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Article

Cohabiting Relationships as *Matula* for Young Women and Grounds for Intimate Partner Violence: A Critical Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

In this article, we critically reflect on the literature on intimate partner violence and the importance of an African feminist lens to understanding the influence of cultural discourse and practice in cohabitating relationships. We focus on intimate partner violence experienced by young black women in cohabiting relationships among the Vhavenda cultural group in South Africa. We reflect on the concept of *matula*, which views and constructs cohabitation as a taboo practice. We ask: what does it mean to intervene and respond to incidences of intimate violence in a relationship that is already socially and culturally negated? We interrogate the relevance of African feminist epistemology that prioritises cultural beliefs, customs, traditions, values and behaviour. Such epistemology, we argue, reflects the importance of thinking of gender and gender-based violence in the context of culture as dynamic and constantly negotiated by community members. Lastly, we explore the relevance of the African feminist perspective as part of the work of disrupting essentialising cultural and traditional practices that function to entrench gendered power dynamics. This study is conceptualised from a qualitative approach with in-depth, unstructured one-on-one interviews. Ten interviews with young women between the ages of 18 and 24 years were conducted through the Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme in the Vhembe District, South Africa.

Keywords: cohabitation; culture and tradition; intimate partner violence; Vhavenda; African feminism

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Introduction

Deconstructing *Matula*: What Price Culture?

The Deconstructing Matula Project, spearheaded by Profs Azwihangwisi Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Vhonani Netshandama from the University of South Africa and the University of Venda, respectively, has foregrounded the challenges of culture and language in advocating social change for LGBTI+ populations in South Africa, with a particular focus on awareness raising among the Vhavenda people. The project's important work illustrates the alienating role of language in making sense of the embodied practices of sex and gender, arguing that we need to seriously consider how the transposing of English as a medium for understanding non-heteronormative sexualities may be detrimental to fostering acceptance of people who identify as LGBTI+. Mkhwanazi, a queer activist, notes "having to use English removes us from our cultures. It others us" (Collison, 2017). This concern with the failure of language to promote understanding of non-heteronormative identities and experiences is more than an issue of language. As Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2014) has argued, it is also about how cultural understandings may be deployed to legitimate these identities and experiences.

Similarly, it is also present in the cultural constructs of behaviours and relationships considered to be out of the accepted social and cultural norm. Communal cultural values and beliefs require individuals to behave in a certain manner (Nicolson, 2008). For example, Vhavenda women in intimate relationships are expected to remain silent about their partner's violent behaviours to preserve their relationship (Ramathuba et al., 2014). This is because of sociocultural practices of male domination, provider and aggression while females are perceived as passive and expected to be submissive (Nwabunike & Tenkorang, 2017; Shefer et al., 2008). Women's rights have been violated as male dominance is endorsed (Nduna & Jewkes, 2012; World Health Organization, 2016).

In addition, it is a disgrace for women to have multiple partners as this is regarded as inappropriate behaviour (De Beer, 2004). Ussher (1991, as cited in Shefer, 2004, p. 193) reports that women who are perceived to assimilate men's behaviour such as being "aggressive, assertive, sexually active, independent, adventurous and refrain from mothering" are labelled insane. The Venda descriptive term of *matula* is used to denote taboo behaviour. Netshandama et al. (2017) argued that this term is deployed to explain those relationships, identities and behaviours that fail to conform to either heteronormative or culturally accepted forms of heteronormative practice such as marriage. A participant in their study recalled the following:

> Whenever I walked around, I heard people calling 'Mme ya vhana matula', these were the first Venda words that I learned because the majority of people around here said that whenever I walked around. I later got to learn that a man who cross-dresses and behaves in an effeminate way was seen as taboo and that is what Venda people see in me. Matula, a taboo, because I do not conform to gender binaries and cultural norms (Netshandama et al., 2017, p. 314).

