

Section 3: Experience of abuse

The study explored four types of abuse or violence that might occur between partners. These include economic, emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Women were asked about their experiences of abuse over their lifetime. When detailed answers were required about the nature of the abuse, they were asked to think about what they regarded as the most serious incident.

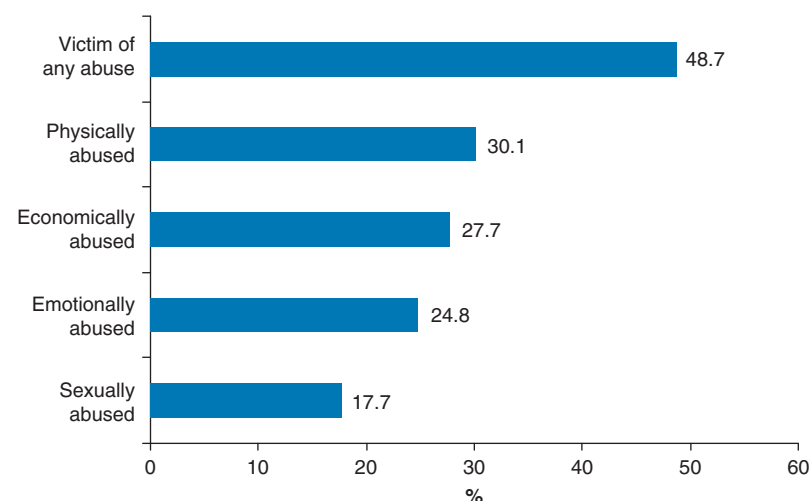
When compared, physical abuse was the most common form of intra-household gender violence, with 30% of women interviewed reporting some form of physical abuse by a partner. This was followed by economic abuse, with more than one quarter (28%) of women reporting that their partner had economically abused them, usually through withholding money. One quarter (25%) of those interviewed said they had been emotionally abused, and just under one fifth (18%) reported that their partner had sexually abused them.

The high percentage of women reporting sexual abuse is somewhat surprising at first glance. However, a number of factors might contribute to this. Respondents were asked about a range of detailed acts that are considered to constitute abuse. Many of these acts might not, within certain societies, have been considered abusive practices. Indeed, many might be considered acceptable and 'normal' within the bounds of a marriage or intimate relationship.

Anecdotal evidence encountered during the design of the study suggested that, in fact, a man who does not project an air of 'entitlement' and 'ownership' of his wife might be suspected of infidelity and the scenario might suggest that something in the relationship was awry.

Similarly, the high occurrence of physical abuse in relation to the other forms of abuse might also reflect an acceptance of men's role in 'correcting' and 'disciplining' women. A recent study undertaken by GTZ in Malawi highlights the role of men as authoritarian patriarchs who have the right to discipline their wives through beatings should their wives not fulfil their

Figure 2: Overall experience of intimate partner abuse within the household



expected roles, which include the provision of sex on demand, as well as domestic chores such as the preparation of dinner.³

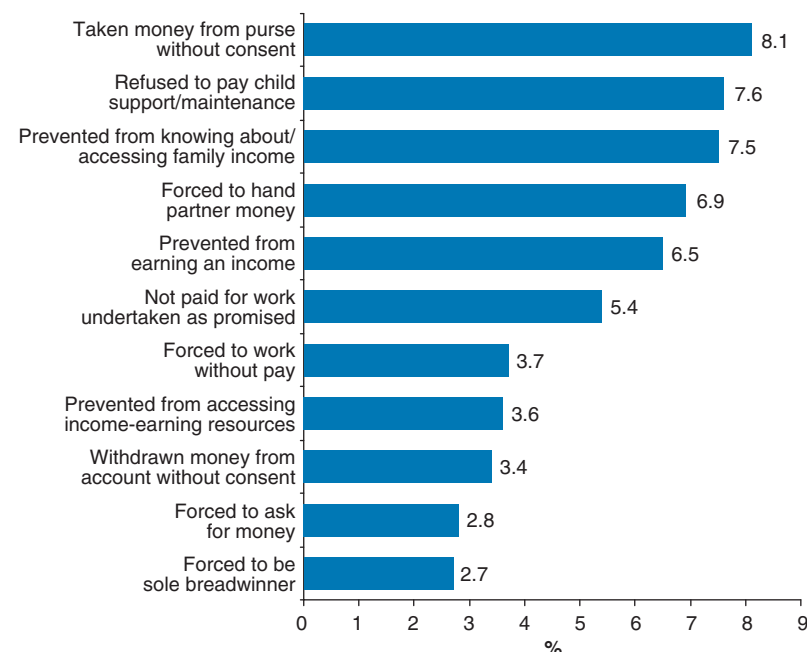
The combination of all these types of abuse means that a total of just under one half (49%) of women, or one out of two, have experienced some form of abuse by their intimate partner – a percentage that far exceeds any other estimates provided up till now.⁴

A more detailed analysis of the different types of abuse allows for various nuances to be identified.

