

Article

Leaving a Violent Child Marriage: Experiences of Adult Survivors in Uganda

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Abstract: Violence against women and girls remains a major public health threat the world over. A significant amount of violence experienced by women is perpetrated by their intimate partners. Moreover, the risk of experiencing intimate partner violence is amplified for women and girls who get married before turning 18. However, there is little documented information on how they escape such violent relationships. This article provides insight into the factors that help survivors of child marriage to leave violent relationships. It is based on in-depth interviews with 26 Ugandan women who married before they were 18. Four main factors helped child marriage survivors to leave violent unions: (1) having a secure base to return to; (2) reaching a tipping point in the relationship; (3) financial independence; and (4) intervention of a significant other. The significance of some factors varied with the age of the survivor at the point of leaving. It is concluded that parental support is a key facilitative factor for leaving violent relationships in the context of child marriage within a low resource setting. Interventions to promote positive parenting may significantly contribute to minimising the proportions of girls trapped in violent unions and incidences of child marriage in the long run.

Keywords: child marriage; girls; intimate partner violence; leaving violent relationships; survivor; Uganda; women

1. Introduction

Violence against women and girls remains a major public health threat the world over. It is estimated that 35% of women worldwide experience either physical and/or sexual violence during their lifetime (WHO 2017). A significant amount of violence experienced by women and girls is that perpetrated by their intimate partners. According to the WHO (2017), almost one third of women who have been in a relationship in their lifetime have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of their intimate partner. Global and country-specific evidence shows that males are the main perpetrators of the intimate partner violence (IPV) meted out to women. For instance, a systematic review of global and regional evidence found that close to 40% of all murdered women were killed by a male intimate partner (WHO 2013). In the USA, 99% of the IPV against women reported in 2008 was perpetrated by men (National Data on Intimate Partner Violence 2012). In Uganda, demographic and health survey data of 2011 cite men as the main perpetrators of IPV (UBOS and ICF 2012).

The risk of experiencing IPV is amplified for women and girls who get married or into union before turning 18. Global statistics show that girls who marry before the age of 15 are 50% more likely to face physical or sexual violence from a partner (Girls Not Brides 2020). An analysis of data from a population-based survey in Ethiopia found that girls who married before the age of 15 were

almost four times more likely to have experienced forced first marital sex compared to those who married at 18 and 19 years (Erulkar 2013). In Bangladesh, a longitudinal multilevel analysis of how the community prevalence of very early child marriage influenced a woman's risk of IPV found that almost 70% of the women who reported experiencing physical abuse had married before the age of 18 (Yount et al. 2016). Demographic and health survey data of 34 low and middle income countries outside South Asia show that incidences of physical and sexual IPV were higher among women who married as children (29%) compared with those who married as adults (20%). Similarly, a randomised controlled trial of an IPV prevention programme in rural Cote d'Ivoire found that all forms of IPV were higher among women who married as child brides compared to those who got into union as adults (Falb et al. 2015). In Uganda, the demographic and health survey of 2016 shows that slightly higher proportions of women who married before their 18th birthday experienced physical violence compared to their counterparts who married at the age of 18 and above (UBOS and ICF 2018).

Previous studies show that leaving a violent intimate relationship is often a difficult and complex decision. Abused women usually balance personal, familial and even communal interests in decisions to stay or leave (Barnett 2000; Khoury and Wehbi 2016). Several barriers are associated with the entrapment of women in violent intimate relationships. These include economic limitations such as poverty and financial dependence and socio-cultural considerations such as social proscriptions that discourage divorce/separation and openness about experiences of IPV, and social and gender norms that value family continuity at all costs, normalise IPV against women, put the responsibility of family preservation on women and present marriage as a source of status and respect for women (Barnett 2000, 2001; Lacey 2010; Khoury and Wehbi 2016; Willan et al. 2019). Other inhibiting factors include the investment of significant amounts of time in the relationship, fears over the safety of the survivor and their family, fear of reprisal and lack of strong formal and informal support systems, among others (Barnett 2000, 2001; Lacey 2010). This is not to suggest that women are passive victims of IPV when they do not report or leave violent relationships. Studies show that abused women often take steps to minimise or address the violence during the relationships. These include seeking the intervention of, and emotional support from, family, friends and community organisations, adjusting behaviours to meet the violent partner's expectations, threatening to report the abusive partner, limiting contact with the abuser in the home and seeking professional help (Ruiz-Pérez et al. 2006; Zink et al. 2006; Khoury and Wehbi 2016; Willan et al. 2019).

On the other hand, women's decisions to leave abusive intimate partner relationships are associated with several social, economic and psychological factors. An analysis of data from the domestic violence experiment in Omaha, Nebraska, USA, found that women who were financially independent and had a high self-esteem, an internal locus of control and less fear for their safety or reprisals were more likely to leave violent intimate partner relationships (Kim and Gray 2008). A qualitative study of how women in Lebanon made the decision to leave violent domestic relationships underlined the significance of family support in their decisions to leave (Khoury and Wehbi 2016). In South Africa, Willan et al. (2019) show that young women typically left violent love-relationships when they had strong emotional and economic support from family, the violence became public and their partners openly displayed their infidelity and no longer fulfilled their expectations of providing financial and material support to them and/or their children.

While there is considerable literature on the factors that influence leave or stay decisions among women experiencing IPV (see Barnett 2000, 2001; Anderson and Saunders 2003; Burman and Chantler 2005; Kim and Gray 2008; Lindgren and Renck 2008; Lacey 2010), it is not clear how such decisions play out in the context of child marriage, particularly within low resource settings. Girls who get into union before 18 years tend to be portrayed as passive victims of IPV due to their young age, limited education, economic dependence and broader structural issues that may curtail their agency, such as patriarchal norms promoting male domination and female subordination (Mathur et al. 2003; Yount et al. 2016; Kidman 2017). This article, however, shows that girls can exercise agency by taking proactive steps to escape IPV inflicted within child marriages.

