

Gender-based Violence against Men: A Muted Reality

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Abstract

This article examines experiences of men who are victims of gender-based violence where women are perpetrators. There are masculinity expectations that if a man is in pain, he is not allowed to show his agony or cry in public, as suggested in the Sepedi proverb *Monna ke nku o llela teng*. These expectations make it difficult for male victims of domestic violence to report the abuse. Gender-based violence has to do with the abuse that is suffered by partners who are in relationships. This violence includes, but is not limited to physical, sexual, psychological, economic harm, and includes actions such as threats and coercion. Men usually do not speak out about their experiences due to the stigma attached to them being victims of female-perpetrated domestic abuse, as this study has shown. This article is based on the study of men who reported their experiences of abuse at the hands of their partners. The study was conducted in Vuwani within the Makhado Local Municipality, Vhembe District in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. The data showed that male victims of domestic violence are reluctant to speak out about their ordeal due to fear of being ridiculed by significant others in the society, such as their family members, peers and police officials.

Keywords: domestic violence; emasculation femininity; masculinity; patriarchy

Introduction

Gender-based violence comes in different forms—namely physical, sexual, emotional,



verbal and psychological abuse, economic abuse, intimidation, harassment, as well as stalking. Gender-based violence can also manifest in the perpetrator damaging the property of the victim and aggressively forcing him/herself into the house or residence of the victim. Domestic violence is a global phenomenon without national, economic, religious, geographic and cultural boundaries. It has negative consequences for social welfare, children, families and the community at large. In an study conducted earlier on gender-based violence on men, Thobejane (2012) found that violence committed by women against their male partners had been largely ignored for several reasons—one of the reasons being the stereotypes that is fuelled by the perception that a man is strong, while women are perceived as submissive, weak and obedient. Therefore, men are the most likely victims of domestic violence. This article seeks to fill this gap within the discourse on gender-based violence, unattended by other researchers who focused on violence from the perspective of women. To date, although there is growing evidence showing that there is increasing violence against men, perpetrated by women, the focus has been on violence against women. Therefore, it is crucial to note that domestic violence affects both women and men. Thus, for equality to be achieved, we need to focus on their issues collectively without any bias. This article also alludes to regional and international protocols on gender violence such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, Beijing Platform for Action, SADC Gender Protocol and the South African Constitution that seem to pay less attention to gender-based violence issues that focus on men as victims. The trajectory of this article will take the following form: Discourse on domestic violence, why is little being said and done about gender-based violence against men, feminist theories and domestic violence.

Discourse on Domestic/Gender-based Violence

Domestic violence involves a range of intentional actions such as sexual, psychological, emotional and verbal abuse. Other forms of man battering include: slapping; pouring hot water while the victim is asleep, and in areas mostly hidden by clothes; chopping men's genitals; verbal insults; insulting the partner in front of children; slashing; pouring petrol over men and setting them on fire. In addition whipping, throwing chairs, benches, stools, using utensils to attack the partner, as well as other objects in the house, especially after serious disagreement with the man (Gathogo 2012). When a spouse or an intimate partner uses physical violence to control the behaviour of his or her partner, she or he is committing domestic violence (Thobejane 2012). Domestic violence is not just restricted to spouses or those in cohabitation but can also be directed against children by their parents. It can occur between relatives within the household or against the elderly, where it is perpetrated by their children or grandchildren. It is important to note that the term domestic violence suggests that both men and women suffer disproportionately from different forms of domestic violence by their partners.

Feminist scholars have argued that knowledge-based mainly on women abuse represents a skewed perception of reality (Collins 2000; Mohanty 2003). Other scholars emphasise that the best way to correct this is to also look at men's daily experiences (Leonard 2003). Usually when the word “abuse” is mentioned, what comes to one’s mind is that the victim of the abuse is either a woman or a child. It rarely or never at all occurs that people would think that the victim of abuse could also be a man (Thobejane 2012). There is stereotypical thinking towards domestic violence, which nonetheless, is understandable, as most of the victims are historically known to be women (Linnegar and McGillivray 1998). This article seeks to present the other reality within this discourse in the sense that it interrogates domestic violence where victims are men and perpetrators are women, who are these men’s partners.

