

## 4 The Spectrum of Violence in Relationships

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### **Gendered Agency and the Moral Economy of Violence in Relationships**

Despite the important contributions of anthropology to nuanced and multi-layered interpretations of love and violence, the two are not often analysed as interwoven phenomena. But complex dynamics connect love, personal desire, social responsibility, and violence. These conditions challenge us to find ways to understand the acceptance of violence within intimate relationships without excusing or justifying it, and without leaning too heavily on overarching explanatory narratives that rely on history, structure, culture, socialisation, or pathology. Notwithstanding the intellectual schemes that have sought to make sense of violence, we should take seriously ‘the ontological priority of social existence’, which, as Michael Jackson says, ‘affirms that truth must not be seen as an unmasking which eclipses the appearance of the thing unmasked, but a form of disclosure which does it justice’ (Jackson 1996: 4). This requires a phenomenological and empiricist perspective that leaves classification and interpretation in the hands of the research collaborators and examines how violence is conceived locally (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

This chapter is therefore concerned with the lived experiences of violence. It examines how Sierra Leoneans think through violence in their relationships, how they assess violent acts, and how they assign meaning to them. Violence, as we shall see, is perceived as an ineradicable part of human relationships. It is one that provides both a risk and a chance, a way to love and a way to hurt, one which must be controlled so as not to exceed acceptable and bearable limits. Research collaborators’ insights into the place, role, and meaning of violence paint a picture of a social world where love and violence are not separate and opposed entities but can be co-constitutive of relationships. In Freetown, many women demand that their partners use certain forms of violence, and their absence is seen as a sign of lack of love. Many men, in turn, are worried that they will lose a partner if they are not violent. Consequently,

men may beat their girlfriends because they love them, and women themselves may use violence against those they love.

This chapter pays attention to gendered expectations and experiences of violence. It thereby contributes to scholarly efforts to rethink the absolute framing of agency–victimhood in research on sex and violence (see, e.g. Jewkes and Morrell 2012; Campbell and Mannell 2016; Mannell, Umutoni, and Jackson 2016; Pells, Wilson, and Hang 2016; Fielding-Miller and Dunkle 2017). It shows that agency exists in a web of factors that shape lived experience; that it is embedded. Whether and to what extent people can exercise agency is affected by historical, sociocultural, political, economic, and legal factors. These shape the actions of people from all genders when it comes to executing, receiving, and responding to violence. To counter the prevalence of violence and develop real exit strategies, policy and law must consider how women, men, and people of other genders interpret their own actions, and shed light on the constraints within which they operate. These constraints must be accounted for in the development of policy.

According to my research participants, violence communicates emotions in relationships where feelings are not openly discussed. It serves as a mirror reflecting the state of a relationship. While some forms of violence demonstrate infatuation and love, others indicate falling out of love or lack of emotion altogether. Violence in relationships may be triggered by the pressure to uphold certain gender roles publicly or to fend off a threat to these roles. In enacting, witnessing, and enduring violence, gendered bodies thus become ‘sites of individual agency and instruments of social control’ (Masquelier 2009: 278). Violence allows individuals to (re)produce, resist, subvert, or embrace certain norms, values, laws, and practices (Masquelier 2009: 246). Accordingly, my analysis of what violence is, what it does, and how different acts are conceptualised and interpreted accepts that the many forms of violence described here are not necessarily of the kind that may be condemned or even rejected. Violence is not only about acts but about forms of becoming, remaking, and unmaking personal and social expectations. Violence is thus a way of acting upon and affecting the very systems that shape behaviour (see also Wardlow 2006).

To develop a situated analysis and understand the embedded nature of agency, I use the concept of the moral economy of relationships (Burrill, Roberts, and Thornberry 2010). A moral economy is a framework for analysing systems of exploitation in which certain forms of exploitation are consciously accepted, within limits, for the sake of protection and subsistence. Early approaches to moral economy were concerned above all with land and labour, but more recent studies like Burrill, Roberts, and Thornberry’s 2010 volume *Domestic Violence and the Law in Colonial*