We examine the factors that can help child brides to leave violent marriages in a low resource context. These data can provide insight into protective factors and supports that can be built or reinforced to empower girls in Uganda and similar contexts to recognise and swiftly escape violent intimate partner relationships during adolescence and later in life.

In the Ugandan local context, the term marriage is used fluidly to refer to both formal and informal unions. Formal unions include those that are customarily/traditionally recognised or conducted by religious leaders and government officials. In informal unions the couple live together as husband and wife, without legalising the relationship through any of the formal mechanisms (Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD 2015a)). Borrowing from the local conception of marriage in Uganda, we define child marriage as the formal or informal union of girls below the age of 18 years.

2. Analytic Framework

We have utilised structuration theory and the agency-structure debate to contextualise the experiences of the young women in their marital relationships and the attendant decisions that they made during the relationships (Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992; Wendt 1987). Giddens recognises the primacy of human agency in influencing the structures in place, conceived metaphysically (Giddens 1984). Structures are defined as entailing rules and resources (Giddens 1984), with the latter further expounded by Sewell (1992) as constituting inanimate and animate objects existing naturally or manufactured to control and lay claims on power. Human resources, on the other hand, are conceived of as dexterity, physical strength, knowledge and emotional intelligence (commitment), which perpetuates the accessibility and control of power. Giddens (1984, p. 9) asserts that “agency refers not to the intention people have in doing those things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place”. This implies that power influences the situation and also suggests that intention alone is not equal to agency, as agency implies action, and can also bring about unintended consequences. Although Giddens recognises human agency and its position in societal interactions (Smith 1998; Turner 1986) and the influence on social structure, other scholars subscribing mainly to realist social theory schools, such as Margaret Archer (2000, 2003), tend to critique this view and that of symbolic interactionism and emphasise instead the critical (and independent) role of structure in regulating human behaviour and its constraining influence on agency.

Sewell (1992) points out that there are variances in the stock of agency across societies and within any given society, indicating how occupations of different positions in society determine different accessibility to, and exercise of, agency. This analysis by Sewell enables the appreciation of the situation of young women in a violent relationship, where their accessibility to power and resources to negotiate freedom was not simple due to the lack of control over the rules and structures prevailing in their marital homes. The current study lends credence to the literature by recognising the *agency, strengths* and resilience of the young women, while recognising the limitations arising from structural constraints (see Archer 2003; Dessler 1989; Sewell 1992). Our study further suggests that the fact that the young women leave violent relationships is a demonstration of agency which shows their efforts to positively control the direction of their lives. However, the failure of the relationships and limited options for escape may suggest constraint on the part of the young women’s agency (agential powers) to exert control over social structures.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Design, Setting and Population

The article draws on data from a qualitative study of issues, beliefs and experiences of child marriage and gender-based violence (GBV) in Uganda. The study adopted a cross-sectional qualitative design, where data were collected at one point in time. Qualitative methodology is sensitive to unique personal experiences, perceptions, beliefs and meanings of individuals and was therefore considered

to be the most appropriate approach for exploring the lived experiences of child marriage survivors. The study was conducted in a total of six districts, four of which were located in central Uganda (Kampala, Wakiso, Masaka and Nakasongola) and two (Gulu and Amuru) were in northern Uganda. The districts were targeted for their experience of military conflict, location (rural and urban) and the perceived risk and prevalence of child marriage.

3.2. Sampling

The sample included a total of 45 adult women (18 years and above) who got married before the age of 18 years, 22 and 23 of whom were from the northern and central regions of Uganda, respectively. To capture the diverse lived experiences of survivors of child marriage, the women respondents were selected purposively on the basis of various criteria, including age at first marriage, residence (rural or urban), current marital status and whether they were still married to the same men or left the relationship. Eligible participants were identified with the help of community leaders and community-based organisations working with GBV survivors.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected between August and September 2018, with the support of 10 research assistants proficient in the local languages spoken in the central and northern regions of Uganda, notably Luganda and Acholi, respectively. In-depth interviews were held with each of the selected women. These were held in the local language using a guide with a list of open-ended questions to enable the participants to express their views. Each interview lasted between 40 min and 1 h and explored a range of issues pertaining to the participants' experience of child marriage. There were questions on participants' socio-demographic characteristics such as age at first marriage and highest level of education attained, the events that preceded the marriage, experiences during the union including IPV and GBV in general, their responses to abuse and available support services, among others. Probes and prompts were used to motivate participants to provide more detailed information on topics of interest where necessary. The flexibility offered by in-depth interviews enabled us to gain deep insights into the participants' lived experiences of child marriage, while keeping the interview focused on a specific range of topics (Russell 2002).

3.4. Data Management and Analysis

All the interviews were audio recorded. They were then transcribed verbatim and translated into English by a team of experts. Each transcript was compared with the original audio interview by a member of the core research team proficient in the local language to ensure consistency in the translation. The transcripts were then word processed and imported into NVivo.12 qualitative data analysis software for further management. Coding was conducted by two members of the core research team. To enhance the accuracy of the process, the two members regularly reviewed each other's work to minimise contradictions in the interpretation and assignment of codes to specific data. In addition, where there was doubt on the appropriate code to assign to specific statements, the two members always discussed the coding to build consensus.