The Beijing Declaration for Action (1995), referred to as the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, identified 12 areas of concern, which required urgent attention to achieve gender equality. Violence against women is the most critical area of focus within these instruments and little has been done to address forms of men abuse. The Beijing Platform (emanating from the declaration of 1995) called for an explication of the causes and effects of, and strategies to prevent gender-based violence, but the focus was more on violence against women and children. It further denotes that the absence of adequate gender-disaggregated data and statistics on the incidence of violence makes the elaboration of programmes and monitoring of changes difficult. Lack of documentation and research on domestic violence, sexual harassment and violence against women and girls in private and in public, including the workplace, impedes determinations to design specific intervention strategies (Linnegar and McGillivray 1998). The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) focused much on violence within conflict-ridden refugee settings rather than domestic violence issues that also affect men. Evidence in Kosovo, located in South-eastern Europe, shows that the establishment of the Pristina-based Centre in 1993 and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) meant that the protection of women and children has been a major priority, while neglecting men as victims of domestic violence (Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa 2003).

Walby and Mayhill’s (2011, 502–522) analysis of a British Crime Survey found that men made up about 40 per cent of domestic violence victims each year. Between 2006 and 2007 men made up 43 per cent of all those who had suffered partner abuse in the previous year. This number rose to 45.5 per cent between 2007 and 2008, but fell to 37.7 per cent (37.7%) between 2008 and 2009. More than one in four women (28%) and around one in six men (16%) had experienced domestic abuse since the age of 16. These figures are equivalent to an estimated 4.5 million female victims of domestic abuse and 2.6 million male victims. In addition, Walby and Myhill (2011) maintain

that almost six per cent (6%) of women and four per cent (4%) of men reported that they experienced domestic abuse in the past year, equivalent to an estimated one million female victims of domestic abuse and 600,000 male victims in Britain.

The experiences of South Africans show that in relation to all places of occurrences of assault, married individuals are most likely to be victims in their own homes (37, 5%) than elsewhere. Spouses or lovers tend to be the major perpetrators of such incidents (43, 8%). Of importance, anger towards a family member or person was the main motive for such an assault at home (Statistic South Africa 2016, 14–17).

The literature demonstrates that violence against men has been on the increase in recent times in some parts of Africa. For instance, Anyuor (2012) gives an example of a survey, conducted in Nyanza, Kenya by *Maendeo ya Wanaume* (Progress for Men) in 2012, where cases of men abuse rose to 160 000 from 460 000 in 2009. The increase in the incidences of male battering by women in Kenya seems to increase with alcohol dependence among younger males, aged between 25 and 34. Many males in this age group stated that they consumed illicit brews in the hours before noon, which generally are considered the most productive hours of the day. This behaviour prompts their partners to be abusive towards them, out of frustration and despair (Anyuor 2012). Again, as more of such men fall back into the vicious cycle of drinking and unemployment, women are forced to replace them as heads of families and as care providers. The end-result is that such men fail to fulfil their roles of providing for their families. Like in most societies and settings, such men, who are dependent on their women, are also likely to be economically, physically and even psychologically abused.

Gathogo (2012, 447–470) argues that domestic violence against men manifests in different ways. Sometimes it begins with insults directed at the man, in front of his children, who sometimes take sides with their mother, particularly when they are first incited against their father. In such scenarios, children of teenage age may even gang up against their father and participate in the corporeal attacks. This may come after their mother first picks up a quarrel with their father. A case in point is that cited by Gathogo (2012), who gave an example of a woman who found her husband having sex with their house worker (helper). She started beating them up using any object available in the house, including unsharpened objects, until they both bled profusely. Considering that the culture does not allow an African man to scream, if he is ever beaten by a woman or a child, the man suffered in silent and was eventually battered to death, while the screaming helper broke the door and escaped.

Why is Little Being Said about Gender-based Violence against Men?

Domestic violence is a daily occurrence and women are reportedly the victims, largely because they are more likely to report it, while men do not do so, owing to the

patriarchal nature of most societies. It is generally accepted that there is an under-reporting of domestic violence in general, in cases where men are victims and women and other men are perpetrators. Men may also be reluctant/unwilling to talk about being victimised, considering that this is irreconcilable with their masculinity, particularly in societies where men are discouraged from talking about their emotions. However, that does not mean that men are not victims of domestic violence in their private domains. Female-to-male domestic violence is a catastrophe that has always existed, but has never been given the attention it deserves, like domestic violence perpetrated against women. In the same vein, violence against men has been trivialised as it is influenced by social and gender stereotypes that define men as heads of households, who are supposed to be strong defenders of families and other dependents and breadwinners as well.

