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Women's responses to intimate partner violence in Rwanda: rethinking agency in constrained social contexts

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Abstract

This paper explores instances of agency in women's responses to intimate partner violence (IPV) in Rwanda. The literature on women's responses to IPV conceptualises agency primarily as an individual's capacity to take action by reporting violence or leaving a relationship, obscuring other ways women may respond to violence in contexts where reporting or leaving are unlikely. We aim to replace this narrow conceptualisation of agency with a social constructivist focus on the meanings women attribute to possible IPV responses. We draw on data from a study of IPV in Rwanda, which includes semi-structured interviews with women experiencing violence and four focus group discussions with women community members (n=39). Our findings highlight socio-cultural, economic, political-legal and historical constraints that shape women's actions in this context. In relation to these constraints, women describe four possible responses to IPV: reporting the violence; seeking emotional support; 'fighting back' against violence (including leaving the relationship); or remaining silent. While reporting and leaving violent relationships are identified, women also discuss the social constraints that make these actions extremely difficult in Rwanda. In designing effective strategies, we conclude that public health strategies need to consider women's understandings of their own actions, particularly in social contexts where certain actions may be highly constrained.

Key words: women's agency, intimate partner violence, violence against women, Rwanda, Eastern Africa

Introduction

In this paper we examine instances of women's agency in responding to intimate partner violence (IPV) in Rwanda. Scholars have increasingly recognised IPV as a significant global health concern in its own right, and one which contributes to the spread of HIV (Dunkle et al., 2004), physical and emotional stress (Campbell et al., 2002), depression (Coker et al., 2002; Devries, Mak, Bacchus, et al., 2013), drug and alcohol abuse (Devries et al., 2014), serious injuries and death (Seedat, Van Niekerk, Jewkes, Suffla, & Ratele, 2009). IPV is prevalent all over the world ranging with 10 to over 50 percent of women having experienced IPV in some regions and global averages estimated between 27.8 and 32.2 percent (Devries, Mak, García-Moreno, et al., 2013). While most studies focus on physical and/or sexual forms of violence, broader definitions of IPV also include psychological, verbal and economic forms of violence, which are implicated in coercive and controlled relationships (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2013). In this paper, we draw on this broad definition of IPV, which is consistent with how our research participants talked about violence perpetrated by intimate partners, including husbands, boyfriends, unmarried partners and the fathers of their children.

The term 'agency' is frequently used to refer to the socially-mediated capacity of an individual to take action (Ahearn, 2001). In the literature on women's responses to IPV, women's agency has largely been conceptualised in relation to two particular actions: (1) reporting the violence to formal sources (police, health and social services, the justice system, shelters) or informal sources (family, friends, neighbours) (Andersson et al., 2010; Kim & Lee, 2011), and (2) leaving the abusive relationship (Scheffer, Lindgren & Renck, 2008). In this paper we are interested in exploring women's agency and IPV in constrained social contexts: settings where violence against women is socially and/or culturally acceptable, and actions such as reporting or leaving a violent relationship are rarely, if ever, taken (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2013; Linos & Kawachi, 2012; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2009; Uthman, Lawoko, & Moradi, 2009). In such contexts, two of the reasons women are unlikely to report violence are because they themselves are tolerant of IPV (Rizo & Macy, 2011; Schuler & Islam, 2008; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2009) or because they lack knowledge about available options (Saito, Cooke, Creedy, & Chaboyer, 2009). Legal cynicism or mistrust of the police can also act as barriers to help-seeking from

authorities (Emery, Jolley, & Wu, 2011), and the potential stigma of being an abused woman can prevent women from seeking help from family or friends (Andersson et al., 2010; Overstreet & Quinn, 2013). Fear of violent retaliation for reporting and lack of adequate services are other key factors (Wolf, Ly, Hobart, & Kernic, 2003). In addition, the economic reality of women's lives is widely recognised as playing an important role in a woman's capacity to leave a relationship, particularly in low-income settings where women may be dependent on a husband or male partner for financial security (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2013; Kaukinen, Meyer, & Akers, 2013).