*and Postcolonial Africa* have enlarged the concept. Viewing the moral economy as ‘a governing network of obligations, entitlement, and provisions ... at the societal level’, they extend it to analyse gendered and generational household hierarchies in ‘contexts of unequal power distribution’ (Burrill, Roberts, and Thornberry 2010: 106). What underlies the formation of households and marriages is a moral economy that oversees rules, responsibilities, and acceptable limits of transgression and exploitation. In such an economy, the breaking point

is the incident or pattern of domestic violence. As such, domestic violence signals the breach in the system of obligations and reciprocity governing a set of relations. It is not simply an act of hitting, withholding food, forcing extra work, or leaving the home that causes the breach; it is when these acts exceed the limits of acceptability and threaten the mutuality of interdependence and obligation. (Burrill, Roberts, and Thornberry 2010: 106)

Within this domestic moral economy, there is an ‘ongoing debate over the appropriate exercise of violence’ (Burrill, Roberts, and Thornberry 2010: 72). Hence whether teeth and tongue are interdependent or create friction or destruction is determined by a web of lines of correlative expectation and obligation that must be held in place. The moral economy integrates historical forces and their influence on interpersonal relationships, and also adapts itself to current sociopolitical dynamics. In Sierra Leone, the experiences of violence during the civil war and the post-war process certainly contributed towards the present understanding and acceptance of violence within relationships (Chapter 2). So, of course, did the violence of colonialism and slavery. In this context, the moral economy is therefore not merely the result of a static ‘prevailing culture of patriarchy’ that ‘helped define the place of husbands and wives in a hierarchical but mutually dependent moral economy of marriage’ (Burrill, Roberts, and Thornberry 2010: 106). In addition, it is a dynamic mesh influenced by social, political, economic, and legal factors, and within it the levels and limits of acceptability are constantly renegotiated. In this way, ‘normative limitations on domestic violence’ are produced. The transgression of these limitations is socially condemned and punished. Consequently, the moral economy serves as a form of protection against ‘outright abuse’ (Burrill, Roberts, and Thornberry 2010: 98).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In assigning social and economic roles, the model of the moral economy of relationships encapsulates other theoretical approaches to violence, such as resource theories and family systems theories, which aim to ‘understand individuals within their interconnected family roles and their (re-)negotiations of positions of power’ (Johnson and Ferraro 2000; see Ofei-Aboagye 1994; see also Browning 2002 for social disorganisation theory), as well as ecological models that look at the interplay of these models (like Heise 1998).

In Sierra Leone, this moral economy extends beyond households and marriages. Indeed, various forms of local moral economies bind partners in different relationship forms together. The acceptable limits of exploitation and the existence of violence, as we will see, are dependent upon the particular relationship form and the level of commitment between partners. As we observed in the previous chapter, these relationship forms encompass a wide range of sexual interactions and dynamics. Violence in relationships, as I learnt, is a widespread concern and a central theme that permeates all of these different models. While many forms of violence are perceived as problematic, they are still considered integral to relationships and demanding of ongoing negotiation, rather than being treated as problems that need to be surmounted or solved. Within the diverse moral economies that form between different partnerships, the levels of acceptable violence and exploitation are constantly renegotiated. Moreover, intersectional parameters such as gender, age, class, and power are influential forces in determining how people endure, expect, and accept violent acts.

## Local Perceptions of Violence

### *Unacceptable Violence: Of Warm Hearts and Warm Persons*

As the metaphor of the teeth and tongue indicates, violence is only acceptable if it facilitates continued coexistence. Violence is unacceptable if its intent is to cause harm and if there is no possibility of restoring what has been undone. Harm is assessed in physical and social rather than psychological terms. Thus, forcibly taking a woman's or girl's virginity or impregnating her causes an irreversible harm, as does killing, mutilating, or otherwise inflicting impairment on another.

In Sierra Leone, where, as Jackson (2017) notes, moderation is regarded as an attribute of strength, unacceptable violence is seen as a demonstration of weakness and a shortcoming that reveals a person's inability to temper emotions and find a controlled outlet for them. This is expressed in the way unacceptable violence is described. Here, words such as 'wild', 'crazy', or 'uncontrolled' are frequently applied. Consider the following statement made by a driver about his brother who uses violence frequently: 'His heart is hot too much. He cannot control himself. Imagine the smallest fly in front of his face ... *ssss* and *zum*, he will explode like dynamite'. Or consider this statement by a cook describing his neighbour's temper: 'This woman is crazy. She is wild like a tiger, her heart is ... it is not even warm, it is hot'. Violent persons have a 'warm', sometimes even a 'hot' heart, meaning that they are easily

angered, unable to restrain their temper or moderate their actions. This is in stark opposition to ‘cool’ hearts and ‘cool’ tempers, which belong to people who think through possible consequences before they act.<sup>2</sup>