Proponents of the feminist theory argue that domestic violence has to do largely with gender and power inequality in opposite-sex relationships. The theory focuses on the societal messages that sanction the male's use of violence and aggression throughout life, and the prescribed gender roles that dictate how men and women should behave in intimate relationships (Pence and Paymar 1993). The theory ascribes the root causes of intimate violence as the outcome of a society that condones aggressive behaviour perpetrated by men, while socialising women not to be violent. Feminist theorists, however, also acknowledge that women can be violent in their relationships with men, but at times do not see the issue of women abusing men as really a serious social problem. To them, therefore, it does not deserve the same amount of attention or support as compared to the issue of violence against women (Kwaramba 2000, 200).

Statistics on male abuse are under-documented due to massive under-reporting of such cases, which according to Anyuor (2012), is due largely to cultural norms, the age-long practice of patriarchy, and the adage that says "Men do not cry." In South Africa, such cultural norms are evident in language expressions. For instance, in Tshivenda, a Language largely spoken in the Vhembe District of Limpopo, South Africa, the following are said to be some cultural norms regarding men:

Ndi munna nge a ambara vhurukhu

("He is a man only by the trouser he is wearing").

Ndi muthu nge a shaya mutshila

("He is a human being only because he lacks a tail") Meaning that a person behaves like an animal.

Kholomo ya ndila a i fhedzi hatsi

(“A man is allowed to have as many concubines as it pleases him”).

Mubva ha na nzie nzie dzi khoroni

(“A man has to go all out to get something for his family”).

Tshakule tshi wanwa nga muhovhi

(“Good things do not come easily so a man has to strive by all means to succeed”).

Vhida la musadzi ndi vhuhadzi hawe

(“A woman's grave is her marriage”) Meaning that she has to die in a marriage.

Munna ndi ndou hali muri muthihi

(“A man is like an elephant as he eats all trees”) These days women feminists contest this by saying (“a woman is also a tree and has to be eaten by many elephants”) – This is another recipe for domestic violence.

Khokhonya ila maanda ayo

(“A man has to eat his sweat and in this case cannot expect anything from a woman”).

Mudi wa goswi au na malila

(“A house of a weak man won't last”)

U tshi kokodza luranga u kokodza na vhana vhalwo

(“A married man is entitled to take responsibilities of taking care of both the wife and her kids”).

Musadzi u bebela munwe

(“A woman is allowed to have kids outside marriage to save the marriage”).

Similarly, in Xitsonga, also a language spoken largely in the Limpopo, the following adages denoting cultural norms regarding men are used:

Nwanuna I nhwembe wa Nava

(“A man is entitled to have as many wives as possible”).

Nwanuna *I nyimpfu u rilela ndzeni*

("A man does not cry").

Nwanuna *I nhloko ya munti*

("A man is the head of the family").

Nwanuna *I nkuzi malanga yi famba hinkwako*

("A man is a bull that walks everywhere").

Nwanuna *I xihloka xo kariha xi famba xitsemelela*

("A man should have so many wives").

Nwanuna *u ba xiqatula wansati a sula ritshuri*

("A man is a bread winner; a woman stays at home").

Nwanuna *u ba katara nwansati a sakamela*

("A man is the head of the family. A woman is the neck").

Almost all languages in South Africa have adages that support hegemonic masculinities. The Sepedi language, also largely spoken in Limpopo has adages such as:

Monna ke nawa o a naba

("A man is entitled to have as many wives as it pleases him").

Monna ke nku o llela teng

("Men don't cry")

As postulated on the topic of this study. This adage derives from the common knowledge by shepherds in most villages, that a sheep, (*nku*) when slaughtered, does not make a lot of noise. It dies bravely, unlike other animals such as goats, which face their fate bellowing and kicking. A man should therefore, be like a sheep when he faces challenges. He should never cry or show some signs of "weakness."