Economic abuse

Economic abuse was defined as any act, within the confines of a marital or household relationship, in which one partner forces the other to hand them money; to ask others for money, food or clothes; prevents one partner

Figure 3: Experience of economic abuse



from having access to, or knowing about the family income; or earning an income themselves; or accessing any resources that might enable them to earn an income. Also included was any situation in which one partner forced the other to be the sole breadwinner when that responsibility could be shared; or took money from the other without their consent, including withdrawing money from their partner's bank account without their partner's knowledge; refrained from paying their partner for work undertaken; forced their partner to work without being paid, or refused to pay monthly child maintenance or support.

"My husband slapped me because I asked him to give me money to buy household items. He told me that it is him who works so he has the freedom to use the money on whatsoever he thinks. I'm suffering yet he spends money on beer and other women."

³ GTZ, Combating Gender Based Violence Project, Workshop Report on the presentation of the findings of the baseline study on gender based violence carried out in Rumphi, Dedza and Mulanje, 14-15 July 2003.

⁴ P Kakhongwe, *Literature Review on Gender Based Violence in Malawi*, unpublished report compiled for the GTZ Combating Gender Based Violence Project, 2004.

Women in Malawi tended to be very aware of all of these actions, and almost without exception did not view them as acceptable. A maximum of 2%, or 76 women, considered any one of these actions to be acceptable. The few exceptions that did occur were justified when the partner needed all available money to support the family (24%), or when one partner was away and money was needed urgently (16%). Another 10% of those who condoned this behaviour reported that if the partner had no money of their own, these actions would be acceptable.

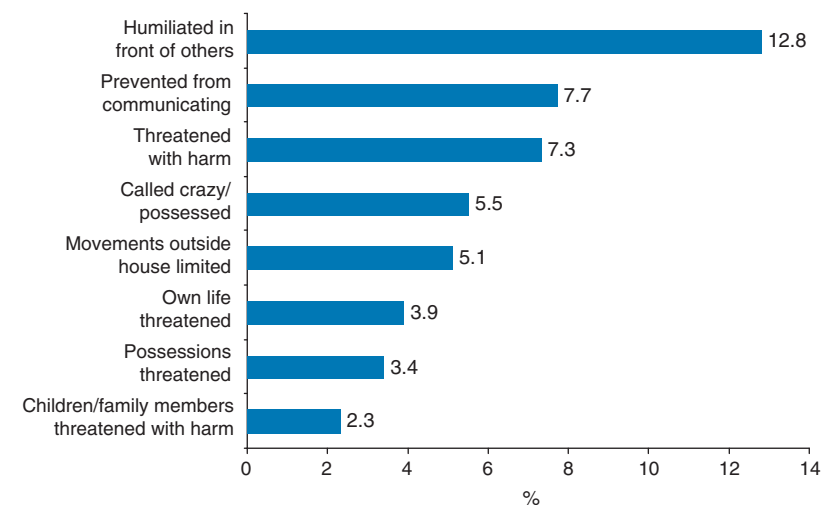
Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse was defined as any act in which a partner prevents the other from communicating with other people; limits their movements outside the house (after the age of 18 years); humiliates the other in front of people; calls the other crazy, possessed, or threatens to take them to a mental hospital/facility; threatens to hurt them, or harm their children or other family members; threatens to damage any of their possessions; or threatens to take their life, or that of their children. Finally, emotional abuse was also considered to include instances in which one party might threaten to commit suicide if their partner did not do what they wanted.

As with financial abuse, women tended to be very aware of what constituted emotional abuse, and to find any such behaviour unacceptable, particularly within the confines of a household relationship. Such behaviour was in fact less likely to be considered acceptable, and only 0.7%, or 26 respondents, thought that it was acceptable to threaten to hurt one's partner. This was the form of emotional abuse most likely to be considered acceptable, followed by threats to damage property (0.6%) and threats to take their partner's life (0.5%). For those few who did consider any of these behaviours to be acceptable, the most common was within an environment when the partner was jealous (31.5%), or when the wife was communicating with gossipers and men (26%).