There is, however, a significant difference between a person whose heart becomes warm or hot in specific circumstances and a person who has a warm or hot heart. While lapses of moderation can happen to anyone and are then weighed against the incident or emotion that led to the lapse, people who have a warm or hot heart are said to act in a manner disproportionate to the incident. They thereby destroy the equilibrium that communities try to achieve, and they let loose around them an inescapable vortex of ruptures. The question of the nature of one’s heart therefore determines whether a person acted badly in certain circumstances or is a bad person. While the actions of people who behaved badly can be punished by households and communities themselves, conflicts involving persons who are in themselves ‘bad’ break the moral economy of any relationship, and their mediation requires state intervention (see Chapters 7 and 8).

### *Violence to Help and Protect*

The intention with which violence is executed is another important factor when communities determine its level of acceptability. If violent acts are executed to help somebody – for example, to punish a partner for wrongdoing, to teach good behaviour, or to prevent further violence – and not therefore performed without good reason or intention – for example, rape, torture, or cruelty to children – they are usually accepted. If violence has the purpose of helping or protecting an ‘innocent’, it enters a grey area and may be condoned. We can see this in cases of violence against children (Bledsoe 1990a). According to Murray Last (2000), in Nigeria violence against children is often carried out to educate and protect. In Sierra Leone, the well-known proverbs ‘spare the rod, spoil the child’ and ‘if you don’t beat your child today, they will stone the thief tomorrow’ have a similar meaning. Moreover, it is commonly understood that violence carried out by known persons is better than violence inflicted by strangers or state institutions, in which cases punishment is usually harsher. If a partner or elders learn of the behaviour of a loved one that is unacceptable, they may punish them as a corrective measure. Research collaborators often explained that they beat

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion of warm and cold hearts in relation to gender in Chapter 7. There is a vast cultural archive on this in (West) Africa; for a summary, see Thompson R.F (1979).

their partners, not because they believe in the value of beating, but because they want them to be protected from the beatings of others. The rationale is that if a person fears being beaten for certain behaviour, they will stop behaving in this way. As a result, they will never have to fear being punished for their transgressions publicly: this would shame not only the individual but their entire family and kin network.

*Violence along Intersectional Lines of Proximity, Gender, and Power*

The moral economy of relationships adheres to gendered notions of power asymmetries. These hold that men have control over women, but also that they must provide for and protect their partners. To be acceptable, violence must uphold, not break, this framework.

In relationships, a physical act is only considered as unacceptable violence if the victim is held down and forced. Coercion, intimidation, and manipulation are mainly speech acts and thus do not fall within the spectrum of unacceptable violence even if they make it possible. Michael (46), a teacher from central Freetown, said:

If I go home and tell my wife to lie down and beat her, it is against human rights maybe and you know the beating is violence, but because she accepts, she lies down, it is still somewhat acceptable. It is between me and her. Only if she refuses or runs from me and then I make her, then that is unacceptable, and others must come intervene.

What Michael's statement shows is that others will only engage if the socially sanctioned line of acceptability is crossed. Consequently, what matters is not that violence occurs but why and how, and who was involved both on the executing and the receiving end (Chapter 6). Teeth and tongue constantly touch each other and interact with each other. Depending on gender, positions of power, and the relationship between those involved, similar acts can have entirely different outcomes. In her book *Masculinities*, Raewyn Connell illustrates 'two patterns of violence ... First, many members of the privileged group use violence to sustain their dominance. Second, violence becomes important in gender politics among men' (Connell 2005: 83). These patterns are evident in Sierra Leone as well. If, for example, a young man beats his girlfriend out of jealousy after she goes to a party without asking for his consent, the likely interpretation is that both acted immaturally and irresponsibly. The acts in themselves, however, will not be condemned (Chapter 6). But if the male head of the house beats his wife after returning home from work because he is frustrated with his day, he

is believed to have acted irresponsibly for a man in such an important position. If he returns home and finds that there is no food prepared for him, again the fault lies with both partners. Generally, acts of violence are tolerated more when they are executed by a senior against their junior (see Connell 2005). If an elder beats their junior, this will most likely be called disciplining or educating, maybe punishing, depending on its severity. If a young person beats an elder, such an act is a form of extreme violence.