Monna ke selepe o wa adimišanwa

("A man is allowed to have concubines")

The treatment accorded to survivors of rape, whether male or female by the community may also be similar. In some communities, female victims of sexual violence are shunned and considered outcasts. So too are male victims of sexual violence. The added dimension that some women face of being shunned by their families does not seem to be present in the case of male victims, possibly because, in many societies, it is the male that is considered the head of the household. Another way in which male victims of sexual violence may feel emasculated is through the process of homosexualisation. When reference is made to masculinity, the dominant construct is that of heterosexual masculinity. It is the heterosexual male that is a symbol of power. It is the heterosexual male that fills or at least filled the ranks of the armed forces. According to Johnson and Ferraro (2000, 948–963), a homosexual male is considered less masculine and more effeminate than their heterosexual male counter-part. Constructing the male victim of sexual assault as homosexual is thus a means by which to emasculate him, thereby reducing his social standing. It is also a means to “taint” him with homosexuality. This implies not only the harsh treatment that a man has to endure from society; but a means by which the international community can ignore the situation as well. If homosexuality is suggested, even if it’s just a “taint”, the international community can carry on with its business as usual and turn a blind eye to the situation; no matter how egregious it may be. This may explain why often times, male victims of sexual assault do not only remain silent but actively deny being sexually abused.

As Kimmel (2002) argues, hegemonic masculinity is a form of masculinity that dominates other forms of masculinities. This kind of masculinity is binding and has created a defined boundary of what it means to be a real man. If one starts tracing the issue, one will notice that domestic violence against men is not new. Many women have been perpetrating abuse against their partners behind closed doors; and had most of the time, gotten away with it. Such men may be labelled double victims of abuse, because not only are they victims in their domestic space, but also risk being ridiculed and not being treated with dignity in the event they should seek assistance. Moreover, the law is more likely to rule in favour of a woman than a man. This problem is compounded by the fact that many cases go unreported; and as a result, many men remain silent about the abuse they endure in the hands of their abusive partners.

Furthermore, there is growing evidence from literature on African Masculinities and African Feminism, which was spawned by writers such as Thiongo (1998), and Fanon (1978). In their writings, Fanon and waThiongo argue for the need to transform gender hierarchies and in this process, strive to advocate for an egalitarian society, which is devoid of sexism and gender discrimination. In Ngugi’s novel, *The Wizard of the Crow*, identity politics are explored extensively. These are juxtaposed with issues of colonialism, neo-colonialism and African identity, which suffered greatly under oppression and conquest. Ngugi opines that contradicting identities continue to afflict

the African, and further suggests that unless the African recaptures his or her identity, he or she would continue to exist in an unredeemed state of alienation. Waita (2013, 45–50) explains that the continuum of subjugation of the African people through slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and now globalisation has led to the creation of a postcolonial personality, who is trapped in a contradictory Western civilisation. This process has been perfected through cultural imperialism over time. The dominant West has continued to impose its values on the African people and deliberately contaminated their cultures. Cultural imperialism finds its refinement in globalisation, whose main motivating force is economics “without borders.” Globalisation continues to be the key instrument in the destruction of the cultural coherence of individual nation-states. Its aim is not different from slavery and colonialism (Waita 2013, 45–50). The African family found itself at the crossroads in trying to navigate the new culture that was imposed on it by these external forces. Frictions in the home became the order of the day. Parents started to argue over resources. The stronger masculinity imposed its will on the weaker one.

It is also important to study Fanon’s work in relation to the struggle against colonialism, as he strives to de-construct the narrative that was brought about by imperialism, especially in Africa. Political violence, according to Fanon, is the tension between expressive action and discursive recuperation. Legitimate nationalist struggle, as argued by Fanon (as quoted by Seshadi-Crooks 2002, 84–98), is an oscillation between the two levels of expression. For Fanon, the core of anti-colonial violence is beyond good and evil. The contemporary experience with violence, be it domestic or otherwise, such as terrorism, is best understood as a symptom of the shattered condition of modernity. Fanon’s view of political resistance, as espoused by Seshadi-Crooks, is often founded upon a reconstruction of masculinism and a restructuring of gender relations within native society in order that there may be harmony in families and society at large. In the context of this study, we can posit that violence that is perpetuated by women on men cannot be divorced from the larger struggles against male hegemony, cultural imperialism and oppression.

