



Women's Violence against Men: an Approach to Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh*

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Abstract - Very often, women only are perceived to be the victims of domestic violence, and men as the perpetrators and the oppressors in marriages. Consequently, male victims of women's violence continue to suffer in silence in the hands of their wives. This gender reversal is visible in Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh* through episodes of husbands' battery. Through the lenses of the reader-oriented theory, this paper investigates the mechanics through which Chinwuba makes available the phenomenon of women's violence against men. It also argues that with the issue of women's emancipation, mankind slowly and surely journeys toward an effective gender-balance. Previously used by men to silence women, violence becomes reciprocal.

Key words: abused men, female oppressors, gender-balance, male victims, violence.

Résumé - Très souvent, seules les femmes sont perçues comme les victimes de la violence domestique et les hommes comme les auteurs de l'oppression des femmes dans les ménages. Par conséquent, les hommes victimes de la violence des femmes continuent de souffrir en silence dans les mains de leurs femmes. Ce renversement de genre est visible dans *Merchants of Flesh* d'Ifeoma Chinwuba à travers des épisodes qui mettent en exergue des hommes battus, violents, ruinés et dominés par leurs femmes. Sous le prisme de la théorie de la réception, cet article examine les mécanismes par lesquels Chinwuba peint le phénomène de la violence des femmes contre les hommes. Cet article soutient également qu'avec l'avènement de l'émancipation des femmes, l'humanité chemine lentement et sûrement vers un équilibre effectif des genres. Utilisée auparavant par les hommes pour faire taire les femmes, la violence devient réciproque.

Mots clés : hommes maltraités, femmes oppresseuses, équilibre du genre, victimes masculines, violence.

1. Introduction

Despite the recent growth of research in gender issues in African literature, women's violence against men seems to suffer the misfortune of being taken for granted. Women's violence against men is "any act of gender based violence that results in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering ... including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life" (Adebayo, 2014, p.15). Violence against men is gender based and is a serious public or private problem that cuts across nations, cultures and religion. However, most literary scholarship on women's issues mostly presented women as victims of male violence and oppression. Consequently, a major feminist concern has been to protect women from men's violence. For instance, "reformist feminists...emphasize the need for the liberation of women from an oppressive and abusive marriage" (Ada, 2011, p.264).

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Commenting the issue of male violence in feminist theory, A. Marin and Russo (1999, p.19), says: "Feminists have done more than simply bring attention to the problems of male violence against women." In *What Causes Men's Violence Against Women?* Harway and O'Neil (1999) consider the potential causes of men' violence against women. Again, it is obvious that few gender studies have addressed the issue of male victims of female oppression. Researchers generally limited their investigations to studies of male violence against women. Discussing the issue of violence against women Bailey and Cuomo (2007, p.1) posit that: "The systematic mistreatment and devaluation of females cross-culturally is pragmatic human harm with grave and pervasive consequences."

Even though there have been so many literary scholarships about domestic violence against women across the globe, domestic violence against men seems to have been overlooked by literary critics and perhaps the creative writers because the former write on what the latter produce. Ko Ling Chan as quoted by Adebayo (2014, p.15) posits that: "The problem in conducting studies that seek to describe violence in terms of gender is the amount of silence, fear and shame that results from abuse within families and relationships. This is why domestic violence against men remains largely unreported." This quotation denotes the non-perception by critics of the phenomenon of men's oppression by women. For instance, Murphy, Jr. (1995, p.xi) opines that: "What is not sufficiently appreciated is the subtle range of mutual abuse and subservience that can arise within the dynamics of intimate encounter." This confirms the scarcity of scholarships which address the issue of female oppressors. Again, Murphy, Jr (1995, p. x) remarks that: "Seeing the gravity of the oppression that has been imposed upon women, it is extremely difficult to come to an awareness of any reciprocal experience." No doubt, because of the topicality of women's oppression, the issue of men being under female hegemony seems to have been overlooked by literary critics and creative writers together.

The invisibility of female violence against the male is truly remarkable given that studies for a long time see violence as coming from men alone. The previous literature has not fully addressed the question. This gives credence to my remarks above. That is why this article explores rarely discussed aspects of women's violence against men: husbands' battery and psychological assault in Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh*¹. The study is limited to thorough textual analysis of the selected novel. Extracts will be taken from the novel under consideration for interpretation and for proving women's violence against men.