We conduct the study from two focal points, namely, culture in general and cohabitation in the Vhavenda culture from an African feminist philosophy in the literature on intimate partner violence (IPV). Cohabitation—the practice of living together as a couple without being married—is similarly not only frowned upon (Obeng-Hinneh & Kpoor, 2022; Posel & Rudwick, 2014) in the African culture but also often labelled as matula, morally taboo. A Lusaka study with cohabiting young women reports a lack of support from family members with some young women running away secretly (eloping) with their partners (Muthengi et al., 2022). Similarly, Lwanga et al. (2022) propose that Ugandan young women in cohabiting relationships lack the support from their family when there is conflict between them and their partners. This lack of support is owing to the disapproval of the union, which influences IPV and stereotypes of culture as stagnant. Some research proposes that there is a lack of research on cohabitation and violence in sub-Saharan Africa (Apatinga & Tenkorang, 2022; Lwanga et al., 2022) and that this is because of the stigma attached to cohabitation relationships (Muthengi et al., 2022).

Similarly, in South Africa, research on young women's experiences of IPV in cohabiting relationships is scarce (Allen, 2017; Kheswa & Mashabela, 2020; Pengpid & Peltzer, 2013). Much of the research on IPV towards young women deals with the topic through a deductive or inductive approach (Gibbs et al., 2018; Jewkes et al., 2010). For example, some studies use a descriptive methodology, a survey and an exploratory approach to explore IPV among young women (Motsoeneng, 2021; Ross et al., 2022). Despite the considerable body of research on IPV, some reports do not contextualise these incidents of violence. For example, IPV in marriage, cohabitation and dating relationships are uniformly reported despite the different contexts (Mulaudzi et al., 2018).

Three main themes have been extensively written about in the literature on IPV in South Africa, namely, the effects of IPV on young women (Sobuwa, 2019), the reasons why young women stay in violent intimate relationships (Willan et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2008), and factors that contribute to IPV (Gibbs et al., 2018). These themes give perspective to the experiences, perceptions, nature, extent and cycle of IPV towards young women (Stern et al., 2019; Willan et al., 2019). Studies highlight the vulnerability of young women in intimate relationships, despite the nature of the relationships.

There is little debate in the IPV literature about culture and cohabitation, specifically in the Vhavenda culture. The lack of focus on women in cohabiting relationships, misrepresentation and homogenisation of findings from general IPV research ignore the plight of young women in cohabiting relationships and the intricate nuances of culture in how violence is responded to among their networks of support. In the current study, we aimed to explore some of the intricacies of IPV from an African feminist perspective to understand how community circles intervene and make sense of IPV in cohabiting relationships. The following two questions guided the overall framing of the study:

- What practising gendered cultural script affects how women experience IPV in the context of the Vhavenda culture?
- Can an African feminist approach help us to understand differently the ambiguous role of culture when dealing with IPV?

African Philosophy Perspective as Relevant to African Feminist Theorising

African philosophy as an ongoing debate is perceived differently by different scholars. Professor Odera Oruka (as cited in Bodunrin, 1981, pp. 161–162) presented the following African philosophical perspectives: (1) ethno-philosophy which is concerned with the "world view of African peoples, their myth, proverbs and folk-lores as philosophy"; (2) philosophic sagacity in which "the attempt is made to identify men in the society who are reputed for their wisdom"; and (3) professional philosophy which emerged in the 1950s and "takes a universal view of philosophy with the same meaning in all culture". Mbiti (1962, as cited in Hallen, 2008, p. 101) propose African philosophy as beliefs and values that African peoples have in common. The above perspectives prompt Oluwole (2005) to argue that, owing to different perspectives on what an African philosophy could be, it is impossible to have an applicable African feminist philosophical position. However, Kalawole (as cited in Arndt, 2002) suggests that feminism in Africa has been in existence through group activities of women for common welfare culturally, socially, economically and politically although they lack the language for their actions. Griffiths (2022) highlights that, although there are different perspectives on what constitutes African philosophy, "philosophy is being done" (p. 243).

Much of feminist theory originates from the activism work that strives for gender equality and the entrenchment of patriarchal ideologies. African feminism prioritises the rights of African women on the African continent and those living in the diaspora (Goredema, 2010). African feminists foreground the narratives of women (see Kessi and Boonzaier, 2018; Kiguwa, 2019) to contribute to knowledge in general and particularly that of black African women within a particular context. For example, other studies represent women's voices by using photo voice, visual methods and poetry (Bradbury et al., 2012; Cornell et al., 2016; Segalo, 2018; Zway & Boonzaier, 2015).