The analysis was conducted thematically. The process involved reading and re-reading the transcripts several times and coding relevant sections, words, paragraphs and sentences according to the identified themes and categories. The themes for the article were generated deductively and inductively (Vaismoradi et al. 2013). We started off with two broad themes derived from GBV literature: experience of intimate partner violence and leaving violent relationships. Intimate partner violence was defined as physical, sexual, economic and emotional abuse and controlling behaviour subjected to the survivor by their partner. The data were scrutinised for evidence of IPV and the identified forms assigned the relevant categories, that is, physical, sexual and emotional abuse and controlling behaviour. Data were further examined to identify patterns of leaving violent child marriages with the intent of understanding the underlying facilitative factors. The analysis generated the four main

sub-themes on which the article is based: having a secure base to return to, reaching a tipping point in the relationship, financial independence and intervention of a significant other.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The study was granted ethical approval by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of Makerere University's School of Social Sciences (MAKSS REC 09.18.217) and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (SS 4939). Written informed consent was obtained from all the selected participants before involving them in the study. Participants who could not write due to illiteracy and other factors signed using a thumb print. The informed consent forms were printed in Luganda, Luo and English. Literate participants were given the opportunity to read and interpret the consent form before signing, except where they opted to be read to. The research assistants read and interpreted the informed consent forms for illiterate and semi-illiterate participants. The consent process involved informing the participants of the study purpose, how they had been selected, the benefits of participation and their right to voluntary participation and to withdraw from the study at any point, as well as assuring them of confidentiality.

We ensured confidentiality by making sure that participants were interviewed in private spaces, where the conversation could not be heard by others. The participants were not asked for their real names during the interviews. Unauthorised access to interview transcripts was restricted by locking computer files with passwords. In addition, the digital audio recordings were deleted after transcription. Only pseudonyms are used in this article. Participants who exhibited signs of trauma during the interviews were referred to our partner agencies for psychosocial support.

4. Results

4.1. Characteristics of Study Participants

The article is based on the experiences of 26 survivors of child marriage who suffered IPV during the relationships. Their age at first marriage ranged from 13 to 17 years. All the women were of a reproductive age (15 to 49 years). All the women had attained some level of formal education. However, only six of them completed lower secondary education (S1–S4). Most (15) women were currently married, but only five were still married to their first partners. Most (17) women were involved in an income-generating activity at the time of the study.

4.2. Experiences of IPV during Child Marriage

The women reported suffering physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse at the hands of their partners. The physical abuse mainly took the form of beatings, slaps, kicking and pinching. Several of the men committed the physical violence while under the influence of alcohol. Viola, who had got married at the age of 13 after getting pregnant and being sent away by her single mother to join the man, explained that she had left the relationship due to constantly being beaten by a drunk partner. " . . . I left because the man used to mistreat me through beating me up especially after taking alcohol. Instead of talking to me softly, he would just quarrel. Anything small I did, he quarreled and beat me up," she said.

Similar experiences were shared by Atwendya, who reported that she was often beaten, kicked, pinched and slapped by her partner.

I was abused for sure. Like sometimes I would be busy with our baby then he asks me to wash his clothes. Whenever I failed to wash them, he would come back start quarreling and after kick, slap or hit me severely. He would complain, 'I have already told you to do this for me, but you are wasting time on your child,' then he would pull my ears, and pinch my cheeks or call me stupid.

Sexual abuse mainly took the form of forceful sex. Some of the women reported that their partners were so forceful that they sometimes ruptured their sexual organs. For instance, Tina told of the excruciating pain and injuries she suffered from her first sexual intercourse after traditionally marrying her husband at the age of 16.

When I reached his [husband] place the first time we had sexual intercourse he tore my private parts. I started fearing to have sex with him but he would force me. I had a lot of pain and it was severe every time I tried to urinate. When the urine mixed with the wound, the pain became unbearable. I felt like not eating or drinking anything because of the pain.

Several women reported being forced into sex by husbands who were under the influence of alcohol. Akanyo narrated how her partner had subjected her to physical and sexual abuse a few weeks into the relationship.

... after a few weeks of staying together he started beating me whenever he came back home drunk. He would force me to have sex any time and even worse when he was drunk. He beat me for many days consecutively ...

In regard to emotional violence, the women reported that they were often insulted, denigrated, taunted, belittled and emotionally tortured by men who brought mistresses home to have sex with in their presence. Miriam told of the emotional pain of being regularly chased from her marital bed for her husband to sleep with another woman. She narrated, "... He also returned with women and asked me to either sleep outside the house or on the floor and for them to sleep on the bed. It was really painful."

Eva related how she was constantly taunted, belittled and denigrated by her partner for conceiving so soon after delivering her first baby.

I conceived again when my first child was only 9 months old. I really felt bad when I found out that I had conceived. Life became hard and unbearable; my husband would insult me every time, saying that I am stupid. He blamed me for conceiving again when the child was still young. He would always ask me, 'Can't you ask and seek guidance from your friends, are you stupid?' I really lost my peace of mind due to those insults ...

Economic violence manifested in the forms of denial of opportunities to work and exclusion from decisions on the sale of household assets or benefitting from the proceeds. For example, asked if she was involved in any income-generating activity during the child marriage, Birabwa revealed that she had been prohibited from working by her partner. "No, I did not do anything. He would not allow me to work. I would just stay home doing nothing but take care of the home and my child," she responded. Dembe related how her husband's tendency to make unilateral decisions had culminated in the sale of land they had purchased together without her consent.

He was dictatorial, that was his [main] problem. He never listened to anyone, he would decide on his own. We had bought a plot of land, where I thought we would build our home, but he sold it without my consent. When the old woman who had sold that plot to us told me that my husband had sold the land, I confronted him about it, then we had an altercation. He decided to stop coming back home for almost a month because he was very angry with me.

In some cases, the men sold the food cultivated by the women for household consumption without their consent and used it on alcohol or other pleasures, as explained by Korina, who was 14 years old at first marriage.