¹Ifeoma Chinwuba, *Merchants of Flesh* (Lagos: Grower Literature, 2003). The subsequent references will be made to this edition and will be marked parenthetically in the text as (MOF) followed by the page number.



My theoretical approach is the reader-oriented theory. According to this theoretical framework, the reader and the text share a transactional experience in drawing meaning out of a literary text (Bressler, 2011, p.72). I, therefore, draw from my reading experience to interpret the novel under study.

My essay is structured around two main sections with two subsections each. The first section addresses “Male Victims of Domestic Violence” and uncovers gender reversal relationship between men and women in the marital home. The second one examines the “Psychological Impacts of Women’s Violence on Men”.

2. Male Victims of Domestic Violence in Merchants of Flesh

In *Merchants of Flesh*, Chinwuba depicts many contemporary gender based issues among which the crucial and thought-provoking issue of women’s domestic violence against men. Through the transgression of the patriarchal order, the authoress introduces her readership to female perpetrators of violence and oppression against their husbands. The theme of male victims of domestic violence has been explored in the novel through Ambassador Godson’s household and the fictional international women’s conference in Genoa.

2.1. Ambassador Godson’s Household

Though women are generally regarded as docile, passive and weak in most male-dominated societies, in Chinwuba’s novel under consideration, Ambassador Godson is under the oppression of his Ngozi woman (MOF, 14) also referred to as Madam number-two (MOF, 14). Ambassador Godson, who feels insecure in his own home, is an example of men’s oppression by women. Just as many women suffer in the hands of their male partners, many men are oppressed, beaten and brutalised by their wives. The author of *Merchants of Flesh* depicts women with oppressive tendencies towards men. This has been done in the novel through instances of domestic violence which is, in fact, the most common form of gender abuse in Chinwuba’s *Merchants of Flesh*. Domestic violence against men is a term describing violence that is committed against men by their wives contrary to what has for a long time been established in the patriarchal society. Domestic abuse against men in *Merchants of Flesh* takes many forms, including physical aggression or assault (battery), threats or controlling. According to H. Kerr, D. Levine and B. Woolard as quoted by Dienne and Gbeneol (2009, p.333):

Domestic violence is violence that is perpetrated by intimate partners and other family members, and that is manifested through physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, economic abuse, and acts of omission. Domestic



violence is therefore a mix of physical and coercive behaviours designed to manipulate and dominate another competent adult or adolescent.

The theme of male victims of domestic violence is mostly set in Godsonn's polygamous household. The narrator informs the reader that:

The ambassador himself was from a Northern minority. He was unable to control his wives, especially the second who was given to bouts of violence. On several occasions, she had locked up the chief representative in one of the Residence rooms, threatening to cut off his manhood unless he fulfilled his promise (MOF, 13).

At such times, Godsonn would call his embassy for reinforcement. Consequently, "his staff would rush to the Residence, appealing to Madam to release His Excellency. The poor fellow would beg the staff not to go back to the embassy without him, as Madam could change her mind and re-arrest him" (MOF, 13-14). Through the above extracts, Chinwuba equips readers with the knowledge that Godsonn is totally under his second wife Ngozi's control. She threatens, beats and oppresses her husband. Consequently, Godsonn and his first wife, Awat, leave under Ngozi's dictatorship. This description presents Godsonn as a victim of female oppression. Simone de Beauvoir as quoted by Amouzou (2014, p.17) states that "in his solitude, a man looks to a woman to confer an absolute value upon his life". However, Ambassador Godsonn's situation is a totally different one. In his situation, he cannot elevate himself to the "powerful and unshakable image which is attributed to man in his society" (Amouzou, 2014, p.17). Ifeoma Chinwuba's role reversal makes Ngozi the "female husband" (Amadiume, 1987) of the home.