An African feminist psychology approach highlights patriarchy as systemic structures and practices that are oppressive to women in general but also differential in effect owing to intersecting influences of race, class, sexuality, geography, etc. In addition, an African feminist approach recognises the essentialism inherent in many understandings and the use of gender and gender identity (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018). This is important as it allows us to conceive of how gender is constructed in different contexts and how cultural scripts influence the ways that people make sense of gender and gendered lives. Social constructionist and critical approaches in the discipline have not only demonstrated the socially construed nature of many of these categories but also addressed how these constructs are linked to power and dynamics of power. The notion of cohabitation as taboo, as matula, is therefore important to address as a gendered

cultural script that unfavourably limits many women's agency to live their sexual and intimate lives and also the choices they make in contexts of violence in these relationships. An African feminist psychology lens further allows us to understand gender-based violence as historical and rooted in social, structural and political processes that have a history (Coetzee & Du Toit, 2018). The research proposes that high levels of violence can be traced to the apartheid regime of unjust laws (Modiri, 2022; Ross, 2009), which resulted in the majority of men being perpetrators of violence (Jewkes et al., 2002).

It is crucial to understand the experiences and belief systems of African women's experiences from orientations that address their lived social, political, economic and cultural lives. African feminist orientations are a critical insight into such realities and lives as they do not marginalise the everyday, structural and cultural influences on how people make sense of their lives. According to Adelowo (2015), this includes the ways in which many African cultures use folklore, local parables, proverbs, songs and storytelling to understand the content and contextualise discourses that are likely to shape young women's world views. The traditional way of narrating stories "reveals reality in freshly apprehended, proximal immediacy" (Edwards, 2011). Ratele (2019, p. 48) reminds us that to understand African people's lives "only a situated understanding can offer an answer to the problems of life as it is lived". In taking up this important reminder, we consider the place of African feminism approaches that may offer us a novel lens through which to theorise IPV. For example, what fallacies do we tend to assume in mainstream theorising about intimacy? What repercussions do marginalised understandings of intimacy have for our understanding of IPV? Here, we are proposing that failure to understand intimacy via a contextualised lens may mean that we fail to fully grasp how these contextualised lenses may influence perceptions of IPV in a relationship. When do families and communities intervene in situations of IPV? What constructs of a relationship as taboo influence these moments of intervention?

African Feminist Frameworks Helping to Understand IPV

This research lens is from an African feminist perspective to potentially understand black African rural women's context and their experiences of intimate violence in cohabiting relationships. African feminism offers an important framework to understand women's experiences of IPV and in situations of social and cultural influences such as cohabitation. The framework acknowledges that being gendered simultaneously occurs alongside other processes and practices of subjectification that include race, class, sexuality and geography. The framework takes seriously the role of culture in framing many women's lives in both positive and negative ways (Landrine, 1995). In responding to the question "is cohabitation un-African?" Okyere-Manu (2015, p. 45) writes: "cohabitation . . . poses a challenge to our African cultural outlook towards marriage," further stating that "the institution of marriage within . . . communities have slowly been [un]adulterated. This has compromised the rich and cherished values around the indigenous rites and ritual leading to marriages". Okyere-Manu's framing of cohabitation as a threat to the sanctity of marriage is implicitly

imbued with a moral panic economy that regards deviations from accepted social and cultural norms as taboo. It also implicitly engages in an essentialist stance towards African cultural practices that posit cultures as immutable and rigid. This is a significant critique also offered by critical feminist scholarship regarding notions of identity and experiences as essentialist and binary.

In this article, we conceptualise cultural influences on the cohabiting relationships of young women in the rural Vhembe District from an African feminist perspective. African feminist scholarship has argued that ideas of culture may inadvertently serve patriarchal agendas that serve to normalise violence against women and girls (Mama, 2011; Mama et al., 2005). In the Tshifudi Village in the Vhembe District, young women are discouraged to further their studies and rather focus on domestic duties (Iwara & Obadire, 2018). The engraved toxic patriarchal cultural beliefs perpetuate women's victimisation intending to normalise men's position of power to make certain decisions on behalf of women (Matshidze & Nemutandani, 2016; Tshifhumulo et al., 2018). Levine (1984) warns that the lack of education and political representation for women's rights relegates women to dependency. In this regard, education is essential as it provides knowledge and skills for young women to contribute productively to the economy and care for themselves (Dlodlo, 2009; Mdleleni, 2022).