He never used to take care of us. Not even any support. He abandoned us with his mother in the village. He would come to sell most of the food harvest like sorghum and beans, then he would go to buy alcohol. He would steal and exchange the harvest with alcohol. Even sorghum, when it is already mixed with cassava, he would select all the cassava from the sorghum and exchange it for alcohol and, worse of all, at times he would even exchange the plants when we have not yet harvested them to get alcohol. I would just see people harvesting the crops because my husband had already taken alcohol of their worth . . . Sometimes he would get women and fail to return home for days.

Some of the women were overworked and economically exploited by their partners, while others reported being neglected and denied financial and material support. Tina recounted being enslaved during her two years of marriage to a suitor identified by her relatives while she was 16. She remarked, "I was his slave; I would work for him then he just sells all the harvest without my knowledge. He would overwork me beyond my age, and when the crops got ready sell them without even informing me."

Lamwaka told of how her polygamous husband refused to support her in spite of earning an income from farming.

He had money, he even married me traditionally. He did not drink [alcohol]; he was a farmer but would never consider supporting me [economically]. All he did was insult me and keep bragging that he was not educated but could keep two women. Yet he did not give us any assistance. I would look for the money to sustain me on my own.

In addition, several of the women reported being controlled by their partner. The majority of them attributed the controlling behaviour to their partner's extreme jealousy and unfounded suspicions of their infidelity. Nasozi decried the physical and emotional torture she was subjected to during her one year of marriage, as her partner attempted to prevent her from interacting with men he suspected she was having affairs with.

That man was very abusive. He would even lock me in the house; that I should not leave to go anywhere until he comes back home. When he came back [home] he would start to quarrel and beat me for no reason. Every person I would talk to, he would say that you have an affair with him; he was an extremely jealous man. He thought I would do what he does so he would lock me in the house as he went to drink alcohol and find me when he returned.

Similarly, Viola had to seek permission from her partner before going on any errand away from home. She said that it was his way of monitoring her movements to be certain about who she interacted with at a time.

I had to ask for permission for almost everything; whether I am going to collect firewood or go somewhere, it was him to decide for me. Even when he wasn't around, I had to wait for him to get back home so that he grants me permission for anything I wanted to do outside the home.

Some women were sequestered because their partners and sometimes in-laws were afraid that they would be arrested for defilement, while others feared that the girls would escape and return to their natal homes. Atwendya was lured to elope with a man at the age of 15 when he realised that he had got her pregnant, then he took her to live with his relatives over 100 km away. She told of how her in-laws initially hid her in the house for fear of being arrested and charged with the concealment of a defilement case.

At first, when I eloped to join their [husband's] family, they were locking me inside the house. They never allowed me to move out of the house. They said that I was still too young to be married, so they were afraid and scared that they would be arrested in case the authorities got to see me with the pregnancy.

Miriam, who also eloped with a man at the age of 14, and moved over 200 km away from her natal home, was banned from talking to community members by her partner. She suspected that he was wary that they could give her ideas to escape and return home.

My husband used to stop me from talking to other people. Whenever he found me talking to anyone, he could beat me and ask me what the discussion was all about. He also used to lock me in the house whenever he found me with anyone in the village. On such days, I would survive on taking water. I think he feared that they would help me to escape.

As shown, the women typically suffered two or more forms of abuse at the hands of their partners. Their relationships can be described as involving multiple experiences of IPV.

4.3. Leaving Violent Relationships

The majority of women in this study left their violent marriages within three years, which meant most of them were still adolescents when they did so. Not surprisingly, most of the women reported that the men were “good” at the beginning of the union, variously describing them as caring, supportive, respectful, understanding, communicative and providing for their needs. The reversal in the behaviour of partners typically coincided with the women’s first pregnancy, the birth of the first child or the partner’s initiation of a relationship with another woman/women. Only one woman could not explain the sudden change in her partner’s behaviour. She nevertheless thought that his ex-wife, who had reemerged after learning that he had married again, was deliberately annoying him so that he would shift the anger to her and eventually force her to leave. In the following sub-sections, we present four factors that emerged as key in helping the women to leave violent relationships. These include having a secure base to return to, reaching a tipping point in the relationship, financial independence and intervention of a significant other.

4.4. Having a Secure Base to Return to

Many like me stay in their violent marriages because there is nowhere else to go, but for me I had somewhere to run to which is home. (Atuku, a Child Marriage Survivor)

As Atuku clearly puts it in the above excerpt, having a secure place—where they felt safe, loved or at least provided for—to return to was critical in our respondents’ decisions to leave violent child marriages. This was particularly the case for participants who left as adolescents, all of whom were dependent and therefore needed a place where they could be supported, not only morally but also economically. As such, all but one of the participants who left their partners as adolescents returned to their parents’ or guardian’s home. For example, Nasozi was typical of this response. She decided to return to her mother, where she expected to be loved and cherished, when her one-year relationship with the man she had eloped with at 16 years turned violent. She lived with a single mother and had been lured into this sexual relationship to cope with extreme deprivation at home. She soon discovered that she was pregnant and eloped with her partner without informing her mother or any other relative of her whereabouts. “We were lacking almost everything. I would be at school but lacking almost everything. I thought that because this man was giving me some money whenever I needed something, he would provide for and help my mother as well,” she explained. While the marital relationship had started well, the man’s behaviour changed for the worse after she delivered her first child.

He first treated me well and I was happy. Initially he provided me with whatever I wanted. But when I gave birth, he changed his behaviour. He no longer provided for me. I was no longer respected; he would take alcohol and come back home to insult and beat me up. When I gave birth the situation worsened.

It was at this point that she decided to reconcile with her mother and seek to return home.

I told myself that my mother is a very poor and needy person but loves me. I called my mother, told her about my situation and the suffering I was going through. I asked for her forgiveness then she told me to come back home. So, I decided to leave the man and came back [home]. I am doing something to sustain myself, my child and my mother; it may be small, but I feel safe and have a peace of mind.