The emphasis in the literature on acts of reporting or leaving a violent relationship is limited in a number of ways for understanding women's agency in response to IPV in constrained social contexts. Firstly, it positions women in these contexts as either agents able to make the 'right' choice, or as unable to do so because they are overcome by their own oppression (Hutchings, 2013). Secondly, it inherently perceives all women living in settings where IPV is socially acceptable as 'victims' lacking agency or the capacity to change their situations. Thirdly, in focusing on actions that are often not viable in these contexts, we are left with open questions about what women do and how best to support their actions. The focus on leaving or reporting violence obscures attention to other actions that may also demonstrate women's agency. As recognised by Snowdon (2011), in attempting to establish simple solutions to a highly complex problem, instances of agency in response to IPV are often overlooked.

This paper aims to contribute to the IPV literature and current understandings of women's actions in constrained social contexts by drawing on a social constructivist approach to agency. This social constructivist approach pays attention to the meanings women associate with their actions in addition to the actions themselves, and how these meanings are situated within the broader social context (Madhok, 2013; Mahmood, 2012). This includes meanings associated with actions that operate within rather than against social constraints, including alternatives to leaving or reporting violence.

This social constructivist approach to agency is poignantly illustrated in Saba Mahmood's work on women's agency in Egypt. In her ethnography of the grassroots Islamic piety movement – sometimes considered by feminists to limit women's agency through strong religious prescriptions – Mahmood (2012) argues there are

different 'modalities of agency' beyond those presupposed by neoliberal feminist scholarship. For example, an action such as wearing the veil, which neoliberal feminists might see as evidence of women's subordination rather than agency, is agentic if one considers this action as part of an internal process of creating the disposition of a pious and modest woman. In other words, wearing the veil is not a symbol of subordination donned in public, but rather an agentic act of trying to become a particular type of person. In this light, agency refers to actions that enable a particular mode of being within a social context. According to Mahmood, it is through understanding the meaning behind the actions produced by a social context that we are able to identify acts of agency. Mahmood's approach is therefore particularly useful for exploring agency in contexts where direct action against socio-cultural or religious norms may not always be possible, such as constrained social contexts. It provides a compelling theoretical reason for paying particular attention to the meanings women give to their actions in such contexts.

This paper draws on this social constructivist approach to agency in two ways. First, we detail the aspects of social context that women identify as constraining their ability to respond to IPV (part 1 of our findings). This provides an understanding of how the social context constrains women's capacity for actions such as leaving or reporting violence in Rwanda, and provides the background needed to understand the meanings women attribute to responses to IPV in this context. Second, we identify the 'modalities' or instances of agency evident in women's discussions of possible responses to IPV from their own experiences and representations (part 2 of our findings). We conclude with a discussion of how a social constructivist approach to agency can broaden the scope of public health strategies aimed at addressing IPV.

IPV in Rwanda

Rwanda has one of the highest prevalences of IPV in the world. National estimates are that 55.6 percent of women have experienced physical violence and 17.5 percent have experienced sexual violence in the past 12 months from their current or most recent husband/partner (National Institute of Statistics Rwanda, 2012). As in many other low-income countries, IPV reporting is extremely low with a total of 135 cases reported to the Rwanda National Police, government medico-legal One Stop Centres and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in 2011-12 (Gender Monitoring

Office, 2012). Of those women who have ever experienced physical violence only 37.2 percent say they have sought help from formal or informal sources (National Institute of Statistics Rwanda, 2012). This means that over two million women have experienced violence and have not reported it, leaving unanswered questions about what actions women do take in this context. Given the numerous challenges in identifying women who have left violent relationships, little is know about the number of women who leave as a result of IPV in Rwanda.

In Rwanda, a key socio-cultural factor that plays a role in inhibiting women's reporting of IPV or likelihood to leave a violent relationship is that women have a wide-reaching acceptance of violence against women (Rani, Bonu, & Diop-Sidibe, 2004). In a recent national survey, relatively high proportions of women in Rwanda agreed that wife beating is acceptable in particular situations, for example, if she burns the food (19 percent), neglects the children (44 percent), goes out without telling him (36 percent), or refuses to have sexual intercourse with him (37 percent) (National Institute of Statistics Rwanda, 2012). Rwanda can therefore be understood as a constrained social context where IPV is a socially accepted part of daily life for many women.

