he can rest, but she has to work and she has responsibility for all house work like getting and preparing food, looking after children. She has to go for outside work for income otherwise she can’t feed her children.”

In the same group, a woman spoke about being told to fetch water even when she was pregnant and also had another child to look after:
“Always I get pregnant and he tells me to bring water. If I bring a small container he says bring me more and if I have my child, he tells me to bring the child on my back and bring 2 small containers.”

A number of references were made to husbands squandering money, often on alcohol, and leaving their wives with little or no means of buying food for their children. One participant talked about the expectation that women provide food for their family even in circumstances where men are using the household income to drink:

“She has to prepare for her husband. He tells her you have to bring what we have to eat. Some women face that. Men take the household income outside and use it for drinking, or sell the food items, they drink it - he is very selfish...”

Overall, there was a sense that women bore more responsibility for household and childrearing concerns, often including generating income for the family. This was particularly the case in the more rural area where this theme dominated the focus group discussion. These responsibilities became even more acute in circumstances where husbands left the marriage often as a result of a relationship with another woman. As one participant stated:

“The capacity of the woman is very low – easily cheated by men and then carries all the problems.”

Unfaithful marriages, abandonment and HIV

While some references were made to the responsibilities faced by women after their husbands died, in all of the focus groups very frequent reference was made to men having multiple sexual partners and to married men being unfaithful to their wives. In addition, women often spoke of husbands or partners leaving them, sometimes in order to pursue a relationship with another women, but for other reasons too (e.g. to run away from bankruptcy, to live in a different country), resulting in the responsibility for children being left solely on the wife’s shoulders. In fact, the frequency with which the participants talked about being ‘abandoned’ or ‘deserted’ by their husbands or boyfriends was quite striking. Some of the things that were said included:

“The problems of females vary from one another. The one who has nothing to eat, deserted by her husband like me...”

“The banks were after us. Then my husband left and vanished.”

“After we had four children he deserted me.”

“[He] completely abandoned her and told her to go wherever she wanted...”

“He then left. She was on her own for 5 to 6 years.”

“After he stayed with her in Ethiopia for a year, he went back to the country where he lives, and that was in Europe. Then, he stayed there for a very long time. He neither sent money nor anything.”

Often it was not clear why husbands had left. For example, one woman stated:
“The difficulty is they [women] give birth to a number of children and later their husbands might abandon them, or they go in to trouble. When the husband leaves after having children, the responsibility to raise the children will rest on the distressed mother.”

Yet, whether or not husbands ended up leaving, infidelity within relationships seemed to be a very common occurrence. Again, this was mentioned repeatedly in the focus groups, to the extent that it seemed almost an expectation that men had sexual relationships with more than one woman concurrently. At times, these affairs occurred within the context of wider abuse. One participant spoke about a woman whose husband was having an affair. It seemed that the coercive control within the relationship meant that the woman was unaware of the affair:

“I knew of one married woman who became a victim of domestic violence. She has two children, and her husband was very aggressive towards her. After giving birth to two children he never allowed her to go out and mix. While he was living with his wife and his two children, the husband started having an extra marital affair. This woman had no idea about his affairs because she was living under his total control and was not allowed to either go out or chat with her friends.”

As stated previously, in situations where men left, women were often left with the responsibility for looking after their children. In circumstances where husbands had financially supported the family, women often found themselves in desperate situations when their husbands left. Although some women managed to secure maintenance through the courts system, many were much less fortunate. In a country with no social welfare system, women were sometimes driven to extreme measures to provide for their children. When they couldn’t find sufficient work or couldn’t sell their produce, women were forced to beg or to engage in prostitution in order to pay for food or in order to send their children to school:

“Suddenly this man deserted me. I have one child from my previous husband, who is now a student, and one from the later one. I am living in a rented house and no where to go. I found it so shameful to beg from people while I am able to work.”

“It is not because they have an addiction that they go into prostitution. When she sees her children starving, she decides to spend a night with a man, go get money and buy her children a dinner. Then she falls ill and faces unexpected difficulties.”

While this participant didn’t describe what she meant by “falls ill” many of the other participants spoke about women contracting HIV. While at times HIV was contracted during sex work, it was also often contracted from one’s husband or partner. Given the frequency of discussions about HIV within focus groups that were about violence against women, it became evident that many of the women felt that transmission of the HIV virus from sexual partners, including husbands, was a form of violence in itself. The repercussions were devastating and oppressive, particularly within a society where those suffering from HIV / Aids experience huge stigma. Many of the women were aware of men who deliberately hid their HIV positive status from their wives or from other sexual partners. Others were aware that their husbands had many extra marital affairs and this resulted in the HIV virus ultimately being transmitted to them.
One participant told the story of her mother whose first husband (the participant’s father) died. She then remarried, but her second husband left her after years of stealing her possessions and selling her livestock and family property. Subsequently, after being on her own for many years, her husband returned and asked her to resume their marriage. The participant cried as she told the story:

“This man asked my mother to allow him to return to his marriage and support her and the children. He was not giving any penny, she was suffering from the pain of her illness; she neither knew the cause of her illness. What he did to her was, he brought her a strange disease, HIV disease. She was healthy for about 10 years, but now look, her life was destroyed.”

Similarly, another participant spoke about her personal experience of contracting HIV. Her first husband died “after he got sick”. She talked about how her second husband left her. She was forced to beg for food. She subsequently discovered that she herself had contracted HIV:

“In the mean time I was getting sick and gradually got weaker. When I was seriously sick I decided to take medical treatment and went to hospital. I was told I am HIV positive. The first time I heard, I was contemplating to hang myself. I felt pity whenever I see my children on the bed sleeping. When I was under great pressure and anxiety I met my husband by chance and told him I was found HIV positive. He said: ‘I am also HIV positive, which is why I preferred to stay away from you.’ He continued to say: ‘Your husband died before I met you. So it is you who passed the disease to me.’... We women are extremely wronged. Now I do not really know from whom I contracted the disease; whether it is from the first or second husband. Men do not consider themselves as the transmitters of the disease; they always blame the woman.”

Concluding comments on forms of violence

To conclude, it was evident that various forms of violence and oppression were experienced within the community. Some of these were experienced by the participants themselves whilst others were experienced by their friends, acquaintances or family members. The main forms of violence and oppression have been discussed here. Others – such as early marriage – were mentioned too, but not discussed in any great depth. Also, while the different forms of violence and oppression were discussed separately here – for ease of reading – it was evident that many of these occurred simultaneously, with many women experiencing multiple forms of violence and oppression. Several obvious connections were evident: Contracting HIV was clearly related to sexual violence and to infidelity. In addition, sexual violence was often accompanied by physical violence. Also, all of the forms of violence were underpinned by efforts to control women. Furthermore, the violence and oppression that the women experienced had profound and long lasting effects on them. In the focus groups we asked the participants what these effects were. Their perspectives on the impact of violence and oppression will be discussed now.

Impact of Violence and Oppression

Economic impact: poverty

Violence and oppression often had a very negative economic impact on families, with existing experiences of poverty becoming even more acute. As has already been discussed, violence
and oppression often resulted in women taking sole responsibility for their children. Frequent reference was made to women struggling to feed their children, to send them to school and to pay rent. In circumstances where making ends meet was often a struggle even when husbands or partners were earning and providing for their families, a crisis could arise when women were left on their own, whether through death, separation or divorce. One woman recounted her experiences:

“I was married and have 4 children. I had disagreements with my husband and he was going out for a few times. Even if I have repressions I gave priority to my children, tolerated the problems and stayed with him. In between God took him. Now, I work as hair braider, trying to look after my children myself. My children, they may eat today, they might not eat tomorrow.”

Another participant spoke about the situation of women more generally and again reference was made to women being forced into prostitution in order to bring up their children:

“It is true the mother is in huge difficulty, she is torn apart between feeding one and looking after the other child. The mother is the most oppressed. Let alone the deceased father, the one who is alive is not as concerned and as caring as the mother. The mother has so many difficulties. She goes in to loans to bring up her children. She even gets in to prostitution; she becomes infected with a disease, suffers a lot and dies.”

It was evident that women took huge risks to meet the basic needs of their children. Inevitably such risks meant that women were exposed to more violence and oppression, thus creating a cycle from which it was difficult to escape.

**Educational**

Violence and oppression had a very strong impact on the education of both women and their children and this was often related to the poverty that women experienced. Many of the participants talked about the fact that women often had to forgo their education after marrying or after becoming pregnant. At times they were not allowed by their husbands to continue to pursue their education. In other instances, there was simply an expectation that they would care for their children:

“If we come in the area of education, if she has lots of children ... raising the children up .... If we honestly look into the problem, the children belong to both husband and wife, but the main one who takes care of the children is the mother. For the sake of rearing our children, there are occasions when we have to interrupt our education.”