Throughout the novel, Ngozi becomes the best narrative element Chinwuba uses to display female aggression in the domestic arena. More telling enough is the manner in which Chinwuba empowers Ngozi to be almighty in Godsonn's home. She imposes herself to both her co-wife and her husband. One major scene illustrating this is when Godsonn attended the meeting of the International Women's Club together with his two wives and as the club demanded that polygamous heads of Mission were to transmit the name of only one wife to be recognized and accredited "Her Excellency", the imposing Madam number-two denies the institution of the first wife since she insists that "in a polygamous home, everything was taken in turns. If the wives could sleep with the man in turns, then they would also take benefits of his office in turns. Full stop" (MOF, 14). Here, what makes the reader feel that Godsonn actually lives under his wife's hegemony is his silence. The fact of the matter is that Godsonn is mostly silent and does not dare contradict whatever decision his wife takes. This episode introduces Godsonn to the reader as a victim of female violence. Elsewhere in *Merchants of Flesh*, the reader sees how emasculated Ambassador Godsonn is and how he even makes "jokes of his *ménage à trois*" (MOF, 14):



You see, it is not good to be charitable... I married that Ngozi woman so that she would not be left on the shelf. You see how she is paying me back now? One day it is lock me in, another it is lock me out. I have told her if she wants to be the man in this house, let her carry all my trousers and wear. Only leave me in peace.

Here, it is perceptible that Ambassador Godson experiences domestic abuse in the hands of his “Madam number-two” and bears it in silence. More telling is the way he becomes aware of both his emasculation and his failure to handle his household and only prays to be left in peace. It is a man under the yoke of his wife’s oppression that Chinwuba portrays in the above extract as a means of exhibiting female violence against men. *Merchants of Flesh* is replete with strong women willing “to gain their personal identity” by overcoming “the impositions of patriarchy” (Murphy, Jr, 1995, p.96). In the parlance of Amouzou (2014, p.19):

The ideological commitment of the feminist movement is the redefinition of male-female relationships, giving voice and authority to woman to play important roles for her own survival and that of her community. In the artistic articulation of these concerns, many women adopt radical positions, advocating a role-reversal which makes woman more powerful than man...

As we see, Feminism’s agenda is to challenge all restrictions imposed to woman by tradition and culture. The renunciation of male domination pushes many African female writers to portray their male characters with negative images.

Ngozi’s portrayal clearly shows a role-reversal in male-female relationships. She rebels against domestic abuse as perpetrated by men in order to imply that women are capable of action in domestic affairs. No matter how radical Ngozi’s violence is toward her husband, this has proved an important tool in balancing gender roles which relate her to Godson. For this purpose, the reader is informed that Ambassador Godson is not free as such in whatever decision he takes regarding his second wife. The fact is stated thus:

He had thought of choosing one of his staff and making her his mistress, but jettisoned the idea immediately. If Ngozi ever found out, that would be the end of his work. She would kill the lady. Madam number-two dreaded the idea of being unseated by a third wife...

He did not feel like bedding his spouses. The senior wife, Awat, had turned off since the arrival of a mate. She just lay there like a bag of semola, as if to say, finish quickly let me do something profitable with myself (MOF, 19-20).

What is important to point out in the above passage is how the narrator contrasts Godson’s wives: Awat and Ngozi. Madam number-two called Ngozi is just the opposite of Godson’s first wife, Awat. While Awat silently obeys her husband and courageously supports the fact that her husband beds with other women, Ngozi rejects the slightest idea of a third wife. Paradoxically, because of Awat’s submissiveness, Godson grants her no attention. On the contrary, the violence Ngozi perpetrates upon her husband prevents him from freely choosing a mistress. Ngozi is referred to as an amazon and Godson blames



God for giving her to him as a wife (MOF, 20). What is amazingly confusing is the extreme violence she exercises on him just like a woman is believed to undergo. She intrudes into his professional life by going to "the Mission asking how much the ambassador's wife allowance was" (MOF, 20). These extracts suggest that the construction of power relations in *Merchants of Flesh* does not reveal men as having infinite potential as patriarchy proclaims.

It is therefore crystal clear that if women do not snatch power from men, they will remain under male hegemony for good. This is justified in the novel under consideration through the episode in which Godsonn being fed up of Ngozi's violence, dreams of a new and traditional woman: "I need a woman, a plain, simple, loving woman: a woman to love me for myself, not for how much I can supply her and her family: a woman to mother me, to care for me, to love me" (MOF, 21). Obviously then, men prefer women with traditional attitudes like Awat in *Merchants of Flesh*. However, if women should always mother men, it would almost be impossible to achieve gender balance in the marital home.