Methodology

The questions guiding this research study were: *What do women in Rwanda discuss as possible actions in response to IPV? How do women perceive and experience constraints on their actions?* Ethical approval for the study was granted by the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Study location and recruitment

The study was carried out in Kigali in 2013. In order to gain an understanding of women's representations of IPV and possible responses, interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out among three groups of women (Table 1).

Table 1: Participants, methods of data collection, and recruitment techniques

Participants	N	Methods	Recruitment technique
Group 1: Women experiencing IPV	5	In-depth interviews	Recruited through an organisation providing micro-enterprise opportunities and group therapy
Group 2: Women experiencing violence more broadly	10	In-depth interviews	Recruited through an organisation providing legal assistance services
Group 3: Women community members (four groups of six)	24	Focus group discussions	Recruited purposively through local research assistant
TOTAL	**39**		

Participants in Groups 1 and 2 were recruited through two non-governmental organisations (NGOs) providing services to women experiencing IPV in Kigali. Women attending for services on days when the researchers were present were told about the study by service providers and were then free to volunteer to participate. The women in Group 1 had all experienced physical violence from intimate partners and were involved in group therapy. The women in Group 2 were seeking legal support for different types of violence from intimate partners or others, including physical, sexual, economic, and child-to-parent violence. Participants in the FGDs (Group 3) were recruited through a local research assistant who used personal contacts with her local community and church group. Participants were all living in or around Kigali and came from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Data collection and analysis

The third author, who is fluent in Kinyarwanda and has specialised training as a social worker, conducted the interviews. In the interviews women were asked why they had approached the organisation, who had helped them in dealing with the violence, and what kinds of barriers they had experienced.

The first and third authors led the FGDs in Kinyarwanda with the assistance of an interpreter. A semi-structured question guide was used during discussions with prompts and additional questions added as needed. The FGD topic guide focused on: types of IPV in Rwanda, what women could do in response, and barriers that existed. Participants were provided with a small stipend to cover transportation costs to and from the location where the FGDs took place in order to minimise economic barriers to participation. The interviews and FGDs were audio recorded with signed consent

from all participants. The recordings were translated and transcribed in English for analysis.

Transcripts were analysed by the first and second authors using thematic network analysis to identify common themes across the different sources of data (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This involved first identifying basic in-vivo codes in the text, and then abstracting these basic codes into thematic categories (first grouping the codes as 'organising' themes and then as 'global' themes). The resulting thematic network was divided into two separate coding frameworks: (1) contextual constraints shaping women's responses to IPV, and (2) women's actions in response to IPV (Appendix A).

Once the analysis was complete, a final report was written for participants in order to share the results of the study. This was part of protecting participants by allaying any concerns about sharing their stories of violence, and enabling them to gain from seeing the results and the experiences of others. The report was translated into Kinyarwanda and shared with participants either via email or through the NGO where the interviews originally took place.

Limitations

Asking women who have experienced IPV about their experience is extremely sensitive and can 're-traumatise' these individuals through the process of retelling their story (Colvin, 2004). A number of safeguards were put in place in order to minimise the impact on participants of this recounting, including a trained social worker as interviewer, assurances that women's personal information would be protected, availability of services, and the sharing of research results with participants. There is no guarantee, however, that participation in the interviews/ FGDs was not stressful for some of the women. In addition, this research was carried out in Kigali and therefore only reflects the meanings women attribute to IPV responses in an urban setting, where services are more readily available.

Findings

Participants discussed numerous contextual factors that constrain women's actions in situations of violence in Rwanda, and many possible responses to IPV.

The contextual constraints shaping women's responses to IPV in Rwanda

Themes of socio-cultural, economic, political-legal and historical factors emerged in women's accounts of the social context in Rwanda that shapes women's responses to IPV.

Socio-cultural. Women discussed representations of gender roles, marriage and family as constraining women's responses. Traditional gender roles were described as positioning women in the home, taking care of children and not working, and men as the authority figures who control the family's finances and make decisions. In one FGD, a participant talked about how IPV comes from traditional representations of gender roles and the refusal by some men to change:

> I think it comes from before when men were seen as idols. They had that mind-set that whatever they said was true and must be done or obeyed and if it's not, I will beat her…Up until now that mind-set is somehow there, they think they are superior to women. They can't listen to women's advice; they just want them to follow their orders. The way they found the society at their birth, they think that is how it should be. (FGD 1, 7/9/2013)

However, these gender roles were thought to be changing in Rwanda with more women working professionally and less dependent positions for women in their relationships with men.