Often, it was simply not possible for the women to continue with their education as they needed to earn money to provide for their child or children. This was particularly the case if the father of the child or children was absent. Several stories were told about university students becoming pregnant and leaving their education to be with their boyfriend and care for their child and then subsequently being left on their own with the baby. In one situation, a participant told the story of a university student who became pregnant and began living with her boyfriend. Compared with others that were described, this case seemed unusual in that the girl left the baby with her boyfriend:
“While she was living with the boy he changed his mind and started treating her differently. He was looking down and denigrating her. He was bothering and harassing her…. When things got worse she was forced to leave her child with her boyfriend and left the house to work in a cafe. Imagine, this girl was a bright student and because of the boy she interrupted her education and ended up in lots of trouble. Now she deeply regrets and blames herself for destroying her future destiny. She recalls the quarrels they had with her boyfriend which started when she heard that he was seeing another girl on top of her and now she still feels angry. Since she left her boyfriend she is still working in cafés and has no improvement in her life.”

In other instances, older children were forced to leave education to earn money or to look after younger siblings, particularly in cases where parents were ill or had died. The participant who previously described how her mother resumed a marriage with a man who had left her and then contracted HIV, talked about how she had to leave school to look after her sick mother and brother:

“To look after a sick child, I had to interrupt my education, went through many hurdles… Later on, both my mother and the child were admitted to hospital and I was again the one who took full responsibility to care for them.”

As well as women’s education being disrupted, violence and oppression also had a very severe impact on children’s education. At best, children struggled with their education, perhaps because they found it difficult to concentrate in school due to the problems that were occurring at home. At worst, children were unable to attend school as school fees could not be afforded or the children were needed to earn for the family or to care for younger siblings.

“I struggle to raise my children selling soaked beans and roasted grain. They are not successful with their education. Three of my daughters failed at grade 10. Now they are trading cactus fruit and other items.”

Another participant, who eventually received employment and assistance from the DOC, told of how her children nearly had to leave school after the family became bankrupt and her husband left. This woman described herself as having previously been wealthy and was forced to sell all of her clothes to earn money for her family. She talked about her children’s education:

“My children were bright in their education, but how can they continue? They have no school uniform. One of my children was sent home by the school guard, because he was coming repeatedly with no uniform. He would like to continue his education but he can’t. I went to the school and met one teacher, may the Saviour help him…. The same day my son went to school with an empty stomach, was starved and interrupted his class and slept in the school. One teacher approached him and asked him what happened, and he told her that he was hungry. She asked him where his father and mother are. He responded: ‘My father was missing, he left us, and my mother has nothing left.’”

To a large extent, it seemed that the impact that violence had on education – both of women and their children – meant that the cycle of poverty, violence and oppression was able to continue.
Physical effects

The physical implications of violence and oppression were generally discussed in relation to sexual violence. Very little reference was made to injuries sustained as a result of physical violence. The reasons for this are unclear. In relation to the effects of sexual violence, several references were made to gynaecological problems caused by rape, and occasional reference was made to physical problems resulting from female genital mutilation. The physical consequences of rape were described by one participant in relation to a woman she knew:

“During pregnancy period she was getting sick frequently. Later on she had a problem of miscarriage and became a fistula victim.”

Another physical implication of sexual violence was HIV and this was discussed very frequently throughout the focus groups. As was described previously, many of the participants talked about contracting HIV from their husbands or boyfriends, and they often attributed this to the fact that their husbands or boyfriends had multiple sexual partners. In addition, a number of stories were told about men who were aware that they were HIV positive but did not inform their wives of this. One woman told a particularly shocking story:

“I heard that a man who previously has a wife living with HIV has again married a woman who is healthy. The later wife had a daughter from her previous husband and two children from the present husband. When he married this second wife he knew that he is HIV positive. While they were living together he transmitted her HIV / Aids and then she passed away. After his wife passed away, one time he came drunk, he raped and took the virginity of the daughter of the deceased. During the incident the girl was crying for help and people from the neighbourhood came to help. When the people knew the situation they asked him why he did that. He replied that he does not want her to marry another man. He wanted her to stay with him. Since then the girl is infected with HIV. Now she is supported by the Catholic Missionaries.”

In addition to the physical manifestations of HIV, a diagnosis of the virus also led to profound psychological consequences. The participants spoke again and again about the stigma attached to the virus. They told of how people kept their diagnosis a secret, for fear that they would be ostracised from society. One participant described the following story of a woman whose husband became sick and died:

“But she was healthy. She was saying: ‘I came from the country side, do I have yet to get examined? I can’t.’ Later she got checked. Her children were positive; she became aware she was also HIV positive. She never told her children, because they were students. I mean she was afraid that their colleague students would alienate them.”

Although the predominant discussion of physical implications centred on the implications of sexual violence, some examples were given of women who experienced ill-health as a result of neglect. These took place within situations of coercive control. In one example, a woman’s husband was abroad while she was pregnant. The woman was left with her sister in law who didn’t give her proper food and didn’t care for her when she went into labour. The baby was born dead and the woman was very ill after the birth. She subsequently also discovered that she was HIV positive.
Emotional and psychological effects

The participants made frequent reference to the psychological implications of violence and oppression on both women and their children. In relation to the effects on women, asides from the stigma experienced by those who had contracted HIV (which has been discussed already), women also experienced shame and hopelessness in relation to their situations. While many of the women cried out for help when violence occurred, others were said to remain quiet because of the shame that they would feel. There were a number of references to women feeling hopeless and killing themselves or attempting to take their own lives as a result. One participant spoke about her neighbour’s daughter whose brother saved her from killing herself:

“One wicked and cursed man deceived her and took her virginity. She earlier refused another man when she was formally asked to be engaged. Later, instead of seeking medical assistance quickly … her tummy enlargement became visible, she was pregnant. Her brother found her when she was trying to commit suicide by throwing herself to hit her abdomen. He saved her life.”

In addition, previous experiences of violence meant that women found it difficult to trust men. One participant, who saw how her mother was treated by her second husband, stated:

“Until now I do not know the face of any man and have not had any relationship with anybody, this is because I still feel the pain of my mother.”

The women were also very conscious of the psychological impact of violence and oppression on children. While occasionally examples were given of children being abused as well as their mothers, little was said about this in general. However, participants talked about children feeling fear and worry as a result of the violence that their mothers experienced. At times the participants themselves remembered these feelings from their own childhoods. In other instances, women spoke about their own children and how they felt. Sometimes children questioned why their mothers lived with their fathers or why they married them in the first place. One woman stated:

“As for me, its effect on my children is very bad. For instance, my daughter because she hears that he is a curse, she would tell me, every now and then, why I couldn’t live on my own. She would ask me why I got married to her callous father. So, its effect is not only on us but overflows to our children too. My daughter is 5 years old. I would tell her it was not the will of God, and now I can’t live on my own. The consequences go this far. It might also affect her morals.”

Another participant talked about the type of conversations she had with her 6 year old daughter. The dialogue shows the efforts she made to protect her child and reassure her:

“She said: ‘I am afraid he might come. I am afraid he might even kill us by car if he met us on the street.’ I would tell her: ‘He is your father, he loves you, he will buy you shoes and clothes.’ She would answer: ‘If he loves me why wouldn’t he love you, you are my mother?’ … In general, violence affects not only the mother but also the children. It has also a psychological impact on the children. Their father won’t be a proper role model.”
Another participant felt that if children grow up listening to fighting between their parents they “won’t have a healthy mind.” Others were concerned that children would become hopeless and that if their parents were not providing for them they would be forced to live on the street. In this way, the cycle of poverty and violence could again be allowed to persist, as children living on the street would be at increased risk of further violence and oppression.

Conclusion: Abuse leading to further abuse.

The impact of the violence and oppression was evident both from comments that the women made about how they themselves felt after their experiences and also from their observations of how violence affected others, including their children. It was evident that the participants believed the violence and oppression had significant and long term effects. There was a range of different types of effects but primarily the effects were poverty, physical effects, psychological effects and educational effects. Interestingly, some of these – poverty and lack of education – were also identified as causes of the violence, thus suggesting the existence of a vicious cycle of poverty/lack of education and violence for some women.

Causes of Violence and Oppression

Given the devastating effects of the violence, understanding the root causes is essential if it is to be prevented in generations to come. While various causes were suggested, three were particularly prominent. The women mentioned poverty, lack of education and lack of equality as reasons for the violence that occurred. Other reasons were also suggested and these will be discussed more generally under miscellaneous reasons.

Poverty

Within the literature, poverty and financial reasons are cited as reasons why women do not leave abusive relationships. This is despite the fact that most of the literature is based on research in Western countries, where social welfare systems can act as safety nets for women who decide to leave. However, in Ethiopia no such system exists, and, as a result, poverty is an even greater barrier to women leaving situations of abuse. In addition, it is evident that many of the women felt that poverty was actually the cause of the abuse taking place in the first place.