Some women returned to their parents even if they were not completely welcome, which further underscores the significance of parental support for child marriage survivor's decisions to leave violent relationships. For example, Dembe decided to return home and apologise to her father when a year of economic and emotional abuse at the hands of her partner culminated in her abandonment in hospital when she had a stillbirth. She had married her partner aged 15 when her father and stepmother chased her from home while she was pregnant, following a streak of rebellious behaviour that had started two years earlier. She reported that sleeping with men had been her way of coping with the neglect and abuse perpetrated mainly by her stepmother, who had also managed to bias her father against her. But life proved difficult from the moment she joined her partner. He could not provide for her because he was not working. She had to do heavy work like fetching water and cultivating people's gardens to get food, in spite of being pregnant. He controlled her, sometimes forcefully took her money away and often insulted and blamed her for her predicament. "He would yell at me and say, 'you are suffering because you are illiterate, you thought getting married to me would be your source of security instead of staying with your parents and focusing on your studies'," she narrated. When Dembe lost her baby during a complicated birth, her partner abandoned her in the hospital and never returned. With nowhere else to go, she decided to return home to her parents.

I decided to go back to my father's home since there was nothing left to hold on to; I had lost my baby and my husband had deserted me. I went and apologised to my father, he forgave and took me back in.

Unlike Nasozi, Dembe did not receive the warmest of receptions after being accepted back into the family. She continued to be maltreated by her stepmother but nevertheless stayed. She intimated that the suffering at her natal home was not comparable to the abuse she had endured during the marriage. "My stepmother continued to isolate and discriminate against me. She mistreated me so much, but I stayed; at least there was food," she remarked.

Several participants without a secure base to return to could not leave the marriages as early as they had wished to, while others in this situation who attempted to leave soon returned to their violent partners. One example of this was Ageno, who had married at the age of 14 and initially got trapped in her abusive relationship because she lacked a secure base to return to. She had been pushed into marriage in the hope of escaping maltreatment from the aunt who had assumed her guardianship when both her parents died in the war that ravaged northern Uganda for two decades. She explained, "I used to stay with my aunt. She would mistreat me a lot, so I decided to get married; hoping that life would be better." She soon learned that married life was difficult and decided to return home to her guardian slightly over a year later, shortly after giving birth to her first child. However, she did not get the reception and care she had hoped for and ended up returning to her abusive partner.

I was only 14 years old, life in marriage was not easy but I had nothing to do until I gave birth. My husband was also very young, and we were both young parents so it was very difficult for us. I did not get any respect from my husband. When he started bringing other women he became so rude and would even force me into having sex with him. He would not allow me to use family planning [methods]. I went back to my aunt, but the situation was even worse, so I decided to come back to my husband.

Fifteen years later Ageno did eventually leave the marriage and return to her relatives. However, at this point she was an adult capable of fending for herself and her family and so could manage without

much support from her relatives. At the time we conducted the study she was living independently with her children in a house she had constructed on the family land and deriving a livelihood from subsistence farming. She indicated that she was supporting her family without much assistance from her relatives, who were overburdened by their own responsibilities. Her case demonstrates that lacking a secure base to return to was key in her inability to leave the relationship earlier.

While Ageno made an attempt to leave during her adolescence and eventually left as an adult, 25-year-old Korina was still trapped in a violent and unhappy marriage because she felt that she had no secure place to go to. She told of the multiple forms of abuse she had suffered at the hands of her partner since early on in the marriage she entered at 14 years.

He was disrespectful and abusive; he would over work me beyond my age. I would always do casual labour in order to buy food. He is an alcoholic, when I gave birth to my 2nd and 3rd born, he started beating me. We would quarrel and fight regularly. Do you see this gap [in my teeth]? I lost my 2 teeth during a fight with him . . . all these scars on my body are signs of his abuse towards me and now he has abandoned me with his mother.

During the interview, Korina, who lost both parents to war and her guardian (a grandmother) due to natural causes, intimated that she was still living in a violent relationship primarily because she had no parent/guardian to return to. In explaining why parents should avoid pushing their children into early marriage, she indicated that she would be long out of the relationship if her mother were still alive. She remarked:

Like for me right now, if my mother was alive, I would have gone back to her with my children long ago. And that means the burden [of care] would go back to my mother. So I would never want such a burden for me in future because in case their husbands reject them, the burden will be mine.

Similarly, Maria was stuck in an abusive relationship because she saw no way out. While she had considered the option of returning home to her parents, she hesitated to leave because she anticipated rejection from her father. She remarked:

He always beats me up severely, because he is a drunkard. Every time he comes back [home] he hits and yells at me and often times leaves me without food or any single coin for home use. He also does not allow me to visit any of my relatives or friends. When he finds out that I have gone somewhere may be to look for food, or to talk to someone about what I am going through, he beats me severely . . . I have thought about leaving but I have nowhere to go. My father who would have helped me now hates us [girls] all. When I got pregnant at 15 years while in school, he vowed never to educate a girl-child beyond O [ordinary] level.

All the above cases show that for child marriage survivors, having a secure base to return to is a critical factor in their decision to leave violent relationships. This is primarily because they are usually young and dependent when they get into union and thus unable to support themselves and their offspring on their own.

4.5. Reaching a Tipping Point in the Relationship

All the women endured the IPV for a while before reaching a breaking point, when the violence escalated, they got fed up, or realised that it would only escalate more. Several of the participants reported seeking the intervention of local authorities and relatives to stop the abuse but gave up when they realised that their partners would not change. Atuku told of how the escalation in violence from her partner had pushed her to a point of leaving, even though she had tried to endure it at first in the hope that he would change.