Representations of marriage were similarly discussed as stopping women from leaving their relationships. Women who were married were described as more rooted to the 'home' and less able to leave, whereas those who were not married were said to have more freedom. This was linked to socio-cultural norms about marriage and 'building a home' as described in the quote below:

> Culture and norms sometimes also become an issue. Women say 'no, I am not going to build a home and destroy it after. Let me try this month. If it fails I will try next month' because of the culture and norms. (FGD 4, 14/9/2013)

Closely related to marriage were women's representations of family, and the importance of keeping a family's (and therefore a husband's) secrets safe from neighbours and community members. This was described as a major deterrent for women in reporting violence. One woman in a FGD used a Rwandan proverb to explain this – *'the heart of a woman is the coffin of a man's sins'*.

Economic. Economic factors including women's unemployment, homelessness, food and financial insecurity were mentioned as constraining women's responses. In the

end, whether or not a woman had a job was seen as a major factor enabling her to escape a violent situation:

> As a woman you might be working, you have a nice job and at that time you have the ability to raise your children and have a good life if you divorce. Most of the time women stay in violence because they don't have anywhere else to go or because of poverty, but if you have somewhere to go, and a job; it will be very easy for you to come out of that situation. (FGD 3, 14/9/2013)

Employment would allow a woman to maintain herself financially, and this was closely linked with her ability or inability to leave the relationship. Women need jobs in order to provide them with options since men are frequently those that provide for them financially. Reporting the violence was equally seen as having negative financial implications because the husband would be put in jail, which would end his ability to provide for his family. In interviews, women who had experienced IPV noted that this lack of financial security had often contributed to both food insecurity and homelessness.

Political-Legal. Two different aspects of the political-legal context were identified as constraining women's responses: one, laws around marriage and child custody; and two, a lack of support from authorities. There was significant concern and disagreement during the FGDs about the government's position on child custody in cases of separation. Under Rwandan law, government authorities take decisions about custody only when the couple is legally married. Local leaders or family members often act as mediators in cases where the couple is not married. Whether children go with the father or the mother if a couple separates due to IPV was discussed in the FGDs as a major factor regulating a woman's decisions to stay in a relationship or not:

> When it comes to kids it is hard to quit the situation. So for those who are married and being mistreated and don't have kids to cater for, they can say 'I can't stand staying in a situation where there is always someone on my head bothering me. I would rather quit and live a happy life than stay in violence'. But think of that person who doesn't have anywhere to go and has kids to cater for. She can only accept the violence, forcefully, she can't even consult someone. Her only hope is the children when they grow up, will support her in one way or another. (FGD 4, 14/9/2013)

Here the participant discusses the decision of staying in or leaving a relationship and the ways this is intimately connected to marriage status and children. Married women

can report violence against their partners under Rwanda's Law on Prevention and Punishment of Gender-based Violence (59/2008), and yet major constraints exist for married women regarding child custody. The political-legal context that dictates laws of marriage and child custody is deeply implicated in women's agency in this context.

The political-legal context also comes into play in the perceptions and experiences women have of authorities. Previous experiences can greatly affect women's decision to report violence as described in one of the interviews:

> I went to report him to the authorities, I was always going to courts reporting him, but it was in vain. No one helped me, and I thought I was wasting time, and then I stopped reporting him to the authorities. (Interview 1, 17/9/2013)

Similar experiences of the authorities either refusing to help or being caught up in the administration of the system were reported across the interviews. The political-legal context is therefore not just about the laws that exist, but the ways in which these laws are implemented by those responsible for putting them into practice (Author, 2014).

Historical. The genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994 provides an important context for understanding women's responses to IPV. Participants discussed the implications of losing their family during the genocide for the decisions they were able to make. In the following quote one of the women experiencing IPV discussed the impact of Rwanda's history on who she has for support:

> He has a family and I don't have a family, you all know what happened in Rwanda since it affected many people and changed our state of life today. (Interview 6, 19/9/2013)

Women also discussed the way in which ethnic differences complicated relationships with their spouse or in-laws:

> His mother told him that I am not from the right tribe "called impunyu" that he should not stay with me. (Interview 13, 19/9/2013)

In both of these examples, the history of Rwanda has placed constraints on women's ability to seek support from their families (due to their death during the genocide or lack of support from in-laws). Similar constraints were mentioned across the interviews in often very subtle ways, for example by mentioning the absence of family to support them financially if they were to leave the relationship, or disagreements with partners over the paternity of children after the conflict.