Again and again, throughout the focus groups, the participants spoke about women entering relationships or getting married as they felt that they would have a better life with a husband or boyfriend. As such, relationships with men were often viewed as a way out of poverty. Very frequent reference was made to girls and young women entering relationships for this reason, with little attention paid to the character of the man. One participant talked about a girl she knew and how she had entered into a relationship with her boyfriend:

“The girl, attracted by the wealth of her boyfriend’s parents, and not foreseeing what problem might follow, agreed [to the relationship]. Her parents have no job; they were very poor and have a big family with lots of children. She is the only student in the family, the rest of her siblings work as daily labourers. The boyfriend’s parents have a better living standard than her parents so she believed marrying him will lead her and her parents to a better life. Based on this thought, she agreed to do what her boyfriend told her to do. She had no idea what would happen with her boyfriend in the future. She was only thinking positive things that if she is married to him she would have an opportunity to help herself and her parents.”
The boyfriend subsequently began mistreating the girl and treated her as a housemaid. Many of the other participants told similar stories. For example:

“He told the girl that if she marries him, that she will have a better life and that he will take her aboard, including parents, with him. He promised other stuff as well. Based on the promises she agreed and married him.”

Another participant simply stated:

“...the point is there is deception, we women are easily deceived. We fall into the trap of temporary success without thinking of the long term consequences. We women are mostly misled for money.”

In addition, financial security seemed to be a particularly important lure for women whose first marriages had broken down or who were widowed. Usually these women had several dependent children whom they struggled to feed, clothe and send to school. One participant was particularly strong in her views that this was the sole reason for violence that occurs within a second marriage:

“Once they are face to face with problems and are asked for marriage by another man they do not hesitate to accept the request and get married again. This is because they think they would support them to raise the children and send them to school. Total dependency on the husband had resulted in less interaction and exposure to the community which in turn ruins the whole family. Therefore, the source of problems that are created after the death of the husband is women’s dependency on man. There is no major reason other than this.”

Indeed, dependency was mentioned by many of the participants. A lack of property rights meant that this sense of dependency was exacerbated. Several participants described how property was usually in the name of the man and sometimes in the name of the man and other members of his family. This meant that women felt they had little choice but to stay in abusive relationships given that they would have no rights to the home if they left or if they forced their husbands to leave. One participant described this problem:

“The problem here is the property they produced together is registered in the name of [the husbands’] brothers. While the assets belong to the two of them, the husbands registered it in the name of either their brothers or sisters, like the family known as [name of family]. The husband is known to be rich. But the wealth he accumulated was registered in the names of his brothers. His wife was thrown out, living in [name of area]. It was like as if she was not rich at all or has no single penny.”

In talking about the lure of money and financial security, the participants often said that women showed a lack of foresight. They said that women did not think ahead and instead were attracted by what the man could offer them in the short term. This was related to the issue of lack of education and lack of awareness which will be discussed in the next section. One woman, who had previously lived very comfortably, reflected on her own situation. She was quoted earlier talking about having to sell all her possessions after she and her husband became bankrupt and he subsequently vanished.
“But I was foolish. Whenever my father visited me, he was telling me: ‘My daughter, it is better for you to go to school and finish.’ I was in 11th grade by then. As for me, I had everything, there was wealth, and I never thought it would go. I was not wise enough. I was just having children and rearing them, there was plenty.”

The links between poverty and working in the sex industry were very clear. As stated previously, girls and women were often forced to engage in sex work because of poverty. Sometimes, they entered the industry having previously experienced violence and oppression. In their work as sex workers their dependency on their male clients was again evident. For example, one participant described the following situation:

“The girl lives in a rented house and had four months unpaid rent. ... There was one person who lives abroad. He is a well respected person. Especially these who live abroad demand various forms of sexual interaction. For sex workers in hotels they pay up to 1000 Birr to give them oral sex. The above mentioned man asked my neighbour to have oral sex for a 1000 Birr. Imagine this girl has 4 months unpaid house rent and she wants money urgently. When he first asked her she was shocked, it was a strange experience. But later she agreed to do what she was asked and she went with him. When they started, how could she handle it? She went because she is already in the business, and the 1000 Birr was too big money. She thought she will manage.”

It is evident that financial security acted as a reason for entering relationships and as a reason for staying in them. However, there was also another way in which poverty acted as a cause of violence. Conflict within relationships sometimes arose because of what one participant described as “the ‘give me’ and ‘I don’t have’ interactions”. Wives asked for money to buy food but husbands didn’t have money to give, because of lack of income. Families struggled to meet basic needs even when men were working and trying to provide. This led to tension and conflict within the home:

“Life now is very tough, getting expensive. You take 100 Birr for shopping, and you return back with your basket not full. You get headache because everything is dear. A family would have a minimum of 5 children. She would ask for money, he would say ‘I have given you yesterday. From where would I bring you now?’ Then, they fight.”

Lack of education and awareness

Lack of education and awareness was viewed as another cause of violence and oppression. As one woman stated:

“Why violence against women takes place is, firstly, it is because of lack of education, they are not educated. Secondly, women are under the hands of men, they are dependent.”

Illiteracy and lack of education were particularly mentioned by the group attended by older women and also by the women from the more rural area. They were acutely aware of how their own lack of education had disadvantaged them. In their eyes, it was unlikely that educated women would experience violence and abuse. One participant was aware that another member of the group was educated and had experienced violence but she felt that this was not a usual occurrence:
"As for me, I have met one, that’s her. She is educated. She wouldn’t think she would face any difficulty. It is a coincidence. We, it is because we are illiterate and because we have no awareness that we have to face violence. I myself am angry because of my illiteracy ...But the educated women who happen to be abused are few and a rare incident."

In general, the women were not specific about how lack of education caused violence. However, some of the participants made a link between lack of education/awareness and lack of farsightedness, suggesting that lack of education/awareness meant that women did not think ahead in relation to the implications of their decisions. For example, one woman stated the following:

"Indeed these types of violence are caused due to lack of awareness. For example, I know one Muslim girl married to a Christian man. Her husband has no job. They live in a rented house. She is frequently attacked by the husband and she always cries out to get help from the neighbours. She has already told her neighbours to come whenever they hear her crying. What this shows you is that she knew he has no job, and never thought how she would survive. There is a lack of farsightedness."

In addition, frequent reference was made to a lack of knowledge and awareness of legal rights. One participant talked about a woman she knew who got married “when she was a little child” and her husband transferred her property into his siblings’ names. She only discovered this when she later had to go to court following the breakdown of her marriage:

"Then she was told she has no possessions from her marriage, and that she is a complete dependent. She was a mother of four and she was told that she owns no portion of property. We were sitting side by side when the verdict was told. She was shocked. I was told to take her out. The decision passed was that she has no possessions. This person got ill. Hence the problem here is about unawareness of the legal system. The government doesn’t give any lesson to raise legal awareness."

While this lack of awareness may not have caused violence to occur, it inevitably led to the oppression of this woman who was then left without any possessions and was forced into continued poverty, thus putting her at further risk of violence and oppression. Similarly, another participant, who again regretted her own lack of education, stated:

"Those public servants or educated are better off. Because they go to the court and can engage in litigation. Had I known that education was so useful, I would have attended school. Why? I am now being disadvantaged. When you go to court, in order for you to be confused, they would tell you to go here and there. You then will be puzzled and quit the court process. Therefore, if we are to talk truly, it is women who are ill-treated. Nothing happens to the male."

This quotation suggests that perhaps education informed people about the legal system and also that it provided them with confidence in engaging in the legal process.

Another woman, who had experienced violence and whose husband had subsequently left her, leaving her destitute, stated the following:
“Ignorance, back then there was no education or trainings as it is now. Poor women, even during marriage, they don’t know how to control their possessions, where to seek help, where to report to. Females didn’t know where to get justice. Now, the female is learning that her illiteracy has disadvantaged her. She completely trusts her male counterpart. Males shall never be trusted.... So, it is our ignorance which made us destitute.”

Participants spoke on numerous occasions about lack of knowledge of HIV. Many women were aware of how to protect themselves from HIV and attempted to persuade their husbands to get tested for the virus. However, others either did not have the awareness of how to protect themselves or felt that they could not ask their husbands to get tested. Perhaps this was due to cultural reasons or due to the stigma associated with the virus or due to their dependency on the man and fear of being separated from him. Participants also suggested that some women did not know how to care for themselves when they contracted the virus. One woman, who had worked as a facilitator with local women suffering from HIV / Aids, stated the following:

“Their husbands would leave them and have children from other women. Then, they return back to them to resume their marriage. They would never ask where the husband has been, they never bother to demand for health check before taking them in. This is due to some cultural imposition and fear of being separated again. They are going to get ill anyway, they are the ones who will raise the children, why can’t they be careful? Besides, there are a lot of women who take their tablets without having any food.”