He had changed and kept on changing for the worst. I used to be battered, slapped, insulted and undermined most of the time. At first, I thought he would change, and I tried to endure but the abuse just got worse as time passed by. All I can say is that I am happy and lucky to be alive because he could have beaten me during my pregnancy; and who knows what, I could even have died. All I can say is that if a woman is going through such kind of violence she should just leave and move on.

In contrast, Birabwa tried to stop the violence by seeking help from the police, the village chairperson and her mother, grandmother and mother-in-law, but he refused to change. She felt that she had no choice but to leave. Encouragement from her grandmother and mother-in-law strengthened her resolve to abandon the marriage.

I reported him to the LC (local council) chairman the day he almost strangled me to death. He [LC] came and intervened. He cautioned him, then he ran away for a while. When he came back he continued from where he had stopped. I reported him to the police station; they called and cautioned him to stop beating me up like that and to settle and resolve issues amicably. He was even imprisoned but he did not change and told them that no one makes decisions for him. I also reported him to his mother, my mother and grandmother but all their efforts resulted to nothing. He continued with his bad behaviour; I had to leave him. Even my grandmother and his mother advised me to leave to avoid being killed, so I left.

Two participants who also reported an escalation in their partner's promiscuous behaviour indicated that they had been pushed to leave by the fear of being infected by HIV. Ndibalekera explained how a rapid increase in the number of children sired by her partner led her to leave the marriage out of fear for her health.

He used to treat me with respect at first but later started to abuse me verbally, was quarrelsome and would tell me that the food I grow is not on our [natal] family land; so he would sell it off without giving me any money . . . He would come back annoyed; may be confused by his concubines and would displace his anger on us. I left his home eventually when he started producing children with different women and bringing them to me. I feared for my life; I thought that I would get HIV . . . , so I left to protect my life.

Participants who were yet to reach such tipping points tended to stay in the abusive relationships in the hope that their partners' behaviour would soon change. An example was Nalutaaya, a 32-year-old woman who had married her partner at the age of 15. She told of how the little improvement in her partner's behaviour, following the intervention of the LC committee, had encouraged her to stay, because she was hopeful that he would eventually stop abusing her.

He also used to beat me and often abused me verbally, threw my things out and would always tell me to get out of his house because he had got a mature woman. I reported him to the LC chairperson then they called and cautioned him. He reduced the beating a bit, and stopped throwing my things out. That is why I am still here. I am hopeful that he will eventually calm down [stop the abuse].

Nalutaaya's case further attests to the facilitative role of reaching a tipping point in child marriage survivors' decisions to leave abusive relationships.

4.6. Financial Independence

Having a source of income that could support independent living outside the marriage enabled some women to leave abusive relationships and re-establish themselves. The women who managed this were mainly adult survivors who did not wish to return to their parents or other relatives. A typical example was Nampijja, a mother of three who earned a livelihood from teaching in a primary school.

She was able to meticulously plan her exit using her income. She narrated that she had used her savings to pay for a room, where she relocated with her children without the knowledge of her abusive and controlling partner. The partner had threatened to kill her if she left him and indeed attempted to strangle her the first time she had tried to leave.

I had kept money on my account and after three months, managed to look for a room which wasn't expensive. I went to the bank, picked the money and paid for the house. I stealthily moved my things and three children, then we entered our new room. He thought that I had gone back to my parents, so he did not follow us.

While the husband eventually found Nampijja and the children and threatened her to take him back, she was able to stand her ground because she could provide for herself and the children without his support.

When he discovered that I had rented a room, he came shouting that I am a very complicated woman. How can I rent a house without his consent? He threatened that I would not manage to provide for the children without his support. That I should accept him to live with us again. He forgot that we had managed without him for three months . . . He talked a lot but I also reminded him of all the ills he did to me. I told him about how peaceful I was in my room. I told him, 'when I was still at your place I was looking so miserable but currently you admire me'. I told him that our relationship ended long ago. He continued pestering me for a while but eventually gave up.

In contrast, Eva, who was entirely dependent on her abusive partner for survival, felt powerless to leave because she could not fathom how to start out on her own without his support, as she explained.

He does not beat, but insults and neglects me. I sometimes think of leaving, but then I think about the children; what will I feed them on, how about school fees. I have no job, so he provides everything for the home. He pays rent, school fees [and] buys food. Every time I think about leaving, I counsel myself to stay because I don't know where to start from.

As shown, having a source of income helped the women to support themselves and their children away from the marriage. In many cases, it offered choices and a way out of the violent relationships.

4.7. Intervention of a Significant Other

Several participants relied on the support and assistance of significant others to leave their abusive marriages. These included relatives, neighbours and other community members. Some provided financial assistance to enable survivors to travel back home, while others helped them to find alternative places to go to (e.g., getting them alternative livelihood opportunities). Miriam, for example, benefitted from the benevolence of community members to escape from her abusive marriage and travel back home to her parents. Trapped in an abusive relationship over 200 kilometres away, Miriam could not raise the transport fare to return home. She was only saved by a concerned and kind neighbour, who mobilised other community members to contribute 60,000 Uganda Shillings (USD 16.2) for her fare. Miriam had initially shared her predicament with this neighbour, who then reported the abuse to the village chairperson. Whilst the chairperson had cautioned Miriam's partner, the abuse had not stopped.

I shared my plight with our neighbour; she went to the LC [Chairperson] and reported. My husband and his relatives were summoned and warned to stop mistreating me, but they never changed. Later, my neighbour mobilised people to contribute 60,000 shillings which helped me to travel back to my mother's place.

Another case shows how both the advice of others and their practical support could be important, but also that leaving was not always permanent. Tina finally managed to leave her abusive husband with the help of a sister, who tapped into her social network to find her an alternative place to live. Tina had initially fled her marital home during a physical fight with her husband and returned to her guardian (an aunt), but ended up returning when she realised that support from her aunt and other relatives was not as forthcoming as she had hoped.