Research Methodology

The article adopted a qualitative research method, where data were gathered through interviews with male participants who experienced domestic violence. In the context of formal research, interviews were verbal communication between the researchers and participants. This research employed unstandardised interviews, as they are less structured in nature; which gave freedom to these researchers and the participants to explore necessary and relevant areas of interest on the subject matter of interest. Thus, the employed unstandardised interview gives a platform for the participant and researcher to interact and talk deeper about the topic and other themes around the topic that may emerge during the interview (Creswell 2014). The interview therefore, relied

on research participants' experiences and their accounts. The research design was qualitative, exploratory and descriptive as the researchers intended to describe the lived experiences of men who experienced gender-based violence. The study participants were selected from those who made use of the Vuwani Victim Empowerment Centre (VVEC), in an effort to recover from domestic violence. VVEC is located in Vuwani township in Makhado Local Municipality, Limpopo Province. As indicated, the eventual six (6) study participants were selected from clients who were still undergoing counselling sessions. After an appropriate explanation of the purpose of the study, they consented to participate. The design described the experiences of men with regards to the phenomenon of gender-based violence and what meaning their collective experiences held. The data were collected in 2015.

The study had to rely on what was available as a source of information. For the purposes of access, arrangements were made with each of the six available participants for individual interviews. Thus, researchers were only able to find only six men who were willing to participate; because of the sensitive nature of the study, such as the stigma attached to their experiences and disclosure of their experiences as men who were victims of gender-based violence. Participants also filled consent forms. Three did not want to be interviewed at the VVEC and instead chose locations they were comfortable with. The participants were shown the tape recorder and the button to switch it off in case they were uncomfortable with certain information, which they wished not to have recorded during the interview. The approach was to allow the participants to speak freely and on their own terms about their lived experiences of domestic violence. Each participant was told that the duration of the interview would be one hour and thirty minutes, owing to the sensitivity of the questions. Sometimes the participants cried or paused during the interviews. Thus, from an ethical point of view, the following ethics were observed and put into practice: informed consent and confidentiality, avoidance of harm, and avoidance of deception.

Discussion and Analysis of Data

During the face-to-face interviews, participants were asked a number of questions that sought to inquire about their experiences of abuse by women, factors they attributed to their abuse, as well as fear to publicise their abuse. Pseudonyms have been used in this section to discuss and analyse the data. The first question posed sought to establish whether participants had experienced any form of abuse in a marriage or intimate relationship in the past 12 months before this study was conducted. Researchers, in this case, wished to capture the complexity of the answer to this question. To do this end, the question posed was: *have you experienced any form of abuse in your marriage or an intimate partner relationship?* All participants answered in the affirmative. However, they elaborated differently but similarly in some instances.

Among the six, two mentioned that they did experience emotional, psychological and sexual abuse at the hands of their partners or spouses.

Dakalo, aged 28, indicated that his wife used to insult him and used vulgar words in the presence of their children when talking to him. He ascribed his wife's disrespectful behaviour to the fact that she was more educated than him and held an influential position at work. Straus (1990, 49–73) refers to this as some form of psychological aggression and behaviour that is demeaning, belittling, or that undermines the self-worth of one's partner.

Muratho, aged 36, revealed that his wife was flirting with other men. He discovered that through her WhatsApp conversations that she was actually cheating on him. Muratho further said the following:

I'm being abused by my wife of 8 years with whom I have two sons. We are still married but there is no intimacy between the two of us.

The third respondent, Tshililo aged 35, revealed that his partner was too demanding. When asked what he thought the reason could be, he said that it is because she was from a rich family. With his meagre salary, he could not satisfy all her needs. He further said:

She also dictates terms on how we should spend my salary. I am often without money during the course of the month because she shall have spent it on clothes and on entertainment.

Masenyani, aged 27, who had separated from his wife, was paying maintenance for his child. However, he said that since their ordeal he was not allowed to see the child, in spite of the fact that the court gave him the permission to. In his words, he said:

I think I am a victim of domestic violence because I am being denied access to seeing my child since we separated seven months ago. We separated because she was too demanding. She thought that by reporting me for maintenance, she would get more money from me through the maintenance courts. I am paying for everything including school fees, medical costs, transport costs, clothes and pocket money for school. But I'm denied access to my daughter while she is currently staying with her new boyfriend.