Inequality and the role of women and men in society

Another cause of violence and oppression that was suggested by the women was the lack of equality between men and women and the perception that men were superior. One participant stated the following as a cause of violence against women:

“The attitude of the community which doesn’t consider the woman to be fully human.”

Another made reference to the roles attributed to women and the lack of respect for these roles:

“Violence is because they are females. This is because of her sex, she has to be pregnant, to lactate and take care of children and in this process she did not get respect for this. This is because one thing due to attitude of the country and due also to the problem existing within the country.”

Some simply suggested that one received less recognition for being a woman and as a result women could be demeaned.

Interestingly, several of the participants suggested that as mothers they themselves had a part to play in causing the violence and oppression that their daughters later suffered in life. In raising their children they treated boys and girls differently. According to one participant, this started at birth, when the birth of a boy was celebrated with five acclamations while the birth of a girl was marked by only three.

“The problem starts at home with the mother and family. We have different expectations for boys and girls. When we give birth, we acclaim the birth of boys five times, for girls only three times.”
This participant went on to say that the birth of a boy was celebrated by killing an animal while this did not happen for female births. In addition, as girls got older their freedom was curtailed in an effort to prevent them from having sex or “exposing herself to bad things”. She also stated:

“Even you give special things for boys. We tell her: ‘you are a girl’. But this is done, but God, but he violates their rights, even the woman is happy if husband is happy. Even when we treat the children, never the same as the boys ... We still don’t work to mingle the girls. This is against the tradition. We, as women, we are doing this violence against our girls. We never encourage them, neglect them.”

While it was recognised that this type of treatment was not as common now as it had been in the past, it is likely that some of its legacy remains. Another participant also stated:

“Even the women have less connection to the girl - this is a tradition - it is very bad. Prepare food, make coffee and serve similar to her mother - give more feeding to boys and as a mother I have started to violate her at home and he will do the same thing to his wife. They act in the way they grew up at home and I expect when my son brings a woman, I expect similar things. My daughter is also facing similar things.”

Frequent reference was made to men believing that they are superior and one woman said that “male superiority” is the first cause of violence. Some of this attitude of superiority was evident in earlier discussions. For example, it was clear that men viewed themselves as being in control of sexual relationships and women felt obliged to serve their male partners. To some extent, beliefs about male superiority meant that women were taught to behave as inferiors from an early age, even in their interactions with their brothers. For example, one woman stated the following:

“The attitude of women and men, just we tell them to be submissive, even if she is violated by a brother, and if beaten. She has to be subservient, because he is a boy. This is our attitude. The cause is lack of education.”

“We did not treat girls the same, because of our fear. If she gets freedom she may fall into problems. We are interested in keeping her at home to avoid problems and to keep the norms.”

Another participant, who was previously quoted saying that “domination and attacks on women are common practice”, went on to suggest that “this starts within the parents themselves that a girl and a boy are not treated as equal”. Another woman suggested that fathers pay little attention to their female daughters.

While these participants suggested that inequality started in the home, they did not make much reference to culture or traditions. Others, however, did, and suggested that the inequality was culture related:

“First reason is, it has been there for long, and it is still part of us. We females ourselves believed and accepted that we are under male. Had we asked ourselves what makes me less than male, had we challenged him, he would have changed. If we had courage to show him that I can also work equally, he would respect me, I would respect
him. We can change the attitude and show we can share the work (that she can do both female jobs and male jobs). From now onwards we won’t have the old way of thinking.”

Indeed, cultural beliefs, and the inequality inherent within them, meant that girls had little choice when parents wanted them to marry at a young age, sometimes to an older man whom they knew nothing about. In addition, participants made reference to the expectation that women would be engaged or married at an early age, thus suggesting that cultural expectations left women with little choice but to get married:

“Let me add one thing that is commonly happening to women. Here, when a girl remains a virgin for a longer period, it is considered bad, that matured virgin girls feel ashamed. Based on this, a girl, once she reaches the age of 18 years is supposed to be engaged. However, if she stays a virgin for a longer period she is considered as she is not wanted by anyone. This is a big problem within the society. Therefore, women in such condition despair and always think what people might say about them.”

Another participant added:

“In fact a mature girl has her own objective why she wants to stay a virgin. But it is what the society says about older virgin women which mostly matters. If a girl is not married early in her adolescence most of the people within the society would consider her as if there is no one to propose her for marriage. Such a girl is locally called ‘Abay Gual’ (unmarried big girl) and this is common in Tigray. In general, this type of attitude of the society towards women has not yet changed.”

According to some of the participants, society also held particular expectations about divorce. One participant related the points about culture to the points about what girls learn growing up. Cultural norms dictate that women do not express themselves as equal to men:

“Oh, it is a culture which came down from parents that you lose your status when you divorce your husband. The woman feels her future is dark if she is divorced. Therefore, we ourselves surrendered to live under repression. This is because of the culture we inherited from our mothers and elder sisters. What we inherited is a system where a woman can’t express herself as equal to men. If a woman discusses as equal as her male counterpart, she will be under focus, even if she tries to speak ahead of her husband, she will be a talking topic. People would ask her husband ‘are you living with a human being?’ What you see is, if a woman behaves differently out of the norm she will lose her integrity. It is culture related.”

In addition, the reference to divorce suggests another reason why leaving abusive relationships is difficult and this relates to the point made by another participant who stated that in the past when women left violent relationships their parents “would advise them to live with their husband, enduring his abuse”.

Miscellaneous reasons

Apart from poverty, lack of education and inequality, the women suggested many other reasons for the violence and oppression that they experienced. Several of these – such as the lack of family planning and men having multiple sexual partners – have been discussed previously in
this report. Other reasons were mentioned less frequently but contribute important knowledge to our understanding of the situations in which women in Tigray live. For example, one woman attributed the violence to the simple fact that no solutions existed:

“The ill-treatment is a lot. But because there is no solution, many females endure them.”

While this may not account for the existence of violence in the first place, it certainly suggests a reason for why women endured the violence, despite their awareness of the effects it was having. Similarly, others suggested that the silence of women contributed to the ongoing nature of the abuse.

Women and children were at increased risk of violence when they were forced to leave their homes. Related to the points made previously about cultural beliefs and societal expectations, girls who became pregnant outside of marriage sometimes left home because of fear of what their parents would say or because they wanted to protect their families from the shame. These girls often migrated to cities and ended up homeless or engaged in the sex industry. In addition, several references were made to conflict arising in families where re-marriage had occurred. At times, the new husbands did not get on with their step daughters and as a result mothers and step fathers disagreed, sometimes resulting in violence. In one example, the daughter left the family home as a result, as she wanted her mother to have peace. Her mother subsequently discovered that she was working in the sex industry and had contracted HIV. Several participants referred to the fact that the death of parents resulted in children experiencing violence. As orphans, they were at risk of being homeless or at least of not having any adults to protect them. In one previously mentioned example, an orphan girl was raped by her step-father following her mother’s death.

Related to the point about women being dependent on men and lured by promises of wealth, participants talked about the tendency of women to be too trusting of men:

“After he abused one and left to meet another female, the later female needs to think and ask herself what kind of offence he committed against the first one, and tomorrow, will he harm me?”

Interestingly, one participant in the rural group blamed democracy for the violence and oppression that women experienced. As women were expected to participate in everything, they simply had too many responsibilities:

“The cause is the politics of democracy. Because people are saying there is democracy, women have to participate in so many things. It created overload.”

Several references were also made to the role that alcohol played in causing violence against women. In recounting stories of violence against themselves or against women whom they knew, the participants frequently made reference to violence occurring after husbands or boyfriends arrived home drunk. In addition, in discussing the situation of young women having unplanned pregnancies or becoming pregnant as a result of rape while attending university, several participants made reference to the role played by alcohol and other drugs:
Participants’ Resistance to Violence and Oppression

The concept of ‘resistance’

The use of the concept of ‘resistance’ to describe women’s responses to their victimization has been evident in the literature for almost twenty years. Gondolf and Fisher’s “Battered Women as Survivors” (1988), a study of 6,000 women in Texas, challenged the then prevailing theory of learned helplessness, popularised by Lenora Walker’s influential “The Battered Woman” (1979) and the Battered Woman Syndrome (1984). Gondolf and Fisher (1988:3) concluded that “battered women demonstrate tremendous resilience, persistence, and strengths which press for a less pathological orientation to ‘victims’.” They suggest that “their experience points to an alternate characterization - one that considers battered women fundamentally as ‘survivors.’”

Liz Kelly, in her work ‘Surviving Sexual Violence’ (1988), defines resisting as “to oppose actively, to fight, to refuse to co-operate with or to submit”, and suggests that it involves women’s refusal to be controlled. She distinguishes between coping and resistance, and between victims and survivors, suggesting that the term ‘victim’ makes invisible the active and positive ways in which women resist, cope and survive. Without this alternative perspective women can be presented as “inevitably passive victims”.