The ways in which cultural discourses may be deployed in the justification for violence against partners have been well documented. Lichter and McCloskey (2004) highlight that patriarchal beliefs promote IPV. For example, Phaswana (2000) report that many Vhavenda men perceive the slight (as opposed to excessive) beating of their partner as an acceptable form of discipline. Ahikire (2014) reports that in Kenya, Uganda and Namibia cultural practices disadvantage women and privilege men's domination. In the Vhavenda culture, women are not supposed to utter their concerns either in intimate relationships or in general (Nenungwi, 2015). This is justified via discursive rhetoric of culture and disciplining women and young girls, illustrating the intersection of both cultural and gender discourses in normalising partner violence. Limited research from the Vhembe district reports an increase in intimate femicide (Mukwevho, 2017). The femicide report from the Vhembe District is of young women in a marriage setting. This does not suggest that young women in cohabiting relationships are not likely to face similar fates and it is a thought-provoking omission in the report. Some scholars have argued that most young women in Venda are likely to get married at an early age (Kyei, 2011; Moore & Govender, 2013). Given such diversity regarding relationship structures and their recognition in the community, it is reasonable to expect that there are differing responses to accounts and situations of violence. In the next section, we present an overview of the method of this study.

Method

Settings

The Community Police Forum and the South African Police Services (SAPS) established the Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme (TVEP) in 1997. In 2001 and 2004, 24-hour one-stop centres were established in the Tshilidzini Hospital and the Donald Fraser Hospital, in partnership with the SAPS and the South African Department of Health. The two hospitals are the main public hospitals that service the Vhembe District communities. The TVEP is located in the Sibasa Mbilwi area 3 km from Thohoyandou in Limpopo, South Africa. The TVEP provides services such as prevention, empowerment and support services in five thematic areas, namely, HIV/AIDS, child abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault and LGBTI/vulnerable minorities. The TVEP organisation was selected to be the data-collection site for this research because of the sensitive nature of the study, which focuses on the participants' experiences of IPV in cohabiting relationships.

The Vhembe district is formerly known as the Transvaal region by the British colonies from 1910 until the end of apartheid in 1994. The Vhembe District Municipality is in the northern part of the Limpopo province. The Vhembe District covers a geographical area that is predominantly rural. It is diverse in its languages as the majority of the population speaks Tshivenda (69%). This is followed by Xitsonga (27%), Sepedi (2%) and Sesotho (1%) (Limpopo Vhembe District Profile, n.d.). The diversity and population growth could have a financial impact on its province. This is likely to result in a lack of insufficient resources that affect the communities' access to health services and education. It also results in poor infrastructure and poor administration of policies and management, rendering IPV unabatedly (Nefale, 2016). The Vhembe District encounters challenges related to poverty and unemployment due to the low socio-economic activity in the region (Kyei, 2011; Nefale, 2016).

Data-Collection Procedures

A qualitative approach forms the basis to explore the participants' accounts of their lives in cohabiting relationships that became violent. We used in-depth, unstructured one-on-one interviews as a data-collection method. All interviews were conducted at the TVEP organisation in a secluded private room, and were digitally audio recorded. The interviews were conducted in the home language (Tshivenda) of the participants and then translated into English. This was done to embrace the tenets of African psychology to centre language in making sense of people's lives. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour to 2 hours per participant with breaks in between as needed. The participant accounts were prompted by a general question on how they have come to be at the TVEP. The data were collected for six months. A narrative approach allowed the participants to tell their stories of both cohabitation and the resultant experiences of IPV in the home.

Cohort of Participants

The participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 years and some had left their abusive relationships at the time of the interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities. The participants reside in small villages surrounding the TVEP organisation. They grew up in different socio-economic backgrounds with eight out of 10 being raised by single-headed women (either an aunt or a mother). About nine out of 10 participants had a maximum of three toddlers of which the majority of toddlers were girls. At the time of the interview, eight participants were cohabiting and two participants were recently (two months before the interviews) separated from their partners because of conflicts. Two participants had an entry-level education, two were still studying and had not yet matriculated, two were studying at the university and four were high school dropouts. All participants were in heterosexual relationships and narrated their understanding of IPV in cohabitation specific to the dynamics of rigidly conservative and heteronormative relationships in the community.