Ranwedzi, aged (35, said the following during the interview:

I broke up with my girlfriend because she was very violent. When angry, she would throw missiles at me. She also threatened to pour boiling water on me when I am asleep. This is where I drew the line and decided enough was enough.

Mmbudzeni, aged 36, said his wife stalked him all the time. She was so jealous that she did not believe that he was not cheating on her. Crenshaw (1991, 124) defines stalking as a course of conduct directed at a communication, or verbal, written, or implied threats, or a combination thereof, that would cause any reasonable person to fear. Stalking behaviour may include spying on someone, standing outside their home or workplace, making unwanted phone calls, or vandalising their property. Mmbudzeni experienced all of the above.

Mmbudzeni characterised stalking as follows:

She always wanted to know what I was doing, where I'm going, what friends I'm with, and what time I'm coming back home. If she can't get in touch with me, she'll call a hundred times by using different names and sit outside the house to wait and see what kind of a car is bringing me home. The poor guy will then get a scolding for bringing me home late.

One of the questions that were asked of participants was: *Do men report to relevant authorities when battered by women?* Five of the six participants answered with a "No." Asked why they did not report the abuse they cited, among others reasons, the following: religious leaders' advise couples to seek the face of God rather than "wash their dirty linen" in public; the parents' fear of embarrassment; male ego, close friends who prefer to downplay the magnitude of the problem; fear of being laughed at; concerns about the taboo, as well as the anathema or abomination associated with the cultural dictates of African societies. These men also fear the effects of divorce, especially where the man relies on the "rich" woman for his daily upkeep; as well as the embarrassment that goes with being labelled a "weak man". Below are some of the responses given by the participants:

Dakalo, in emphasising how well educated his wife was, further said the following:

I do not want to be a laughing stock of my male peers. Also, I don't want my manhood to be undermined by them.

Muratho expressed his fear that his wife might leave him. He said that he suspected that his wife was getting material acquisitions from other men, and this made him feel embarrassed and impotent.

Tshililo further said that he was feeling "small" and feared to be the laughing stock among family and peers. He had a sense that the wife's family did not think he was worthy to have married their daughter. He felt like a "nobody" to his in-laws. He also feared that if he could seek the solution he might be ridiculed and rejected by the same in-laws.

The reluctance to report the abuse to the relevant authorities is further compounded by the fact that in most communities in Africa, it is an abomination to see a man crying after being beaten by a woman. In such scenarios, a “crying man” would lose prestige due to the cultural barriers and stigma attached to crying. Others feel guilty for not taking responsibility for the welfare of their families; hence they keep quiet when they are battered. There are other several reasons why abused men continue to suffer through cycles of violence. The main three reasons have to do with “deserting” their children, financial dependence, and the expectation from relatives and friends to make the relationship work. Several men in this study expressed concerns about their children’s wellbeing in the event that they have to leave an abusive relationship. They may feel like they would be doing more harm to their children if they broke up with their mothers. This is backed by feminist epistemologies and ideologies that foreground their theories on the historically-evolved system of patriarchy that has tried to diminish men to emotionless animals, while women are seen as too emotional and conscientious (see Hill-Collins 2000; Hooks 2006; Maqubela 2013; Mohanty 2003; Thobejane 2012).

Conclusion

Hegemonic masculinities can transcend the constructs of gender, and if not well monitored or fought against, can unleash a violent culture in our societies. It is in this vein that this article alludes to the study of men who reported their abuse at the hands of their partners, as against the practice where studies are usually conducted in the context where women are victims. The data analysis showed that domestic violence against men by women is not a new phenomenon in our society, yet it is rarely spoken about. Male victims of domestic violence are reluctant to come to terms with their predicament due to fear of being ridiculed by the society, peers and police officials. It is evident that men too can be victims of domestic violence. However, their plight is not made prominent as that of women victims, because of the cultural adage such as *Monna ke nku o llela teng* (“A strong man must suffer in silence”)! During marches against gender oppression and for an egalitarian society, the plight of those men who suffer at the hands of their partners ought to be considered.

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