Goodman et al. (2003) propose what they term the ‘Intimate Partner Violence Strategies Index’ to investigate what factors influence women’s use of defensive and resistant strategies and the effectiveness of these strategies in ensuring their safety. The Index was developed as part of a longitudinal study of 406 women in the eastern United States, and divided the help seeking and resistance responses of abused women into six categories: Placating, Resistance, Safety Planning, Legal, Formal and Informal. Allocating each of the responses of the women into one or other of these categories, (e.g. fighting back as ‘Resistance’, and getting help from his employer as ‘Formal’), unsurprisingly they found that women were more likely to use ‘private strategies’, which they subdivided as either placating or resistance, rather than public strategies such as seeking legal or formal help. They found that women progressed from using private strategies to more public and formal strategies as the violence increased, but did not substitute one for the other. However, the strategy that was found to be most helpful by 78.9% of the respondents was talking to someone in a specialized domestic violence service. Their overall conclusion was that public strategies which involved family, friends, or formal agencies were the most helpful in terms of ending the violence.

Researchers such as Wade (1997, 2000, 2007), Coates and Wade (2004), and Todd and Wade (2003) approach the topic of resistance to violence from a less quantitative vantage point. Wade (1997) rejects the traditional Western view where what counts as resistance is usually based on the model of “male-to-male combat” (p. 25) where people fight back physically. This view excludes most forms of resistance. He also rejects the traditional psychoanalytic understanding which sees resistance as failure to comply with professionals’ advice. His understanding of resistance is that it includes “any attempt to imagine or establish a life based on respect and equality” (p. 25). The following sections include extracts from the women’s

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4 Stimulant leaf
5 Locally brewed beer with a high alcohol content.
narratives which describe how women use these ‘resistance’ strategies to envisage such a life of respect and equality.

**The participants’ strategies:**

**Strategies used within an abusive relationship**

Goodman et al (2003) describe the placating category as including strategies that are used to change the behaviour of the abuser “without challenging, and possibly even supporting, his sense of control” (p. 169). In the study being discussed in this report many of the women spoke of the use of these types of strategies. One woman described how being calm with her husband reduces the level of violence to which she may be exposed:

“When he comes in ... if you wait for them with complaint they won’t like it. Therefore, how the wife should behave is, when he comes in, even though she is burning inside, she has to calm down as much as possible. Even if he comes too late, she has to welcome him with peace. However, if she shows anger, it will lead him to rebellion. Therefore, I would say it is better if the wife stays calm.”

This appears to many people as a form of subservience. However, it is as Wade (1997) says, a clever form of resistance, as the woman knows that if she is not calm and peaceful it will lead him to beat her. Other women described similar strategies:

“You can do things to protect yourself. For example, when he comes home hot tempered, prepare with kind of talks to calm him down. Even when you accidentally find out he is angry, you have to warmly welcome him, asking him if he is ok, with a concern.”

Another woman described how she tolerates such abuse:

“He comes home drunk, but I spent the day in the scorching sun and bring home some things for my children. He would many times beat me. I would keep silent and be submissive to him. This shows you that it is the female who endures violence.”

One woman described how she kept the continuing abuse to herself - not telling neighbours or friends:

“I myself, for instance, when my husband hit me, ‘In the name of the Father, I have lived for more than 30 years, people hearing my cry or how would I divorce him now?’ I would ask myself. Hence, I kept it with myself.”

Again, this looks to outsiders like subservience, yet this woman is making a clear decision that she would rather tolerate the abuse than diminish her identity in her community. Maintaining one’s identity is an important part of one’s self esteem, and it often motivates women in their resistant responses to abuse.

The efforts of others to avoid the abuse were different. Some talked about staying out of their husband’s way. For example, one participant described the advice she received from her mother:

“For example, when he is to beat her that she stay outside until he goes to bed and he is calmed down.”
Another woman, however, took a totally different approach, pretending to be sick in order to prevent the violence:

“There was one man every time he came home he just beat her - so she used this way - when he approaches the house she pretended to be sick and the children looked after her, and then he doesn’t beat her.... Women use different means to protect themselves.”

Others used methods that fell into the ‘resistance’ category as identified by Goodman (2003). In this category of strategies women attempt to change the behaviour of the abuser by “challenging his sense of control” (p. 169). For example, some women discussed the need to stand up to husbands who are drinking their income, or not earning enough to support their families. This approach took a number of forms.

“What I would say is, they have to resolve and bring up their children together. The wife should not be dependent on the husband. Based on my experience, we should not be selective of jobs, but keep working.”

Another woman described this strategy as follows:

“Whether it is washing clothes or cleaning teff, I have to add to our income. If the husband asked why I went out, I would tell him: ‘You won’t bring in enough on your own, I have to help you.’ If he told me his wage is too small, I have to work and bring more.”

This is a strategy which addresses the woman’s poverty and her struggle to feed and educate her family, as well as helping to maintain her independence and reclaim some control over her life. Overall, all of these examples demonstrate the range of resistance strategies that women utilize to minimise the abuse they experience from their partners.

**Leaving the relationship and divorce**

However, the most extreme and final strategy is the strategy of ending the relationship and getting a divorce. While, the women’s narratives suggested that there are many complications attached to this strategy, many women discussed the need to divorce abusive husbands:

“Just divorce. I said to myself, if I still have to suffer anyway, it is better to be on my own.”

Another woman expressed it as follows, suggesting that while women might endure the abuse for some time because of the shame they feel, eventually they start to confide in friends and begin thinking of getting a divorce:

“Now a female suffers a lot, she would be ashamed to talk to people. But when she has had enough, she would tell a friend whom she trusts. She would share it as her secret. At the end what will happen is, she will go in to the divorce process. So, the way out mainly is getting a divorce.”

Similarly, another woman, who felt that divorce was not advisable in general, recognised the need for divorce if the abuse gets worse:

“If their problem gets worse, in order to save the woman from beatings and abuses, let her be divorced.”
Another participant spoke about a well educated woman who took a very determined approach, and sought a divorce without outlining the abuse she experienced:

“The source of the fighting was the husband. The wife had her own income, she was a clever woman. When the husband opens his mouth, she never responds. ...They lived together for 25 years. When she was asked what her problem was, she said, ‘I have no problem. Marriage is a contract, I have finished my contract. I want a divorce’. She said no unpleasant things. Later, they were divorced. She was good at her studies. She graduated with a degree and went abroad.”

However, not all women feel able to leave the relationship, due to poverty, fear, or social and family pressures. Many women remained in abusive relationships in order to maintain a home for their children, which is a universal experience for mothers:

“The wife has to be enduring and the husband needs to be tolerant. We should not be divorced. For the sake of our children, in order to bring them to a better life.”

While in Western societies women are encouraged to leave their violent husbands even if only for the emotional and psychological welfare of their children, in Ethiopia this was often not possible. In essence, the women in this study had to consider the basic needs of their children: food and shelter, and then, possibly education. As has been referred to previously, divorcing one’s husband often meant that these basic needs could not be met. Therefore, leaving in order to protect the emotional welfare of children was a luxury that often could not be afforded. However, some women suggested that ending the relationship and returning to their family of origin was one solution to this dilemma:

“Tell her mother, and if her father accepts it, they share with her own family.”

Yet, this quotation also suggests that the woman’s father must agree - again placing power in the male member of the family, thereby taking power and control from both the woman herself and her mother. Others recognised the influence of culture on their parents’ reactions, with one woman recounting the rejection she experienced from her parents when she decided to get divorced. Thus, there was a high price to pay for her resistance to the abuse:

“Even your own parents when you tell them you are in difficulty, that you want a divorce, their reaction is as if nothing has happened. They are more concerned about their reputation. They don’t want to hear the rumours of their daughter’s divorce. Finally, when I couldn’t bear it anymore, I told them that I am getting a divorce, that I can’t keep going. And my parents told me: ‘If you are divorced, you don’t belong to us.’”

Such a deeply held belief system of the sanctity of marriage, and the cultural emphasis on staying together, creates serious barriers for many abused women. According to the participants, these views are also reinforced by church practice:

“It is a really great problem from a religious point of view. If you divorce, the priest will not give the sacraments to you. For example, when you die. This kind of trend should be changed. Many women stay quiet because of their religious views.”

As can be seen from the above extracts, women engage in a variety of strategies to resist abuse. Some women feel strongly that adopting pacifying tactics to minimise the abuse keeps women
safer, and as can be seen above, some of these are very clever strategies. But there appears to be consensus that, in the long run, if these don’t work, divorcing one’s husband is the only way to ensure safety. However, this brings with it family and cultural stigma, and refusal of the sacraments by the Catholic Church. It may also bring great poverty. In addition, in their efforts to leave relationships women do not feel supported by the legal system, as will be seen in the next section.