Data Analysis

The software MAXQDA (Verbi, 2018) was used to manage the data. Thematic analysis was utilised for data immersion, which is a coding process where themes generated were grouped into main groups and subgroups. The process enabled the final meaningful themes that contributed to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Creswell, 2007). The narrative analysis was focused on exploring the stories that the participants chose to share and the significant social and familial networks that they narrated as important to their experiences of IPV. In a context such as that of the Venda, where traditional cultural values may influence how cohabitation is perceived by the community at large, these experiences of IPV become even more complicated.

Vhavenda Cultural Perspective of Intimate Relationships: Some Gendered Dimensions

In this article, we present a perspective on the Vhavenda culture. We also note that this culture does not exist in isolation or static ways, but is shaped by people, material, and political and economic conditions. Nonetheless, several dominant cultural constructs of women's position in society are important to consider concerning the issue of IPV. In considering the gendered dimensions of women's status in communities, the status of marriage as a key defining aspect of a woman's life cannot be understated. In most African cultures, parents consciously anticipate their daughter's lobola[1] arrangements from her potential in-laws (Rudwick & Posel, 2014). Matope et al. (2013) have argued that cultural practices such as lobola exacerbate gender-based violence.

1 Transactional dowry exchange carried out by the male relatives of the husband-to-be and the paternal male relatives of the bride. In some cultures, the paternal aunt (*Rakgadi*) may be involved in dowry negotiations between families (Rudwick & Posel, 2014).

In considering cultural and social expectations placed on young women's sexual development and intimate attachments, Nduna (2020) argues that a sequential model has been predominantly deployed in the surveillance and policing of young women's sexual behaviours. The sequential model of sexual development assumes that adolescent girls and young women can only develop in a linear phase that is marked by the achievement of key development goals. For example, a young girl and woman must first succeed in school, obtain an education and then strive to become employed. Only then should she consider sexual and intimate relationships.

Even when a young woman does consider her desire to explore her sexuality and sexual desires, this is only desirable within the bounds of marriage and with the implicit intention to procreate. The sequential model has been critiqued by feminist scholars as not only ignorant of many young women and girls' social realities but also imposing a narrow patriarchal ontology of sexual and intimate behaviour (Mojola, 2014). Hollway (1989) has similarly referred to this model of sexual behaviour as framed within a "have-holds" discursive view of femininity. The sequential model referred to seem not inclusive of cohabiting relationships as young women might be perceived to deviate from the cultural norms of intimate relationships. This is because some African cultures also believe in gendered systematic socialisation guided by a set of principles (Nenungwi, 2015). For example, in African culture, marriage is an acceptable and sound form of union through the support of religion, law and culture (Moore, 2019). Cohabiting relationships are culturally unexpected (Edin et al., 2016). Any behaviour that is seen to challenge or disrupt such social beliefs are referred to as matula (Netshandama et al., 2017). Cohabiting relationships, while increasingly common, are therefore categorised in this way and often frowned upon as a cultural taboo.

Differing social statuses are enjoyed by women in the family and community relative to their cultural position. For example, the role of the *Makhadzi* (paternal aunt) is more valuable than that of the woman's brothers in the family. This is because the paternal aunt is entrusted to protect the male genealogy (Matshidze, 2013; Matshidze & Nemutandani, 2016). This of course also means that the paternal aunt enjoys a more elevated social status than the maternal aunt (*Mmane*). The Basotho people follow similar cultural practices to the *Rakgadi*'s role (the paternal aunt), which includes addressing the family during cultural ceremonies (Mankga, 2013). What would such a role mean for couples in cohabiting relationships? The role of the Makhadzi is non-existent in cohabiting relationships because the nature of the relationships is culturally unrecognised. For example, couples in cohabiting relationships are pressured to either get married or have their relationships tabooed with no lack of support from family members during conflict (Muthengi et al., 2022; Obeng-Hinneh & Kpoor, 2022).

Motherhood is prioritised in marriage and the inability to expand the husband's family leads to calling the wife derogatory names (Dyer et al., 2002). The cultural and religious beliefs which recognise motherhood as "social status and recognition" for wives are challenged (Mothoagae, 2019). These philosophies condone gendered roles, interpret

women's experiences in different contextual marriages as being homogeneous, and do not recognise motherhood in cohabiting relationships. Cultural ideologies endorse some behaviours and taboo others.