Instances of agency in responses to IPV in Rwanda

Women's accounts of possible responses to IPV were categorised into four main themes: reporting, fighting back, obtaining emotional support, and remaining silent. Examples from the data are discussed below in terms of the meanings women attribute to these actions, and how some can be understood as instances of agency while others cannot in light of the contextual constraints outlined above.

Reporting

Participants spoke about the possibility of reporting cases of IPV to three different sources: the police, the community, and (to a lesser extent) family or friends. A recent campaign carried out by the Rwandan National Police about violence against women appears to be largely responsible for the focus on reporting to police. A great deal of optimism was expressed by participants regarding the responsiveness of the police:

> Women now have advocacy, when we have problems we go to the authorities, the police come to help, and they put men in jail when they are at fault. (Interview 12, 19/9/2013)

In recent years, the government has also put in place community measures to act as resources for women experiencing violence, including Gender-Based Violence (GBV) committees and *umugoroba w'ababyeyi* (parents' evenings) where community members come together to discuss relevant issues in their community, including IPV (Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, 2011).

However, in interviews and FGDs these options were frequently dwarfed by the overwhelming barriers to reporting described by participants. Women described reporting as an option and often in the same breath also described the contextual barriers that make it difficult for women experiencing violence to act:

> At least for today there is gender awareness that one has to fight for his or her rights. So she has to know where to go and the levels also which can help her. But to talk of that person who is marginalised, she will even die of violence because she can't speak out. (FGD 2, 14/9/2013)

In examining the meanings attributed to acts of reporting in this context, reporting is often discussed by women as an ideal but unfeasible response to IPV. Significant contextual barriers prevent reporting from taking place, consistent with the extremely low instances of reporting to formal sources in Rwanda.

Fighting back

Participants identified four main ways in which women fight back against IPV, including: behaving differently; getting a job; threatening police action; and leaving the relationship. Women in both interviews and FGDs mentioned the possibility of behaving differently in the home as a means of responding to violence.

> It is true she has rights, but she also has responsibilities at home. So through teachings, they [social workers] tell them how to behave. For example if a husband starts shouting and you do the same, it will go far. You have to know how to manage the situation and talk to him nicely – show him love. (FGD 2, 14/9/2013)

In this quote, the participant discusses the responsibility of women experiencing violence to try and manage the situation through not shouting back. This could easily be interpreted as an example of women's oppression and acceptance of gender roles that position women as responsible for maintaining the stability of the home and acting demurely with their husbands. However, drawing on Mahmood's conceptualisation of agency here, we can also interpret this act of behaving differently as an agentic act of self-management. Women describe managing their behaviour in order to maintain control over IPV. This commitment to self-management is illustrated in a quote from one of the interviews:

> I came here and I met other women, and after we would exchange ideas. I would know how to behave myself in the house and be patient too. I also learned about small-scale business, how I can start my own business and then things started changing and misunderstandings in the house were less. (Interview 5, 17/9/2013)

For this participant, the act of behaving differently has provided a means for her to reduce the violence. It also belongs to a larger project of self-development, including starting a business. The act of altering behaviour in the home in this case is not an act of oppression (although her actions do work within, rather than against, gender norms). For her, behaving differently played a role in her capacity to take control of the situation and change the violence.

Similar to the previous quote, several participants discussed getting a job as a means for women to change violence while still remaining in a relationship. Again, this was explained as providing a means for women to manage the situation:

> If you have a business or something else you do he cannot abuse you. For example if I had something to do like a job, or if I had financial means to raise up my child I wasn't going to

the authorities and all that to get help…[Violence] happens because they see that women need their help and they take advantage of them. (Interview 12, 19/9/2013)

In this quote getting a job is described as an alternative to going to the authorities for help. Participants often claimed that a job would protect women against violence, as in this brief quote from one of the FGDs: '*If you have a job your husband will not look down on you*.' Finding a job is thought to protect a woman against the forms of violence that arise from the poverty of the family more broadly, for example violence that occurs as a result of financial pressures that create stress and conflict in family dynamics. In this way, getting a job provides a means of managing the violence rather than leaving the relationship. While this may not be an act of agency in terms of freeing a woman from an abusive relationship, it is an act of agency in terms of the meaning attributed to it by women – as a way of managing violence in the household.