*Using the legal system*

Seeking support through the formal legal system is a strategy used by many women experiencing violence and abuse. It was evident that this was the case for women in this region too. There were numerous examples of women bringing cases to court or to local authorities. Through these systems they sought maintenance for their children, financial settlements for businesses that were jointly owned, and property rights:

“We advised her to go to the court and make him list their property legally and also to ban him from misappropriating any part of their property without her knowledge. Now this woman was aware of her entitlements to their property…”

“She brought her case to government…”

“I went to the court and filed a charge against him, and they gave me a letter to deliver to him, and that was for him to appear before the police…”

“She came back with an application to sue him…”

Participants recognised the importance of reporting abuse to the relevant authorities. For example, one woman stated:

“The solution is the female herself. When the problem occurs she should not hide it, she should report it to the body concerned.”

A woman who had described the coercive control that she experienced at the hands of her husband, spoke of how she used the legal system:

“But later, I suppose I was too strong. I took legal action against him. I built the house myself with him. We also owned retail shops and a workshop. I carried out the litigation myself. I did not have the capacity to hire a solicitor…”

While these quotations on their own suggest that women used the legal system to try to end the violence, their stories often had a “but” attached to them. Women made efforts to use the legal system but often the outcomes were not favourable. For example, the woman quoted immediately above went on to say:

“I have also seen women in the court that suffered more and were more confused than I was….. Sadly, the verdict from the court was for him to give me 25 Birr each month for the two children. He is rich! I appealed and got 100 Birr for 5 children, 20 Birr each. Thus, there is no justice for wronged women….How can I raise my children with this money while he is accumulating money….There is no justice.”

Dissatisfaction with the legal system was a prominent theme throughout the focus groups. Many women expressed the view that the legal system was not fair or helpful to women.
Barriers to accessing the legal system included not being able to afford a lawyer, being unaware of legal rights and entitlements, or being confused (often because of poor educational levels) by the complexities of the legal system. However, in addition, even when these barriers were overcome participants felt that the legal system was unfair. They had little or no faith in the system and did not expect to receive equality or fairness. In many ways the women felt that using the legal system resulted in further oppression. Frequent reference was made to unfair verdicts, as is evidenced from the quotation above. Another woman gave a different example, also from her own experience:

“I don’t know how they arrived at that kind of decision; the verdict passed by the court was anyway in favour of the husband’s request that he should share half of the retail shop. She was saddened by the decision.”

Such experiences meant that other strategies were often used first. For example, prior to going to court, local tradition allows for mediation by elders in the community. However, the participants did not report good experiences of these processes either. The following is one woman’s experience of mediation.

“Later the elders who mediated were nominated by both sides of husband and wife. They labelled me as rebellious, and sent me off empty handed. I was evicted out of the house. I had no penny, no food to eat, nothing to drink.”

Clearly this woman’s self determination was punished by the elders. She then went to the court, and was given a letter to give to him. She went to the police to help her find him, as he had gone into hiding, but they demanded a fee:

“They told me: ‘Yes, you can take one, but you have to pay a 50 Birr fee.’ I am poor, let alone 50 Birr. I don’t even have 50 cents. I can’t even buy bread. And they said, if you don’t pay, we can’t search for him for you.”

This determined woman eventually tracked down her husband on her own, but her experience in court was no more helpful than her experience of the elders:

“However, even if you go before the court, there is no justice. I have to pay 5 months house rent. His salary is 2,000 Birr. It was decided that he would only give 50 Birr to each of his daughters. I went to the Women’s Association to appeal. It was then raised to 300 Birr. Later on he was intimidating that he would not pay the 300 birr....the elders were mere talk, no practical measure... Therefore, when it comes to women there is no justice. It is said that women’s rights are respected, such things don’t exist.”

Another participant referred to the influence that husbands can have on members of the judiciary:

“When you come to justice, the husbands have contacts with members of the justice system either through bribes or other means. Then the mother remains with her problem.”

Such distrust and lack of faith in the legal system disempowers women who look to the legal system for redress, justice, and support, for themselves and their children. Such a lack of trust diminishes women’s options and in many cases may force them to stay with abusive husbands, thus acting as a cause of continued abuse.
Seeking and receiving help from family and friends

As well as using personal strategies to prevent or address the abuse that they were experiencing, the participants’ accounts also suggested that they sometimes sought help from friends and family members. For example, as was mentioned previously, one participant talked about the strategy used by a lady she knew:

“She is frequently attacked by her husband and she always cries out to get help from their neighbours.”

The participants also told of situations when they themselves had intervened in order to support women within their communities who were experiencing violence. One woman talked about a neighbour who was forced to sleep outside after she and her husband had an argument. The participant intervened:

“I went there after work, and I saw her husband drove her out and she is sleeping outside. I wanted to resolve their conflict and took 3 people with me. He didn’t come until 9pm in the evening. We waited and he finally came... While we were discussing, in the middle he said: ‘I have given her a thick duvet.’ I said: ‘The duvet you have is one, I know it, and it is on the bed with you, I saw it.’ Later we argued. As a result he threatened to kill her. He broke the door, two of us were fighting. He hit me. Then we called the police....We called the police and went there, and stayed up to 12am midnight. ...I tried to explain myself that I have done nothing wrong, that I was trying to mediate. The police made peace in between and the couple were sent home. She settled and spent the night with him. And what happened was, I was hated as a result while they made peace. Such things also exist.”

Sometimes help was given by the community even when it was not necessarily sought. One of the major impacts of intimate partner violence reported by the women in this study is HIV infection. As discussed above, the women’s husbands/partners engage in many non marital affairs, and the consequences of this for women is that they become infected with the virus, without realising it, and their unborn children may also contract the disease. The women reported a high level of stigma in discussing this with family or friends. In addition, they often could not afford to pay for medicines. However, the participants reported that they sometimes received support from friends and neighbours who collected money to pay for medicines:

“Then, after, when the people around us realised that my mother is HIV positive, they collected money to buy her medicine”.

Intervening and encouraging women to get health checkups is another way women support one another:

“Next step would be to give her advice to undergo a health check for HIV.”

Once women are diagnosed, they need a great deal of social support and help, as well as financial opportunities. As was discussed earlier, a HIV diagnosis can result in despair and social isolation which require a number of strategies for intervention. These will be discussed in the final section of this report.
Section 3: Recommendations

The sections below set out some key recommendations for the DOC and for VLM. The recommendations are primarily based on the suggestions made by the participants themselves, although a number of recommendations are also made by the authors arising from their analysis of the data and their knowledge of services elsewhere. The authors are willing to discuss these recommendations with VLM and the DOC or provide support in implementing them, should either be needed.

As the study did not involve an analysis of the services already existing in the area, the authors acknowledge that some of what is suggested may already be available within the local communities.

(A) Recommendations for the Daughters of Charity

Supporting victims of rape and sexual violence

In discussing ways to support girls and women who have been raped, a number of participants suggested that these crimes should be reported to the police. For example:

“Next step should be to give her an advice to undergo a medical check for HIV, so that if she is found positive she can start medication early. Afterwards, we have to help her to get the abuser arrested. Otherwise he would rape other women and continue to commit similar crimes.”

As stated previously rape appeared to be common in the countryside, and “not considered a taboo”. When girls become pregnant as a result of such rape they often migrate to cities, and may enter the sex trade as a result. They may work on the streets and are again vulnerable to rape. They may accept a proposal of marriage as they may see this as one way of being financially supported. Many women talked about girls leaving education as a result of early pregnancy, (which may or may have been the result of rape).

“These students, once they have their baby they start to feel depressed and become incompetent in their education and finally quit university. Those who quit university mostly work as daily labourers or stay idle at home.”

This pattern contributes to the alienation of women from education, leaving them more vulnerable to abuse and dependent on their partners.

Recommendations:

Victims of rape need to have access to counselling and psychosocial support. Support services should be well advertised so that victims are aware of their existence.

Community child care provision is needed in order to enable mothers, including victims of rape, to continue in education. This would contribute to empowering women and enabling them to find better paid jobs if they are divorced or deserted by their husbands or by the father of their children. It would help to redress the economic imbalance between men and women, thus reducing women’s vulnerability to abuse.
Providing legal aid to young women to support and enable them to take their rapists to court would also diminish the immunity which seems to adhere to rape and kidnapping. This is discussed further below.

The DOC and other advocacy and women’s groups need to work together to lobby the government to ensure that marital rape becomes a criminal offence in Ethiopia.

Addressing issues relating to family planning

The participants discussed their lack of choice regarding whether or not they have sexual intercourse with their husbands or whether or not they use contraceptives. This control that men have within intimate relationships results in women having more children than they can support or wish to have. This further increases the poverty experienced by families and leaves the women increasingly dependent on their husbands in order to provide for their children.

Recommendations:

Facilitate women to access education about family planning and contraception.

Facilitate women to receive contraception free of charge.