In marital and cohabiting contexts, women's statuses have not changed. This is explained in a study in which a participant stated that a mother will utter words such as "nṋe ndi na afhio? Hafhu ndo ḓa nga kholomo" [What matter do I have? I'm here because of bride-price] (Nenungwi, 2015, p. 77). This interwovenness of culture with gendered social status is important to consider with regard to women's voices in the community and the legitimacy that may be accorded to these voices' being dependent on their cultural position in the family and the broader community. Such a nuanced dynamic becomes even more challenging in the context of IPV. For example, one of the participants in our study, Mulalo, questioned this refusal of her partners' mother and sisters to intervene in her relationship:

> Interviewer: Zwoni fara hani mazwa, mme a, mme a munna na vhahalivho vha sani, vha sani tsireledze sa muthu wa mufumakadzi and hu uri na vhone ndi vhafumakadzi? [How did it make you feel that the mother of the man and the sisters didn't, they didn't protect you?]
>
> Mulalo: A zwingo mpfara zwavhudi. Vhutshiloni ndo di vhudzisa uri why avho vhatshi imelela nwana wavho nne athi nwana? Athi khou, athi fani na nwana wavho? Why vhasa todi u divha uri ndi nnyi okhakhaho vhatshi khou vhona nne mulandu? [It didn't sit well with me. In life, I asked myself why are they standing up for their child, am I not a child? I didn't, I am not the same as their child. Why don't they want to know who is in the wrong, yet they are blaming me?]

Entrenched cultural ideologies perpetuate the cycle of violence (Mshweshwe, 2020). Nhlekisana (2005) propose that some mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law are notorious for maltreating the bride. In this study, Mulalo seems to experience similar treatments as that of the paid bride price from her "in-laws" although cohabiting relationships are not condoned. This suggests that women in general experience some form of violence despite the context of the relationships. Tamale (2008) has warned that interpreting culture and tradition as being natural may escalate problems of violence. Ratele (2007) presents a similar caution.

In another example, another participant narrated being caught between two impossible worlds: to return home to unpleasant circumstances or to be called names and remain in abusive relationships. Uhone narrated that:

> Mm vha vhona sa nne hune nda bva hone hangei hayani. Zwithu zwanga zwo vha zwi sa khou to tshimbila zwavhudi . . . Zwino nda humbula u huma, nda humbula u humela hayani hai ndi sala ngoho ndi sitshena na muhumbulo ndi sitsha divha ngauri ndi a zwidivha uri na musi zwino ndi tshi khou tambula so ndi khou humela hunwe. Ndi mbuya vhuhadzi. [Mm you see as for me the home that I come from. My things were not going well. So, when I thought of going back, I thought of going back home no

> honestly, I remain thoughtless knowing that I know that even now as I am suffering so if I decide to go back somewhere. I am a divorcee.]

The term *mbuya vhuhadzi* (a divorcee) degrades women in general. This is because of pressure on women, in general, to keep their families together (Leburu-Masigo, 2019). For example, in South Africa, the term "return soldier" is used colloquially to mean a woman who cannot keep her house intact or in order. In the Zulu culture, young women are sent off to their partners with a case to symbolise never returning home no matter how difficult it could be. Uhone regards herself as mbuya vhuhadzi because she has left her father's home to stay with a man regardless of whether it was an acceptable union or not. A relationship is a taboo in a cohabiting union because the relationship is not socially acceptable (Posel & Rudwick, 2014). The lack of acknowledgement of diverse relationships influences gender stereotypes that lead to silence and a cycle of victimisation in South Africa.

In Mulalo and Uhone's extracts, they expressed being in a relationship with their in-laws and not in a cohabiting relationship. This might be because they were staying at the home of their partners' family and conducted duties similar to those of young women whose families received a bride price. They might subconsciously be aware of the stigma that surrounds being in cohabiting relationships. In South Africa, some young people in dating relationships refer to their partners as their significant others before marriage. For example, young couples call each other "my wife" and "my husband". These names are mostly used when couples have dated for some time or when they have made their relationships "official" to their peers.