Participants also described threatening police action as a means of addressing the violence without reporting it to the police. Again, this is a means for women to manage the violence in light of the contextual constraints (in this case political constraints) to formal reporting. In an example from one of the FGDs, a participant recounts the story of her friend who decided that putting her husband in jail would not permanently stop him from abusing their daughter:

> She ended up calling the husband. She told him that if he is not feeling guilty about anything it is fine, but if he knows he did something he should leave the country because the police were coming for him. Then the husband said he knew what she was talking about. She asked him what it was, and he said 'maybe it is what happened with K (their daughter), I think she told you.' So she told him to leave the country if he doesn't want to go to prison again or die. (FGD 3, 14/9/2013)

Rather than actually calling the police, the woman in the story decides to threaten her husband as a means of getting him to leave the country. This action is explained later in the FGD as more permanent than committing him to a justice system that may or may not find him guilty or stop the abuse. The agency inherent in this act of threatening police action stems from the perceived effects it can have on the situation – it may make the man leave the country or stop the abuse. It is perceived as enabling change for the woman involved without reporting the violence.

Lastly, participants discussed the option of fighting back through leaving the relationship entirely.

> After being abused, instead of staying in that situation you can ask for the right to separate and live alone, to avoid a situation where one of you might die. (Interview 10, 19/9/2013)

This quote highlights the possibility of leaving a violent relationship. While contextual constraints were often said to prevent this from happening, in the worst cases leaving was seen as both possible and necessary. However, in the act of leaving, women were also described as circumventing the social expectations of marriage and family by not telling anyone:

> There are those who go through violence and they choose to keep quiet so that people won't know. Then they take their belongings and leave their home. (FGD 3, 14/9/2013)

While leaving the relationship is described as possible in this context, this quote highlights how this action still operates within socio-cultural norms. Norms of gender, family and marriage maintain women's silences even in cases where they have the agency to leave their relationship.

Obtaining emotional support

Given the socio-cultural, economic, political-legal and historical constraints on women's responses, participants discussed the importance of obtaining emotional support for the violence. This was discussed in reference to three different sources: groups of women experiencing IPV, prayer and religious belief, and friends or neighbours.

The emotional support gained through talking to other women who had also experienced violence is described by one of the participants here:

> There are times you face a situation and it is hard to keep it for yourself. So we started talking and other women joined and we started something like an association. That is when I became stronger. It was far from where I live but I used to walk and come…I met other women there and we became friends because we all had similar challenges…That is when I started to feel well. (Interview 4, 17/9/2013)

This woman further describes how a need for emotional support drove her to take action by suggesting to the pastor's wife at her church that they meet as a group. It is this emotional need that provides the incentive for her capacity to take action in the face of violence. While this action is about informal reporting of violence, it does not aim to obtain services. However, there is still clear agency evident in the action in terms of what it provides for this woman – it demonstrates her capacity to act in a way that serves her own emotional needs.

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Similarly, FGD participants discussed emotional needs as a reason not to keep quiet about the violence:

> Keeping quiet when you are going through violence increases the emotional wounds, but when you open up and tell someone about your problem, things get better. (FGD 2, 7/9/2013)

Again, the recommendation that women experiencing violence should tell someone about the problem is discussed here not in terms of reporting the violence to authorities, or having your friends report for you. Rather, the reason for action is the emotional wounds that result if you do not speak about the violence. Obtaining emotional support can be seen as an act of agency if we consider the emotional value it has for women experiencing IPV.

Remaining silent

Remaining silent was frequently mentioned by women as a response to IPV. Women were said to remain silent in order to protect the family's image as well as an individual's self-esteem. Women's protection of the family's image was connected to representations of family and marriage. As mentioned previously, women are expected to keep their husband's secrets within the family. However, women also remained silent about abuse as a means of protecting their own status within their community.