2.2. The Fictional International Women's Conference

Since time immemorial, there have always been situations where men were humiliated by their own wives; but this was little discussed because of the pride of men. At times, the abused man would simply divorce the woman. Consequently, "Family violence research has focused on the relative risks that men and women face and mask the high number of men at risk, because of the large number of women who are injured as a result of domestic violence." (Adebayo, 2014, p.17). In the same line of thought, Watts and Zimmermann as quoted by Adebayo (2014, p.16) maintain that:

Though there is a prevalence of domestic violence against women in Nigeria as many women have died, brutalised or maimed for life by their violent male counterparts, however, there is also a prevalence of domestic violence against men, which has largely remained under-reported... the under-reporting of domestic violence is almost universal and may be due to the sensitive nature of the subject.

It is through a fictitious "international women's conference on domestic violence in Genoa" (MOF, 12) attended by Ambassador Godsonn that Ifeoma Chinwuba introduces the issue of domestic violence to the reader. Women and children are more often than not victims of domestic violence. Unsurprisingly, during the fictitious women's conference "delegates spoke passionately against wife battery and general violence against women" (MOF, 12). As the representative of the Women's Minister, the ambassador is given the floor. To the amazement of all, "Godsonn then proceeded to tell the story of his neighbour back home, a small wiry thing who had married a woman three times his size. Every night, this woman would pound and hammer the poor



man who would shout for the whole town to come to his rescue” (MOF, 12). A close analysis of this excerpt clearly indicates that women in the novel perpetrate violence on men. This is an excellent instance of gender roles’ reversal in the institution of marriage. Far from exhibiting radical feminism, such an episode may be an important factor in achieving gender balance since men have more often used beating as a weapon to silence women. Furthermore, Godsonn “prayed the conference to consider addressing the issue of wives who beat up their husbands. Husband battery, he called it. It was an embarrassment to all present” (MOF, 12). The novelist’s portrayal of these scenes obviously accounts for both the topicality of women’s violence against men and the fact that this issues is taken for granted. That is probably why Chinwuba has Godsonn insist that conferences in the future address the issue of male abuse by the female.

The tragedy is that men who undergo domestic violence hide and do not talk openly about their experience because it harms their self-esteem and exposes them to ridicule in a patriarchal society. Ambassador Godsonn endures physical battering in the hands of his second wife yet he rarely openly complains like women do. It is striking to notice that Ambassador Godson tells his own story through the so-called “neighbour” (MOF, 12) also known as old Nick (MOF, 20-21). We are told that: “He remembered the women’s conference on domestic violence and wife battery in Genoa. He had been right in telling about old Nicky. Many [men] were suffering in the hands of their wives and the UN was doing nothing about it. Only thing [sic] was that old Nick was no other person than himself” (MOF, 20-21). Here, two major facts are perceptible. Firstly, it is the ambassador himself who suffers in his second wife’s hands. The secret agenda of Chinwuba seems to be the deconstruction of patriarchal norms which always see women as a weaker sex. Secondly, male victims of female violence are not on agenda in the international organisations of human rights such as the United Nations (UN).

3. Psychological Impact of Women’s Violence against Men in Merchants of Flesh

According to GoodTherapy.org Staff (2014), “Domestic violence often has a ripple effect that tears through the fabric of the victim’s life. The psychological, emotional, and social impacts of domestic violence can linger long after the violence has subsided, and even after the victim has left the abusive partner.” In *Merchants of Flesh*, Ambassador Godsonn and Ufot exhibit a psychological impact of the domestic violence imposed upon them by their wives. Though Godsonn and Ufot differently undergo female violence in their respective households, the evidence that this violence impacts their lives looms



throughout the novel. Here, two important issues will be discussed. Firstly, the impact of home troubles on men at work and in the street. Secondly, wives' responsibility in their husbands' downfall.