Addressing the problem of HIV/AIDS

The participants outlined a number of ways in which women could be supported by friends, neighbours, the community and formal organizations. As mentioned above, neighbours providing money to women to buy medicines for HIV is a practical way they can help women overcome the difficulties their illness and their poverty causes. Women also discussed the shame and stigma attached to having contracted HIV. Addressing this issue would appear to be an important way women can keep themselves safe by feeling they can attend local clinics and hospitals and not keep the illness a secret. One participant described the feelings of a woman who had been diagnosed as HIV positive:

“She was ashamed. There is fear. When we do have a chronic illness, we are ashamed of revealing it for fear of what people might say. There is fear.

Keeping such a serious and treatable illness a secret to avoid stigma ensures that the disease will spread further, causing further distress, suffering, and early death. According to the participants, there is also the belief that

“...physically fit people are free of HIV. Therefore, I would suggest that it would have been better to undertake frequent medical check ups.”

Further education on the issue of HIV, how it is transmitted, and how it can be treated would appear to be necessary to reduce this level of stigma. It was also suggested that as well as counselling, women with HIV need to develop skills to support themselves:

“In addition, it would have been good if these women living with HIV have their own places to train and work together in the fields if they are interested....I suggest establishing a centre by the Government or in collaboration with other humanitarian...
organizations that give services exclusively for the victims...These centres can be used to teach and train different skills as well as counselling service centres for victims.”

While there is certainly a need for skills development amongst women to allow them to be self sufficient, this participant’s suggestion could result in a type of ghettoisation occurring, whereby women living with HIV train and work together and thus do not interact with other members of society. There was evidence that this was what some women wanted:

“We will be isolated anyway. We should feel free, we will stay on our own, no hassle. People will eventually know. One day they will officially know. We won’t feel free by grouping with them.”

However, others recognised the dangers of this kind of approach and felt strongly that people with HIV needed to mix with those who did not have the disease. One young ten year old girl was refusing to take the medication and not mixing with her friends at school. Her mother was advised by the teaching staff not to tell the girl that she was HIV positive. Such social stigma and the acceptance of this by those with HIV, accentuates their social isolation and prevents others from being tested and taking medication. This was recognised by many participants:

“To help them, the society needs to mix with them. They should not be neglected and made feel isolated from the society....Hence, they need to get continuous counselling to mix with the society and follow regular medication.”

Recommendations:

Further education on HIV is needed in order to increase understanding of the virus within the community and hence help to reduce stigma and prevent transmission.

Counselling, support and social networks are needed for those who have been diagnosed. If possible, and through consultation with the community, these social networks should include people who are ill and those who are not.

Facilitating access to and support in using the legal system

The women, as discussed above, described their lack of faith in the legal system. Yet, despite the injustices that the participants saw within the system, they continued to feel that it was important to bring cases of abuse to the attention of the authorities:

“When you come to the justice system, the rights put in place in writing are not put into practice. However, we have to be clever and smart to make use of it. What make it worse is, the right of women put in papers is not there. And the society needs to have the mentality ‘a maltreatment happened to one can happen to me.’ There is no justice for females.”

“The females have to bring to the court the males who commit offences against them.”

However, women will often need a considerable level of support in bringing cases to court. This might come in the form of educational support which educates women in relation to the court system and the legal process. It might come in the form of financial support that ensures that economic circumstances do not prevent women from going to court. It might also come in
the form of emotional support whereby someone is able to accompany women to court. There was evidence from the participants’ stories that these forms of support were already in place to some degree. Increased access to them is essential if more women are to utilise the legal system.

“How we can help females who experienced violence is, firstly, they have to believe in themselves. Secondly, in the process of sharing of domestic possessions, when a litigation arises, the female has no knowledge of the law. Firstly, she needs legal counselling. Secondly, financial or material assistance. Now, for instance, when I was taking legal action, one female legal assistant helped me for the 6 full years for free, she was a huge support. If I had to hire, imagine how much I would have to pay. Up to now she writes me letters for free, there is also another man, they help me two of them together. So, if there is such kind of assistance ... One female when she goes in to litigation process, because she wouldn’t have the capacity, she might also have to look after her children, she needs free legal support. And I think this is an important support.”

Recommendations:

Women need to be organized, informed and able to confront the legal system with confidence. This requires considerable education and access to free legal aid. The DOC could liaise with local legal firms to provide this education and to provide free legal aid for those most in need. Alternatively, innovative ways could be found to fundraise for legal costs. These might include establishing partnerships with Irish legal firms, whereby the Irish firms could sponsor particular cases.

A legal and court accompaniment service to support women who are taking their partners or abusers to court is also needed. The provision of such legal support is essential if women are to feel free to utilize the system to gain justice and equity.

Challenging inequality

All of the focus groups discussed the issue of marital violence in great detail. As described previously, one of the groups discussed in detail the manner in which women are accepted as second class citizens from the moment they are born. Their narratives suggested that as women they reinforced the existing inequalities by treating their daughters differently from their sons. As such, the participants felt that they needed to start changing this practice and claiming their rights as women:

“Our husbands have violated us, but we start to violate our daughters at home. The trouble we are afraid of, she may not be a good girl if she gets freedom ... we assume if she gets freedom she will have sex or expose herself to bad things. We are not claiming our rights. This indicates that we never give opportunities to our daughters.”

Recommendation:

Education programmes on treating girls and boys as equal, with equal human rights and equal rights to education and safety, must be established in order to combat violence against women.
Establishing support organisations and programmes

Participants suggested the need for training and counselling services:

“Provision of professional trainings and counselling services for free, I would also recommend to give them capacity building services.”

“After the professional training was given ... the body who gives the training or the trainer has to give money to those females who truly faced violence by forming either an association or a group. Training on its own is not enough: there should be an arrangement whereby they can put the training into practice.”

These participants seem to be referring to the need to up-skill women as well as to provide them with money to establish an association to support women who have experienced violence. Many countries now have such organizations, such as Women’s Aid and local refuges, as well as violence against women campaigns.

Recommendations:

The development of support organisations and programmes, at local (and, eventually, national) level is essential if the culture of immunity for violence against women is to be combated.

Given that women often feel unable to leave their homes because they have nowhere else to live with their children, the establishment of a local refuge to temporarily accommodate those experiencing violence would be a welcome development.

Mobilising the courage and determination of women

The stories that were told in the groups suggested that women displayed remarkable courage and resilience in the face of extreme challenges. In attempting to tackle the problems of violence and oppression it is this courage and resilience that needs to be mobilised. As one participant stated:

“We just have to believe in ourselves, we should stand up and say to ourselves ‘I am special’.”

Another stated:

“Women need to be bold. For instance, when I see my neighbour wronged (beaten by her husband), if I have the capacity to report, I have to report it... As a female I have to cooperate. If possible, I have to get people arrested. And I have to help her get up, take her for medical treatment and courageously bring them to the court.”

It is evident from the strategies that were previously discussed that women often supported one another. In addition, it was evident in the group that the women were happy to be open about their feelings and their experiences and indeed that they were grateful to have the opportunity to talk.
Recommendation:

A support group for women experiencing violence within the community should be established by the DOC. This would be a very inexpensive and cost effective way of supporting women and mobilising their own internal resources. As well as providing support to one another, members of such a group could engage in awareness raising and advocacy campaigns aimed at preventing violence against women in society. The group facilitator needs to be appropriately trained.

Preventing women’s dependency on men

Given the huge role played by poverty in both causing and maintaining abusive circumstances, it is essential that work to combat such poverty continues. Economic support is already being provided by the DOC in their work with women. This was referred to a number of times by the participants.

“When you are especially empty handed the abuse gets worse. When I was living in such condition, one day Sr. X saw me. She met me when I was fetching firewood with my children. She asked me and I told her all. She gave me 300 Birr. Additionally she offered to take 25Kg of teff every month. I was also working, and kept looking after my children. Thanks to the help from the nuns, Daughters of Charity, I am able to look after my children.”

Such practical and timely support was clearly appreciated by the participant, and other stories of such support were also recounted:

“Thanks to Sr. X I can’t thank the nuns enough, Daughters of Charity. Sr. X helped me and my son got registered. He is now in his 2nd year. Thanks to them I am sending my children to school”.

The use of income generating projects and micro credit systems which enable women to set up small businesses to support themselves are other practical ways to support women who are being abused or who wish to leave an abuser.

“But if women organize themselves to form an association, the Nuns would provide loans to the needy interest free. The repayment process is, it starts 3 months after the business is activated and then it continues every month. So, if you grab the opportunity, the female can rear her children.”

Recommenendation:

Provision of financial support in terms of cash payments will continue to act as a vital lifeline for women experiencing abuse or for women wishing to leave violent relationships. Increased provision of income generating programmes and micro credit is essential in reducing women’s dependency on men or dependency on cash payments.