Despite this widespread awareness of what constitutes emotional abuse, a relatively large percentage of the female respondents still said they were subject to such behaviour. Most commonly, more than one tenth (13%) of women reported that their partner humiliated them in front of others, while

Figure 4: Experience of emotional abuse



8% (or 272 respondents) had been prevented from communicating with others outside their home by their partner, and fractionally fewer (7%) had been threatened with harm (Figure 4).

Physical abuse

This is the form of abuse that is most commonly attached, in the public's mind, to gender violence, in part perhaps because it is often the most visible. Physical abuse is by definition violent.

The definition provided to respondents included any incidents in which their partner might have thrown something at them that could harm them; pushed or shoved them; twisted their arm; pulled their hair; slapped or hit them; kicked, or punched them; choked, strangled or suffocated them; hit them with some object; burned or scalded them; used a knife or gun on them; or physically harmed any children or other members of the family.

Perhaps given the violent nature of this form of abuse, levels of acceptance of such acts were the lowest of the three types of abuse already considered. Only 108, or 3%, of the women interviewed felt that it was acceptable for their partner to hit or slap them; followed by 55 women (2%) who thought it was acceptable for their partner to kick them. Less than 0.5%

"I was asking him about his love relationship with a certain lady so instead of answering me he started slapping me."

"Each time my husband is not in good mood, he just shouts at me and if I ask, he beats me with anything, and last time he twisted my arm up to the point of going for x-ray."

"My husband was coming from the bar where he went to drink beer. When he arrived home he rung the bicycle bell, but unfortunately I was busy cooking and I did not hear that. He rushed to me and asked me why I did not welcome him; before I explained, he started beating me."

"One of our children had an incident of breaking a mud pot and broke it while the relish was there. As a result the pot was destroyed and the relish was on the floor. So my husband beat him."

"I went to draw water and because there were a lot of people, I came late and he twisted my arm until my arm was dislocated."

"We went to the stadium and my team was performing better than his so he was getting bored as I was supporting my team. So after the match, my team won the game and I hugged one of the players but my husband got angry and started punching me."

"As I was staying with my husband I went to attend a church meeting but when I came back, my husband beat me up and burnt all my belongings."

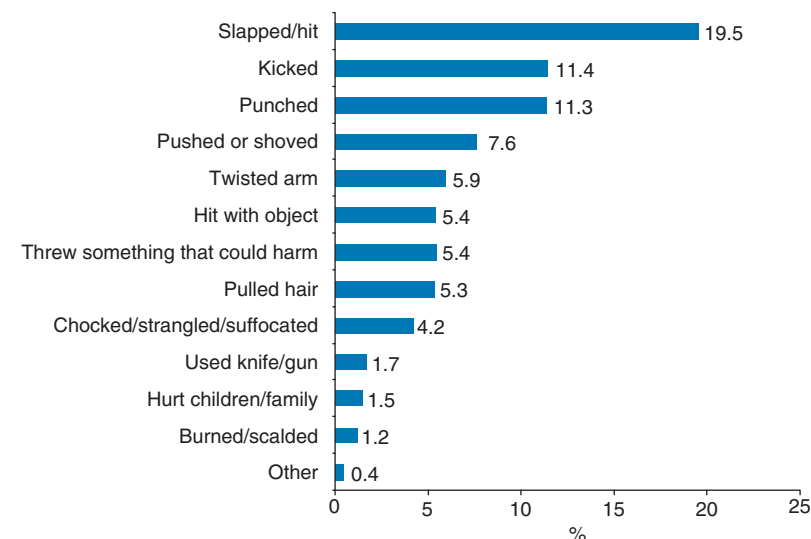
"My husband had two wives so my husband was supposed to stay at one home for one week and it happened that he stayed at the other wife's house for two weeks and I went there and quarreled with my co-wife. My husband was annoyed and he beat me."

"My husband heard that I was having a relationship with another man. When he asked me about it, I refused [to say anything] and we started quarreling until he slapped me."

"My husband refused to give me money for the maize mill. I went to seek causal work, and since I came late he started punching me."

"My husband cut my ear because I asked him about his secret affairs."