> If you look closely you will find that many [women who experience violence] keep it in their hearts. There are times that it becomes too much for them, but they say that they will die with the secret. And when you see them walking you will never know what they are keeping inside. You can see your neighbours walking around, smiling and happy, but you don't know what happens at home. She might spend the whole night crying, but when she is about to go out she wipes away the tears and then comes out smiling so that no one will know she has been crying. (FGD 3, 14/9/2013)

This quote from one of the FGDs highlights how silences can be used to protect one's image. In hiding her tears from neighbours, the woman in this story is able to maintain a certain image in spite of the violence she is experiencing. She is able to be agentic in portraying herself as the type of person she wishes to be. While this could also be interpreted as a story about how women are oppressed into silence through the stigma of IPV, a quote from an interview with a woman who had left her husband and still chooses to remain silent about the violence points to how this act of remaining silent can also be seen as an act of image preservation:

> In my life I don't like to go around saying my problems. I don't want anyone to look down on me. Till now no one knows that I don't live with my husband. (Interview 10, 19/9/2013)

This provides an example of how acts of agency can operate within the constraints established by context (in this case socio-cultural norms of family and marriage), while still providing outcomes that are valued by women. Women may choose not to report IPV not only, or at all, because they accept social norms of violence, but because they have chosen to manage public presentations of themselves in ways that are important to and consistent with the person they wish to be. In constrained social contexts, violence threatens how women are perceived within their community and how they perceive themselves. In remaining silent women may be simply acting to counteract that threat in a way that is feasible for them.

Discussion

Through discussions with women about their experiences and representations of IPV, we have identified several instances of agency in the meanings women attach to IPV responses. This helps move beyond the narrow conceptualisation of agency in the IPV literature as either reporting or leaving a relationship.

As shown in our study, women's agency is evident in the meanings women attribute to actions such as seeking emotional support for IPV. Understanding emotional support as an act of agency, as the women in this study appear to, rather than as a form of coping or a failure to formally report, provides the opportunity to acknowledge its positive potential in women's lives. Group discussions can provide participants with a greater sense of self-efficacy in dealing with problems, and help establish alternative narratives for cultural norms (Campbell et al., 2013). In this light, group discussions about IPV can be seen as a potential breeding ground for new ideas and ways of redefining representations of gender roles, marriage and family.

Women's agency is also evident in the meanings women attribute to attempts to change violence without reporting it, for example by modifying behaviour, finding a job, threatening police action, or silently leaving the relationship. However, agency manifests in slightly different ways in each of these examples of how women 'fight back' against IPV.

On the one hand, behaving differently and getting a job both demonstrate the meanings attributed to the capacity of women to try and manage the violence. While

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these actions may not always be successful in reducing violence, they are perceived by women to provide a certain amount of control over the situation. This sense of control may lead to other actions (including reporting or leaving) at a later period (Snowden, 2011). In this way, it is critical not to see agency in women's responses to IPV as a single act (e.g. reporting), but rather as a series of actions that are mutually constituted and constitutive (Madhok, Phillips, & Wilson, 2013).

On the other hand, instances of agency such as threatening to call the police or leaving the relationship act in direct response to political-legal and socio-cultural constraints. Threatening police action is a means of leveraging the political environment that has legal supports in place for women experiencing IPV, while at the same time not directly using these legal supports. The possibility of leaving a relationship highlights the ways in which social norms of family and marriage are being challenged in Rwanda, and yet a woman doing this silently without telling anyone she is leaving acts within these same social norms. This points to the ways in which acts of agency are intimately shaped by the context in which they occur, and the challenge of relying on generalised ideas about agency as either leaving or reporting a violent relationship.

Drawing on a social constructivist conceptualisation of agency in our analysis has also helped to identify the potential for a limited form of agency in the decision to remain silent about IPV. While taking this as an act of agency runs counter to the IPV literature, by paying attention to what an action enables for women we can see how remaining silent can provide a means of protecting both a family's image and an individual's self-esteem within a community. Clearly it is vital to support women in telling others about violence they experience. However, our argument is that in order to fully address the complexities of why IPV happens, how it is maintained, and how it can be addressed in constrained social contexts, we need to also consider the meanings women attach to a range of possible responses to violent relationships. This includes understanding the reasons for women's actions, such as remaining silent, that operate within socio-cultural norms that condone violence, but that may also play an important role in a woman's self-esteem, sense of community belonging and ultimately in her control over being the person she wishes to be.