Engaging men in discussions regarding violence against women

In order to change attitudes towards women and prevent violence against women occurring within the community, services need to engage with men. Given that this research only
included women, further research could be undertaken to hear the views of men. This would provide a more complete understanding about gender based violence and particularly about its causes.

**Recommendations:**

Conduct further research or facilitated discussions with men to explore the issue of gender based violence from their perspective.

Involve male staff members and/or local men in the delivery of any awareness raising campaigns, particularly campaigns aimed at boys and young men.

**Providing pre-marriages courses**

The findings suggest that many couples married without knowing each other very well and that women made decisions to marry based on cultural expectations and reasons of financial security.

**Recommendation:**

The DOC, in conjunction with churches should offer pre-marriage courses. Couples getting married should be asked to attend these courses which would encourage both parties to consider the reasons that they are marrying. The courses could include input and discussion on various relevant topics, including communication, roles within the marriage, family planning, and intimate partner violence.

**Providing training in conflict resolution**

The findings also suggest that conflicts within relationships and between families were often resolved through violence. Given that children may grow up in violent home environments they learn to resolve conflict in this way. Providing alternative conflict resolution techniques is therefore important.

**Recommendations:**

Provide support and training for children, young people, and couples in relation to conflict resolution. This would provide adults and children with ways of resolving difficulties that do not rely on violence. Such training could be provided jointly by suitably trained male and female staff members.

If needed, provide training and support in relation to anger management.

**Providing training to the Daughters of Charity and to staff members**

The DOC themselves and their staff members play a key role within their communities. They have regular contact with local men and women through the various projects that they run. These include women’s projects, medical clinics, street children’s projects, and youth clubs. Given this important and influential role, it is essential that staff are adequately trained in relation to gender based violence. Otherwise, they may unintentionally perpetuate the abuse by not recognising it or responding appropriately.
Recommendation:

Gender based violence training should be provided to all DOC staff. The training should explore the types of violence and oppression as well the impact and the causes. In addition, staff should be trained in recognising signs of abuse and in responding to these signs in an appropriate way. Familiarisation with local services is also important so that staff can refer women to these services.

(B) Recommendations for the Vincentian Lay Missionaries

Funding for DOC projects

If the DOC decide to take on some of the recommendations listed above, they will need funding to set up various projects and programmes or to expand on their existing services. VLM may be able to play an important role in helping the Daughters to secure some of this funding.

Recommendation:

Work with the DOC to apply for funding (from Misean Cara and other organisations) to establish or expand projects relevant to the prevention of gender based violence or to establish or expand projects that will support victims of such violence.

Awareness raising

VLM could make an important contribution by raising awareness about gender based violence in Ethiopia amongst its members and amongst those interested in the organisation.

Recommendation:

Include information about these research findings in forthcoming VLM communications such as newsletters or by including information on VLM’s website or facebook page. A seminar on the issues raised in the research could also be organised for VLM members, past volunteers, those interested in volunteering in the future, and the general public in order to raise awareness.

Selection and preparation of volunteers

During the course of their placements VLM volunteers are likely to become aware of the unequal gender relations that exist within Ethiopian society. As such they need adequate preparation. Such preparation will help to raise awareness of the complexity of gender inequality and gender based violence and will help the volunteers to understand the situations of many of the women that they will meet. In addition, it will provide them with insight into the home environments within which many of their young students may be living, thus allowing them to have a better understanding of the difficulties that they may face and the impact that these difficulties may have.
Recommendations:

In selecting volunteers, attitudes towards women should be assessed as far as is possible. It is important that VLM does not in any way reinforce the gender inequalities that exist in Ethiopia by sending volunteers who may not understand or believe in gender equality.

Gender inequality should be discussed within the training that is provided to volunteers prior to their placements. As a basis for this discussion, VLM volunteers could be provided with a summary of these research findings. VLM volunteers should be provided with guidance in relation to how they might respond in a culturally appropriate way to situations of gender inequality or gender based violence that they encounter.

The role of the volunteer while on placement

VLM volunteers could play vital roles in supporting the DOC in their efforts to prevent gender based violence and support those affected by it. Given the sensitive and risky nature of domestic violence situations it is essential that volunteers are suitably trained and have an adequate understanding of gender based violence in Ethiopia. Many VLM volunteers have professional backgrounds (for example, teachers, social workers, health professionals) that qualify them to be involved in different aspects of work related to this area. Even when volunteers do not have the relevant training, they can play a key role through the attitudes that they themselves display and voice during their time on placement.

Recommendations:

When developing role descriptions, consideration should be given to the role that volunteers could play in preventing gender based violence or in supporting those who have experienced violence.

Suitably trained volunteers could work with local staff to raise awareness amongst children and young people about gender equality and human rights. Intensive, short-term, awareness-raising programmes could take place while volunteers are on placement. The involvement of males who could act as role models would enhance the effectiveness of such programmes.

If services for women experiencing violence are set up by the DOC, volunteers and former volunteers could support these services (e.g. child care facilities, refuges) by fund raising for them or by working in these services while on placement.

Given the importance of women’s income generating projects in preventing violence, further thought should go into the roles that VLM volunteers can play in supporting these projects while on placement and after return. These roles could include supporting the projects in the creation of products that will sell well in Ireland and facilitating the projects to sell these products, for example, through establishing links with retailers in Ireland or through the creation of websites.

Engaging volunteers upon their return

VLM is committed to engaging returned volunteers in its work. Returned volunteers could play a very important role in relation to tackling the issue of gender based violence in Ethiopia.
Recommendations:

Former volunteers could work with the DOC to apply for funding to establish services for women who are experiencing violence. Their role could involve writing or proof reading project proposals or passing on information about funding opportunities to the DOC and to VLM.

By working in partnership with the DOC, former volunteers could also be involved in developing resources for awareness raising initiatives in Tigray and in other parts of Ethiopia.

The issues of gender inequality and gender based violence should be incorporated into any education programmes that VLM or its former volunteers are running in Irish schools or third level institutions.
Section 5: Concluding Comments

This research involved an exploration of women’s perspectives in relation to gender based violence and oppression in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. The findings make for grim reading. The women who participated in the focus groups spoke openly about the issues they and their counterparts faced in their localities. As has been described, these included rape, physical and emotional abuse, unequal division of labour, unfaithful marriages, the transmission of HIV, poverty, unfair legal proceedings, lack of support from their communities, families and church if they wish to divorce their husbands and lack of education. The impact of these issues range from the economic and physical to the emotional and psychological, with all members of the family being affected. The women attributed the causes of violence and oppression to a myriad of reasons including lack of education and awareness, and inequality. The role played by poverty was particularly noteworthy. It was evident that many women became caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and abuse, whereby their efforts to meet their children’s basic needs meant that they felt unable to leave abusive men on whom they were dependent.

Tackling such difficult realities requires diverse and innovative cross community responses which engage with men and women, young and old. It requires awareness raising programmes, practical training and support. The establishment of organizations to support abused and raped women, providing counselling, training and economic support to enable them to move on with their lives, was suggested by all of the groups. The development of crèches to enable young girls to continue their education would enable them to become equal partners with their husbands, and to provide for their families if they needed to get divorced because of abuse. In addition, the provision of competent legal aid to support women taking abusers to court is essential in order to allow them to utilize the system to their benefit. Providing education and support for women infected with HIV/AIDS was discussed at great length in the groups and suggests that this is an issue of great concern to the participants.

While VLM and the DOC have an important role to play in tackling the issue of gender based violence and oppression, an effective response requires the support of the churches to which women are affiliated and the cooperation of school authorities, as well as the involvement of other community based organisation. In relation to churches, the women identified the refusal of sacraments to those who divorce their husbands as problematic and the findings also raise questions about the Catholic Church’s stance on contraception. In general, churches and church organisations have the capacity to play a very positive and influential role in preventing and responding to gender based violence. This role can involve the education of boys, girls, men and women as to the human rights of all parties, the condemnation of abuse and rape, within and outside of marriage, and the challenging of attitudes towards the respective roles of men and women within society. For their part, school authorities can help to eliminate abuse by working in partnership with local organisations (such as the DOC) in developing awareness raising programmes, in supporting girls to continue their education and in making girls aware of the issue of abuse within relationships and their rights in this regard. Educating both girls and boys as to the equal rights of both men and women and encouraging young men to respect the rights and freedoms of young women is key to preventing violence and abuse. If this education happens within different settings the message will become clearer and attitudes will begin to shift.

A range of responses is required if the injustices and abuses faced by women in Tigray are to be challenged and ultimately stopped. Most of the strategies listed here were suggested by the
women themselves and would be utilized by them. Some of these responses are already being implemented by the DOC and by other organisations within the areas in which the research took place, but may need to be strategized to specifically target abused women and provide them with the support they need, as well as to confront the issue within society. Finally, the findings of this study need to be fed back to the participants themselves so that they can be mobilised and empowered to take action.

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List of References