Figure 5: Experience of physical abuse

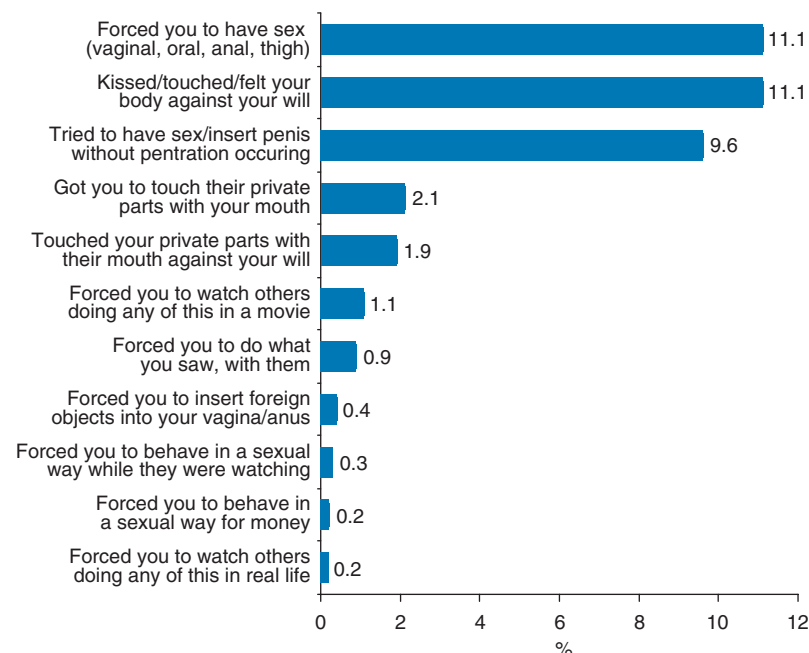


of women thought that any of the other actions falling under the definition of physical abuse was acceptable.

Of those women who did think that any of these behaviours was acceptable, the most common condition under which it was deemed all right was when they were being disrespectful or disobedient towards their husbands (43%). Another fifth (21%) of women who thought any of these behaviours was acceptable considered it so if their partner was angry.

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse included any acts in which the partner tried, or succeeded in kissing, touching or feeling the respondent's body against their will; tried or succeeded in having sex, or in inserting his penis into places the respondent was not happy with, without vaginal penetration taking place; have any other form of sex (including penetrative, oral, anal or thigh) against their will; touched the respondent's private parts with their mouth against their will; forced the respondent to touch their private parts with their mouth; forced the respondent to watch any of the above in a film, or

Figure 6: Experience of sexual abuse

to watch others doing any of the above, against their will. It also included any instances in which the partner forced the respondent to insert foreign objects into her vagina or anus against her will; forced them to behave in a sexual way with another person while they were watching; or forced the respondent to behave in a sexual way with another person for money or any other form of payment, against their will.

This definition was intended to be as broad as possible, and to encompass any and all forms of sexual behaviour that individuals might be forced into against their will, rather than merely confined to the 'traditional' interpretation of sex as penetrative or oral sexual intercourse.

This broad definition highlighted the fact that many of the acts that are usually considered to be abusive, are seen as more acceptable within the confines of a relationship. In total 5% of women interviewed thought it was acceptable for their partner to force them to have non-penetrative sex (i.e. when a man tries to insert his penis into places they are not happy

with, without actual penetration taking place), or to force them to have penetrative sex, whether vaginal, anal, oral or thigh sex.

Further, various forms of sexual abuse were more common than others, or at least reported as such. More than one tenth (11%) of the women reported that their partner, be it a husband or boyfriend, had at some stage forced them to have penetrative sex, or had tried to touch them, kiss them or feel their body against their will. One tenth (10%) said their partner had tried to have non-penetrative sex with them against their wishes. Three percent of the respondents reported multiple types of sexual abuse. This means that just over one third (35%) of women in Malawi experienced some form of sexual assault in their lifetime. This may have occurred with their current partner or spouse, or with a previous boyfriend or husband.⁵

There is clearly a dichotomy between what Malawian women view as abuse, and their acceptance of certain behaviours on the one hand, and what in practice they are subjected to, on the other. Questions around whether they think of the above behaviours as abusive, contrasted with their actual experience of those behaviours, shows how little control they have over their own bodies, and the experiences they are forced to endure.

⁵ It should be noted that as with the other types of abuse under examination, respondents were asked specifically about incidents within the confines of an intimate relationship.