3.1. The Impact of Home Troubles on Men

Perryman and Appleton's (2016, p.386) critical stance fittingly opens this subsection of the essay: "evidence shows that significant numbers of men are victims of female-perpetrated violence, but as the issue is under-explored, the extent and effects of abuse are poorly understood." In *Merchants of Flesh*, Ambassador Godsonn has been portrayed as the greatest male victim of domestic violence. This domestic violence which accounts for Godsonn's home troubles has a psychological impact on him at home, in the street and at work. Several descriptions about him show that he is not psychologically free as such. This situation pushes him to be addicted in alcohol. For instance, Godsonn drinks at times to forget his household troubles. According to the narrator, Godsonn "liked the bottle. He usually invited his staff to have a glass at the end of the day, and then they would talk of general things. Godsonn would beam with happiness, his domestic worries forgotten for a while" (MOF, 14). This excerpt indicates that Godsonn relies on jokes and battles to temporarily escape from his household problems. This is so probably because of the psychological impact of the domestic violence which prevails in his home. Like any other human being, it is not easy for Godsonn to bear whatever type of violence he undergoes into the pitiless hands of his second wife, Ngozi. Being under the hold of his "domestic worries", Godsonn resorts to alcohol. This is commonplace in human society where many individuals take alcohol to forget their hardships and sorrows. It is worth recalling that the only time Godsonn wishes to finish his "tour without any mishaps and then go home quietly..." is when "his wives did not cross his mind at all" (MOF, 23). The psychological impact of wives' violence upon their husbands is increasingly becoming a crucial matter as it pushes men into anti-social behaviours such as unfaithfulness, drug addiction and lack of peace of mind. In this line of thought, Ambassador Godsonn becomes an excellent example in *Merchants of Flesh*.

Due to the many tensions in his home, Godsonn won't like to stay at home because this is not a place where he will have peace and rest. Consequently, he seems to "check up on things" (MOF, 15) by his mission in Milan. In actual fact, "he was running away from his troublesome wives... Initially, His Excellency, accompanied by his protocol officer, visited once every three months. Later, he had taken to coming every month. Nowadays, he showed up every fortnight, alone, sometimes unannounced" (MOF, 15). It is crystal clear that Godsonn's



repeated missions to Milan have no serious professional reasons. The reader is told: "Godsonn was bored. Bored. He had come to Milan to escape from his domestic woes....He needed a woman" (MOF, 19). The narrator even stresses that: "Yes, he had found a good remedy in Milan. Any time he felt domestic discomfort, he would go on a 'consular visit'... Turin, Milan, any place to get away from home (MOF, 21-22). Clearly then, going to Milan has become a powerful means of entertainment to avoid being "bored" by the female violence which reigns in his house. More chocking is the way Godsonn deviates from his ambassadorial duties by travelling out of necessity. In fact, he repeatedly travels to Milan without making any wise calculation about the misuse of the advantages attached to his position as an ambassador. This confirms that he seriously lacks peace of mind. He is perceived by the narrator as living in "pieces" (MOF, 20) instead of "living in peace" (MOF, 20). The frequency with which he goes to Milan in order to be away from the troubles in his house, is very telling about the psychological turmoil he suffers in the hands of his second wife. Such a situation prevents him from leading his life as a good ambassador and blossoming as a full human being. On the whole, as a victim of female domestic abuse, Godsonn is perpetually under a psychological violence. Amouzou (2014, p.16) opines that: "This psychological violence does not liberate the individual from his socioeconomic problems." Consequently, Ambassador Godsonn is never free from both his social and economic problems.

3.2. Wives' Responsibility in their Husbands' Downfall

Merchants of Flesh ends with Ufot's downfall caused by his wife's implication in human trafficking. Unlike Ambassador Godsonn who experiences domestic violence in the form of husband's battery and psychological violence, Ufot has the misfortune of having an extremely greedy wife. For the reader to perceive Mercy as a greedy woman, the narrator introduces her as a medical doctor, the wife of the Chief Consul in Milan and what is more, she has an immunity and some diplomatic privileges (MOF, 260). Consequently, Mercy's husband has a great job, they live in the best houses in the best areas of town and their children attend the best schools (MOF, 271). Despite all these advantages, Mercy secretly deals in human trafficking. By getting Mercy betrayed by Mr Okoroh who according to the narrator "was not happy with his boss, the consul [Ufot]." (MOF, 257), Ufot's life and career have been destroyed because of "activities unworthy of a diplomat" (MOF, 261).