Conclusions

Given the contextual factors that often constrain acts of reporting or leaving violent relationships in Rwanda, new strategies for addressing IPV must be added to existing options. The social constructivist approach to agency drawn on in this paper provides both a theoretical tool for thinking beyond narrow conceptualisations of women's responses to IPV, and a practical tool for considering new public health strategies to support these responses. Efforts to increase the ability of women to formally report a violent relationship currently dominate the public health response to IPV in Rwanda, as elsewhere. The Government of Rwanda has put in place measures to improve knowledge about the options available to women experiencing IPV as part of a countrywide awareness campaign on gender-based violence. In addition, in partnership with the United Nations, the Government has established a One-Stop Centre located in Kigali's police hospital that provides a combination of psychosocial, medical and police support services for victims of violence. It insists that women report the violence to police in order to obtain these services. While the existence of such support services is essential, they fail to address many of the broader socio-cultural, economic, political-legal and historical factors highlighted in this study as constraining women's responses to IPV. Instead, they largely focus on supporting the individual who has decided to report the violence.

The findings of this study point to additional opportunities for public health services to support women's responses to IPV in contexts where reporting or leaving a violent relationship may be difficult. For example, the perception by women that seeking emotional support from others is necessary to address the damaging effects of violence highlights the need for services that provide this emotional support without insisting on formal reporting as a requirement for participation. Ensuring economic opportunities for women provides a means of addressing IPV not only through facilitating a woman's ability to leave, but also in supporting women's self-efficacy, which may be derived from the perception that having a job provides an additional means to manage violence without leaving a relationship. In addition, in order to reduce women's silences about IPV, our findings point to the need for public health strategies that both recognises the stigma that women in violent relationships may experience from their communities and addresses women's concerns about the reputation of their family and themselves. In this way, understanding the meanings

women attribute to responses to IPV is not only theoretically useful for rethinking agency in constrained social contexts, but also provides important considerations for the public health response to IPV.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Contextual constraints shaping women's responses to IPV

Global theme	Organising theme	Examples of basic themes (in-vivo)
Socio-cultural	Representations of gender roles	- men think women should stay at home and cook food
		- before, men were the only ones who had the right to speak
	Representations of marriage	- marriage means having to give one's property to the man
		- husbands take care of women financially
	Representations of family	- homes are built by couples staying together
		- a family's secrets need to remain in the family
Economic	Women's unemployment	- I can't help myself because I don't have a job
	Homelessness	- women stay in violence because they don't have anywhere else to go
	Food insecurity	- days without food and drink
	Financial insecurity	- poverty is a challenge for families
		- women can't leave because they depend on men
Political-legal	Lack of support from authorities	- reporting didn't help so I stopped
	Marriage status	- unmarried women are unprotected
	Child custody laws	- authorities decide about children if the couple is married
Historical	Loss of family during genocide	- He has family, I don't
		- I have lost my family, I can't lose my children
	Ethnic conflict	- I am not from the right tribe

Table 2: Women's actions in response to IPV

Instances of agency (Global themes)	Organising themes	Basic themes (in-vivo)
Reporting	To police	- need to report IPV to police - police act as arbitrator - put man in jail
	To community representatives	- announcements during community gatherings - GBV committees - community gatherings about GBV - telling your pastor
	To friends and family	- telling husband's family - telling a friend
Fighting back	Behaving differently	- behaving oneself in the house - being patient - managing the situation - showing him love - changing one's attitude
	Threatening police action	- telling him the police are on the way - telling him you will report - telling him he should leave the country if he doesn't want to go to jail
	Getting a job	- starting a business - finding a job - getting something to do - selling fruits
	Leaving the relationship	- not sticking to such a man - asking for the right to separate and living alone - taking one's belongings and leaving the home - taking the children and leaving
Obtaining emotional support	Group support (emotional needs)	- starting an association - going to church meetings
	Emotional support from religion	- getting help from prayer - getting help from God
	Emotional support from friends/ neighbours	- telling someone makes things better - approaching neighbours for advice - telling someone you trust
Remaining silent	Remaining silent for the family's image	- keeping family secrets - preserving the family's image
	Remaining silent for the neighbours	- not saying one's problems - hiding tears in public - not telling anyone she doesn't live with her husband