I decided to go back to my marital home because of my child. I could not afford to meet needs like soap to wash clothes, so life was a bit harder because no one could provide for me and my child; everyone was minding their own business.

However, the cold reception she received from her husband on her return convinced the sister who had escorted her to reclaim her marital home that he would not change. She immediately advised Tina to leave her marriage for good and linked her to a friend who was willing and able to take her in.

First of all, the words he used on seeing me back with my sister [accompanying me] were very vulgar. He also told us that he is his own boss; no one gives him orders in his home. He arrogantly mentioned that when he marries a woman, her money becomes his own money. You know my sister had advised him to change his behaviour, that is why he was saying this. After saying all of those things to us, my sister realised that the man would not change; she advised me to leave him for good. She took me to her friend's home because she [my sister] was married and it was inappropriate for me to go to her marital home. The friend where she took me was older than [both of] us, and not married, so I began a new life with her. I would fry samosas with her every morning and deliver them to different shops for sale, then she would pay me some little money.

There were a few cases where relatives removed women from an abusive marriage, but not principally because their husbands were abusive. Rather, because their partners had not paid the bride price. Bride price includes material items (e.g., food, cows, goats, clothes) and money that the bride's family receives from the groom and his family to legitimise and validate the marriage. Viola was picked up and returned home on the instruction of her mother, after she learned that her husband was not ready to pay her bride price. "So my mother sent people to pick me, saying that if there was no bride price they should take me home; so they took me home," she said. Similarly, Angee indicated that her relatives had removed her from her marital home because her partner could not pay *luk* (a fine for producing children with a woman without paying bride price). She related, "I was married but my people took me away from him [my partner] because they wanted him to pay *luk* then he did not pay so now, I have moved on."

While several relations helped our respondents to leave violent marriages, some were instrumental in encouraging them to stay. These relations typically encouraged the survivors to endure because IPV is integral to married life. Some of them cited the violence they experienced in their own unions to show that it was a "normal" pattern in marriage. Tina told of how her aunt talked her into staying when she learned that she wanted to leave a few months into the relationship.

Whenever he would find me with his brother, he would beat me up severely. I decided to ask him to let me go to my grandmother since the pregnancy was almost due . . . He refused me to go. So after some time my aunt came; I think he is the one who called her. She told me, 'You will have to endure all the pain and sufferings, because we also passed through such trials; that's marriage.' I told her but aunt, I am tired of this situation I won't be able to endure. She then told me, 'it is the pregnancy that is making you feel and look like that.'

Eighteen-year-old Nemaite told of how the adult women she has befriended during her marriage of two years keep advising her not to leave on the premise that she will find no better man.

Yes, I have made friends, but all of them are mature adult women; some are my neighbours. The only advice they give me is that I should stay in my marriage despite the challenges. That all men are like that; I am not going to find any special angel.

Essentially, interventions of significant others may be seen as a double-edged sword that can either encourage survivors of child marriage to leave or stay in violent relationships.

5. Discussion

We have presented the factors that helped former child brides to leave the violent marriages. The aim was to highlight potential protective factors that can be built, harnessed or reinforced to empower and encourage girls to swiftly leave violent intimate partner relationships.

The study identified four factors that were key in helping child marriage survivors to leave violent unions: having a secure base to return to, where they could be supported emotionally and materially; reaching a tipping point when the violence escalates or they realise that it will only escalate more and that their partners will not change; intervention of significant others who provide assistance that is crucial for leaving or physically picking up the survivor; and financial independence that enables an independent living away from the marriage, though this may only be feasible for those women who are old enough to work independently. The significance of informal support, financial independence and escalation of violence in women's decisions to leave violent intimate relationships has been discussed elsewhere (Anderson and Saunders 2003; Kim and Gray 2008; Lacey 2010; Lacey et al. 2011; Baholo et al. 2015; Khoury and Wehbi 2016). However, this study shows that for adolescents, having a secure place with loving and supportive parents/guardians to return to is particularly critical if they are to sustainably leave violent marriages. It not only encourages them to leave, but also prevents them from returning to violent unions. As shown, abused adolescents typically returned to their parents/guardians. Those who did not find adequate support from their parents/guardians returned to their violent partners because they had neither the resources nor the capacity to sufficiently support themselves without assistance. Therefore, parental support can be seen as a critical factor in helping young child marriage survivors in a low resource setting to escape violence in the relationships. This is because family remains the main fallback for most people experiencing crises or need in these contexts. This pattern supports the findings of Willan and colleagues (2019), who show that young women from impoverished informal settlements of South Africa are more likely to leave violent intimate relationships if they have strong emotional and economic support from their families.

The significance of parental support in child marriage survivors' decisions to leave and stay away from violent relationships underlines the need to equip parents with positive parenting skills. Described as an approach to parenting that is child-centred and which emphasises care, support, encouragement, empathy and positive disciplining (UNICEF 2018), positive parenting will contribute to making homes a safe haven where children and young people facing IPV can seek refuge. Child marriage survivors who anticipated love, empathy and support from their parents/guardians typically thought of returning home to escape the violence. Moreover, positive parenting can address drivers related to the quality of parenting, such as domestic child abuse and neglect (Bantebya et al. 2014), and contribute to preventing child marriages in the long run. Since several child marriages are preceded by elopement and unwanted teenage pregnancies that strain relationships between girls and their parents/guardians, it is important that parents/guardians are helped to understand that sometimes children only learn when they face uncomfortable consequences from their actions (UNICEF 2018). This will enable them to proactively forgive and provide girls who wish to leave violent relationships a second chance to learn and grow from their mistakes. As our data show, girls were only able to sustainably leave violent marriages where their parents/guardians displayed positive parenting attributes such as forgiving and taking them in, listening to them and understanding their situations, encouraging them to leave and providing them both material and emotional support during the process of and after leaving violent unions.