Many young women of 18–24 years who are in cohabiting relationships experience IPV (Department of Health, 2016). Obeng-Hinneh and Kpoor (2022) argue that cultural discourse could guide how young women make meaning and respond to their experience of violence in cohabiting relationships. In this study, a cultural perspective on silencing IPV was strategically considered to positively influence young women to empower themselves. For example, one participant, Mpho, mentioned that:

> Zwine nda sedzesa ndi zwauri muthu wa munna a vhuya a thoma unirwa lwa u tou thoma namu tendela divhani uri tshifhinga tshothe a vhuya ana thaidzo dzawe nnda u dodzi ntshela nntha hanu. Zwino nne sa muthu wa musidzana ndi adi vhudza uri ndina rights dzanga dza usa nyaga u fariwa. Arali nne nda rwiwa lwa u thoma honoyo mupama muthihi zwo lingana. Ndi khou tuwa ndi khou ya hayani. Na ngauri namusi udo nthwa nga mupama muthihi matshelo a u tsha doda u muthihi u doda u mupundu wa mulenzheni futhi hu doda mupama na mupundu wa mulenzhe. Nda wanala ndi khou vhaisala u fhirisa zwa mathomoni. Nda vho vha muholefhali nga mulandu wauri thingo humbula na u thetshelesa mm. [What I look at mostly is that once he starts beating you for the first time and you allow him to, just know that all the time when he comes back and has his problems from outside, he will take them out on you. Now as a girl, I tell myself that I have my right not to want to be touched. If I am beaten for the first time with that slap it is enough. I am leaving I am going home. Also, because today, he will

> hit me with one slap tomorrow it won't come alone it will come with a kick and again a slap and a kick. I will find that I am getting hurt more than the first time. I then become disabled because I didn't think and listen mm.]

Exploring black African people in a natural environment to understand their socialisation to preserve cultural identities is essential (Igbafe, 2023; Ojoye, 2016). This is because of the historical cultural activities that may have a positive or negative impact on individual beliefs in a particular context (Modiri, 2012). Individuals internalise norms that influence their beliefs and behaviours when they evaluate the actions of others and themselves in a particular community (Horne & Mollborn, 2020). For example, in a study of young people in Soweto, young women rejected being victims of IPV (Makongoza & Nduna, 2017). In another study, nuances of gendered roles among young women seemed to be taken into consideration as they realise their rights and refuse the victim's status (Pettifor et al., 2012). Despite young women's different perspectives on IPV, some young women are victimised in a cohabiting relationship (Kheswa & Mashabela, 2020). (See also Mulalo's narrated account below.)

African philosophies acknowledge cultural beliefs and values as they serve as a guide for social cohesion (Hailey, 2008). Lombo (2017) argues that cultural values tie a deep connection between an individual and the environment to bring out the self in a community. However, in certain circumstances, cultural norms disempower women through gendered roles (Boonzaier, 2008; Thaler, 2012). Prioritising traditional intimate relationships may have dire implications for young women in cohabiting relationships such as lack of trust, isolation and mental well-being. It is in such a context that Mulalo chose to self-censor her partner's abuse in the relationship, given that her partner was not "known" to her family:

> Interviewer: So zwi khou amba uri protection order, munna wavho vhone hango i saina? [So, it means that the protection order, your man didn't sign it?]
>
> Mulalo: He-eh. [No.]
>
> Interviewer: And then ubva tshetsho ha itea mini? Vha humela hayani? [And then since then what happened? Did you go back home?]
>
> Mulalo: Hai nda divha ndi khou di tshila nda humela hayani. Ndi tshi humela hayani ndi, ndi tshi swika hayani mme anga vha vha vha khou mmbudzisa uri mulandu, thingo vha talutshedza tshithu. Ndo to uri ahuna nda vuwa nga tsha matshelo nda vhuya. Ndi tshi vhuya nda da nda ya mushumoni. U swika na namusi avha divhi tshithu. [No, I continue to live and went back home. When I went back home, when I arrived home my mother asked me what was wrong, I didn't explain anything to her. I just said nothing then I woke up the next day and came back. When I came back, I came and went to work. Up to this day, I haven't told her anything.]