In fact, unlike Godsonn who faces his second wife's brutality, things firstly go smoothly in Ufot's household. Mercy, his wife is a medical doctor and always travels back to the home country to supervise a building project.



However, things started falling apart for Ufot when it has been discovered that his wife "had been going to Nigeria to arrange for girls, abusing her diplomatic privileges and immunity" (MOF, 260). This will cause Ufot's downfall as Mr Okoroh will take the opportunity to betray him at the police. The reader sees and sympathises with Ufot who is under multiple pressures. Ufot is compelled to Leave Milan. For this purpose, the narrator has it that:

... the government was declaring his country's Consul in Milan, Dottore Gregorio Ufot, *persona non grata*, for activities unworthy of a diplomat. He would be given seventy-two hours to leave the territory or his immunity would be withdrawn, and his wife prosecuted for human trafficking (MOF, 261).

Most significant to my argument is the fact that Mercy destroys her husband's career because she is "an important human trafficker, apparently a kingpin" (MOF, 260). It is my contention that Mercy provided Mr Okoroh, an enemy to her husband, with a weapon for "striking his enemy down" (MOF, 259). What actually shocks the reader is Ufot's commitment against human trafficking only to later on discover that the wife he loves and confides in is one of these evil human traffickers he engages himself to fight. The narrator reports Ufot's regret as follows: "Deporting these girls not knowing my own wife is among the people importing them" (MOF, 273). As a sign of regret and sorrow, Ufot "shook his head sorrowfully" (MOF, 273). These passages demonstrate that Ufot's wife pushes him into troubles. It is evident that his wife caused his downfall. This is how a careless woman can accelerate her husband's downfall. Most definitely, Ufot is a victim of his wife's greediness:

Greedy people, Okoroh hissed. Controlling all the consulate's tours and still not satisfied. Okoroh was stunned. He never imagined that life would give him such a weapon to strike his rival down... He knew what he would do. Chance had played into his hands. Ufot's career and job now depended on him... (MOF, 260).

Mercy's greediness becomes a weapon which has been used by Mr Okoroh to ruin her husband. As a result of the *persona non grata* (PNG) status confirmed on Ufot by the Foreign Office (MOF, 271), Mr Okoroh "had been appointed temporary consul in his stead. His travails did not end there. When he got home that night, it was to an empty house, Mercy having disappeared with their two children" (MOF, 273). It can be therefore argued that she is entirely responsible for her husband's failure. Elsewhere in the novel, when "Mercy broke down and confessed" (MOF, 271), Ufot's boss, Ambassador Godsonn, asked: "But why, Mercy, why?... What do you women want?" (MOF, 271). This episode confirms women's responsibility in their husband's failure or ruin. This does not mean that men are angels to women. On the contrary, it shows that behind some ruined men lay some women. At the end of the novel, the reader



sees how Mercy has ruined her husband's life, his career and everything he worked for.

4. Conclusion

This essay has shown that women are perpetrators of violence and oppression against men contrary to the established patriarchal order. The issue of abused men by women looms through *Merchants of Flesh*. On the one hand, it has been demonstrated that Ngozi the second wife of Ambassador Godson behaves in a way that has demystified the alleged males' hegemony over their wives. On the other hand, this article has pointed out the psychological impact of domestic violence upon Godson and how Mercy's greediness totally ruined her husband's life and career. Four key findings and some recommendations have emerged from this essay. First of all, it has been found that female violence against men is taken for granted and is still unreported. I therefore recommend that, as global pressure by women's groups facilitated women's liberation from the patriarchal yoke, male victims of domestic violence deserve the same recognition, sympathy and support as do female victims. Next, my study reveals that though husbands' battery and other forms of domestic violence against men is a reality, male victims do not talk about or report incidents of domestic violence because of embarrassment or fear of ridicule. Therefore, men also must be prepared to speak out their situations. Thirdly, it has been discovered that violence against men unlike any other form of violence is ignored by governments' agencies, social institutions and society at large. This article strongly recommends that human rights organisations take seriously the issue of female violence against men just as they protect women. Last of all, my analysis of Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Merchants of Flesh* came up with the result that both men and women perpetrate violence. It is the contention of this paper, therefore, that as we protect the right of women, so also should the rights of men be protected. Also just like women, men deserve protection from intimate partner brutality and abuse.

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