However, positive parenting may be difficult to realise in a context of poverty and socio-cultural norms that condone violence against women and girls and harmful traditional practices such as child marriage. Therefore, optimising the protective benefits of positive parenting interventions requires that they be proactively complemented with economic strengthening programmes to improve the capacity of parents/guardians to provide for their children. In addition, continuous community engagement is necessary to change negative social norms and customs that promote the tolerance of violence against women and girls, as these often prevent parents/guardians from helping their children to leave abusive marriages. These include beliefs that normalise IPV in marriage and the custom of paying bride price. Our data show that several parents/guardians encouraged girls to stay in violent relationships because they had been socialised to believe that IPV is a normal day-to-day experience of married women. An analysis of 2016 demographic and health survey data for Uganda also found high levels of tolerance towards IPV against women in the country (Ghose and Yaya 2019). This normalisation of violence could be attributed in part to the forces of patriarchy and male dominance which prevail in most African societies, a demonstration of the preponderance of structure over the human agency of the girls (Archer 2000, 2003). Other parents/guardians may encourage girls to stay in violent relationships when bride price has been paid. It is not uncommon for African women who wish to leave violent marriages to meet resistance from their parents, who are often afraid of being asked to refund the bride price (Wendo 2004), again buttressed by the power of structure (Archer 2003).

Our data show that several girls and women tend to see returning to their natal home as the only viable way out of violent marriages, even where family members are hostile towards them. This pattern not only suggests a paucity of formal protection services for survivors of GBV such as temporary shelters and rehabilitation centres, but also limited awareness of the few available ones. This observation is corroborated by country-specific reports which highlight the limited funding for GBV-related services and activities as a key impediment to its elimination in Uganda (MGLSD 2015b). It is for instance indicated that the country has only 16 shelters for GBV survivors, in spite of the high incidence of violence against women and girls. Moreover, survivors' access to the few GBV shelters and related services is not only constrained by inadequate funding but also by the limited awareness about their availability (MGLSD 2018; Mugerwa and Wesaka 2020). Therefore, there is a need to invest in protection services to increase safety nets for survivors of GBV whose informal support networks may be feeble or absent. In addition, a massive awareness of available services should be created to increase demand for them and encourage women and girls who would otherwise be entrapped in violent relationships due to lack of viable alternatives to leave. Awareness of a shelter has been identified as a key facilitator to women's departure from abusive intimate relationships in other parts of Africa (Baholo et al. 2015).

While the support of significant others such as family and friends is often critical in helping abused women leave violent relationships (Khoury and Wehbi 2016; Willan et al. 2019), our study shows that the intervention of survivors' significant others can be both a facilitator and a barrier in decisions to leave. Several of our participants accessed resources that were crucial in enabling them to leave with the support of their relations, while others left at their encouragement. However, some of the social relations including kin, neighbours and friends encouraged several women and girls to stay in violent relationships by normalising the abuse. This suggests that community members are a potentially powerful resource in fighting IPV and GBV in general and providing support to survivors, if equipped with the correct information. In this regard, harnessing the protective role of the community requires interventions to challenge and change beliefs and social norms that condone violence against women and girls. It is important, furthermore, to increase community awareness of GBV, its forms, dangers, existing interventions, the referral pathway and the potential role of individuals and families in preventing, reporting and helping survivors to escape the abuse. Community dialogues drawing participants from different sections of the community can be a useful strategy for providing information on IPV and GBV and getting them to reflect on the drivers and dangers of the two practices and on possible solutions to addressing them. Mechanisms to engage children and young people in

age-appropriate conversations on the meaning and manifestations of IPV and GBV, its consequences, how to protect themselves and others from abuse and where to seek support may help to enhance their capacity to recognise and take action. Some of these topics could be incorporated in the sexual and reproductive health education curriculum for adolescents and young people and tackled during discussions of intimate relationships.

It is evident that in the context of child marriage, the significance of specific factors in decisions to leave may depend on the age of the survivor. For instance, data show that having a secure base to return to was more critical for adolescents who were generally dependent and too young to support themselves and their offspring on their own, while financial independence applied more to survivors who left as adults and sought to live independently. This suggests that programmes targeting survivors of IPV involved in child marriage should consider being flexible enough to address the likely variations in the needs of different age groups.

Drawing on structuration theory and the agency-structure debate (Sewell 1992; Wendt 1987; Giddens 1984), we recognise both the importance of human agency and the importance of rules, regulations, norms and value systems in influencing the young women's decisions and ability to leave violent unions. This implies that interventions to encourage young women to leave abusive relationships ought to address both individual and structural constraints for success.

Study Limitations

This study was carried out among women in central and northern Uganda, and results may not be applicable to all communities of Uganda. We believe, however, that the findings are possibly illustrative and indicative of experiences of women who go through child marriages across Ugandan communities.

6. Conclusions

The study unravels important and interesting issues for understanding decisions of leaving violent relationships among women who marry off as children (below 18 years). While it undoubtedly presents an intricate exposition of the young women's experience of violent unions, it also describes the complexity of the relationships, and especially the structural forces that the young women encounter in making decisions and taking actions to leave the relationships. It shows that, at the end of it all, the decisions to leave boiled down to agential powers and resources held by, and accessed from, the young women's environment.

Key among the resources is parental support, which emerged as a key facilitative factor for young women to leave violent relationships in the context of child marriage within a low resource setting. Therefore, interventions to improve the quality of parenting and the safety of homes can create an enabling environment that may not only encourage girls to leave violent unions but also prevent incidences of child marriage in the long run. Such interventions include trainings to equip parents/guardians with positive parenting skills, household economic strengthening programmes to improve parents'/guardians' capacities to provide for their families and community dialogues to challenge and change negative social norms that normalise violence against children and women.

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