The enacted cultural values and beliefs are likely to prompt young women's silence about their victimisation and place them in vulnerable conditions (Mulaudzi et al.,

2022). In a formal union, conflicts are intervened by the whole family because a wife belongs to the whole family and not the husband in the Venda culture (Tshifhumulo & Daitai, 2017). In these instances, cultural discourse can guide how young women make meaning of and respond to their experiences of violence. The discursive constructs of matula or taboo relationships that fail to conform to the accepted cultural norms of intimate relationships in the community may often mean that when violence occurs in the relationship, many women will fail to speak up. In instances where families do intervene in the relationship, they do so primarily to persuade the woman to leave and return home but without any recourse to the abusive partner. This is related to the perception that they do not have the familial bond or legitimacy to address the abuse with him or with his family. In Mulanga's account, this is further compounded by an underlying apathy on the part of the police in the community to deal with issues of gender-based violence. These experiences demonstrate that protective orders and other forms of external support do not vary relative to the couple's status.

In many community contexts, several interlacing factors come to the fore, such as the normalisation of gender-based violence that often results in the reluctance of many women to report violence, the structural violence of reporting systems that further violate victims when they do report, and many women have to contend with the misogynistic behaviours and attitudes of reporting officers (Burris, 2022; Gumani, 2022). For example, the account of one of the participants, Mulanga, of being bedridden after a violent beating from her partner exemplified this inflexion of gendered views in police apathy to intervene:

> Zwezwo nga September nda fhedza vhege mbili ndi khou dzula hayani ndo vhaisala. Khotsi anga vhaya police station vha khou mufarisa. Vha tshia police station vha tshia u mufarisa ha mbodipfi a vhatodei nga uri nne ndo novha muthu muhulwane. Nne mune ndi tea u toda nda vula mulandu. [Then in September I spent two weeks staying at home while being hurt. My father went to the police station going to get him arrested. When he went to the police station to get arrested. It was said that he is not wanted because I have grown up. I need to come and open a case.]

Mulanga's family intervention notwithstanding, the attitudes of police officers to the gendered dynamics of the situation are obvious. Individuals' rights are infringed upon by the lack of police intervention in dire situations (Burris, 2022). However, Gezinski (2022) argues that in many rural areas police are reluctant to intervene in IPV because community members do not come forward during the investigation process. For example, victims and community members do not report experiences of violence (Gumani, 2022). More awareness needs to be created to address police officers' attitudes towards women and gender-based violence more generally. The refusal to intervene in the matter of a bedridden beaten-up woman highlights the apathetic economies within many spaces of reporting experienced by women. Also, familial constructs of when it is appropriate to intervene and in what ways may be influenced by the marital status of the woman. Such a gendered and cultural script limits how young women in cohabiting relationships respond to abuse in their relationships. In instances where a woman

experiences violence in a cohabiting relationship, she will often rely on herself, her family or even the empathy of her partner's relatives to intervene. In the absence of these, she often has no recourse but to find her way owing to cohabitation being perceived as a cultural taboo in the community. These situations highlight the importance of understanding how culture influences community and familial responses, and how these cultural influences are interlaced with gendered understandings that may further marginalise women. An African feminist approach to engaging culture and IPV may therefore be more beneficial than traditional approaches.

Conclusion

In this article, we consider the place of African feminist approaches that may offer us a novel lens through which to theorise IPV. African feminist theory seeks to represent and make sense of African people's lives and world views with regard to their lived philosophies and livelihoods. In so doing, developing an understanding of the role of cultural practice and meanings for how young women lived gendered and embodied lives is important. Young women's agentic resistance and embodiment of cultural practices and beliefs are important to consider for many aspects of their lives, including IPV. For example, in this study, although some cultural scripts influence how women choose to deal with incidences of abuse in their relationship, there are instances where alternate cultural scripts are deployed as an incentive to leave the relationship.

While the study by Netshandama et al. (2017) on cultural taboos attend to the construction of sexualities through the discursive notion of matula and the resultant implications thereof, we are especially interested in the consequences of such a construct for how communities intervene and make sense of IPV in cohabiting relationships. Among the Vhavenda, the prioritisation of marriage as the only acceptable form of intimate relationships has implications for couples in cohabiting relationships. Young women in cohabiting relationships are often unacknowledged or rejected. This is because societal cultural beliefs have already predicated and normalised the sequential model that polices young women's lives (Nduna, 2020). Because traditional customs are not performed by couples in cohabiting relationships, these relationships are regarded as non-existent and taboo. Research that focuses on young women's contextual experiences of IPV, including in cohabiting relationships, may contribute significantly to a more nuanced understanding of IPV and the contexts within which it occurs.

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