Whether violence is acceptable or unacceptable also depends upon the demographics and relationship between the person who executes and the person who experiences the violence. Violence by strangers is always unacceptable, while within a family relationship certain forms of violence are acceptable, such as those committed by elders against the young, by parents against their children, by husbands against their wives, and by senior against junior wives. Hence, violence should stay between the teeth and tongue, which fill one mouth (symbolising an intimate or familial relationship). The line between acceptable and unacceptable forms is crossed when the violence committed permits no return to the previous state of the relationship. Hence, no physical injury or irreparable rupture of the relationship is justifiable. If it does occur, a person is considered irresponsible, angry, and destructive and loses respect and authority.

### *Violence as a Demand and an Act of Giving*

Among my research collaborators, it was also commonly held that violence – both in its execution and its expectation – is learnt behaviour. Darren explained:

Women who have had bad experiences with an ex start to think that the best way to be treated when doing things wrong and if he cares is to be beaten. They believe that instead of discussing, beating is the main procedure of love. And that becomes the expectation. Women who have experienced violence might push for more violence: ‘Why don’t you beat me, don’t you care for me? Why don’t you always call me, tell me how to dress, where to go, check my phone to see who I talk with, never ask me where I am going?’ Women’s expectations might lead men to go through with physical violence.

The perspective of Adama (34), who works at the Rainbo Centre, underscores this:

Violence is not only the responsibility of those who use it but also of those that have been assaulted. If you have a partner who says that he cannot accommodate cheating but then you go on and cheat, then the man will say ‘OK, it is done with

us' and then you say 'I don't think this should be the end of the relationship. There must be something else that you can do'. Then violence can occur as punishment.

The notion of violence as learnt behaviour and expectation points to a persisting system of patriarchy that 'creates an environment that normalizes ... violence, simultaneously infantilizing women and reinforcing their subordination (alongside children)' (Namy et al. 2017: 40). Such patriarchal structures are not just local phenomena. Instead, argues Roseline Njogu, conceptions of sexual and intimate relationships have been 'transplanted through colonialism' and the 'internationalization of English monogamy'. These 'morph and merge with analogous indigenous conceptions to entrench and formalize the continued subjugation of the female body' (Njogu 2016: 16). One of the coping strategies within this larger, historically constructed system of male domination and violence is the offer by women to be subjected to violence in order to hold on to a relationship.

At the same time, these explanations shed light on Connell's notion that 'gender politics' (Connell 2005: 83) goes beyond men. It is shared between men and women. Within the moral economy, it seems that violence as punishment becomes an act of giving rather than imposing. This reciprocity of love and violence, in particular the notion that through punishment equality can be restored, is interpreted as an attempt to rebalance the moral economy. Here, the person executing the violence makes a conscious effort to restore equilibrium. Nevertheless, this moral economy also establishes limits that may not be crossed, and it is these limits that contain the severity of violence within relationships (Burrill, Roberts, and Thornberry 2010).

Violence is accepted less in temporary and fluid relationships than in lasting partnerships. Its acceptability also increases with the amount of genuine love and affection present in a relationship. In some ways, the more people love each other, the more they may also hurt each other by using violence without terminating the relationship. Hence, the more teeth and tongue sustain the body together, the more the tongue may push against the teeth and the more the teeth can bite the tongue. Punishing a partner for misbehaving is often viewed as a necessary component for a respectful and successful relationship. In their desire to live together, research collaborators who care deeply about their partners are overwhelmingly willing to use and suffer some violence to avoid breaking up their relationships (see also García Moreno, Jewkes, and Sen 2002; Burrill 2007). This ties in with the findings of scholars like Deniz Kandiyoti (1988), Saba Mahmood (2001), and Adeline



Masquelier (2009) that women may contribute to the continuation of practices that seem to lock them into marginal positions because of pragmatic considerations (Chapter 7).

### *The Pressure to Uphold Gendered Ideals*

In their study on how to end gender-based violence in Sierra Leone, Mills et al. (2015) point to the important role men can play as role models who champion inclusive forms of masculinity. My research highlights another aspect. It shows that men can come under pressure from their partners and families to use violence and to be 'dominant'. Local gendered notions of manliness require men to be 'in control' over their partners. That it was close to impossible to embody these ideals during colonial rule and the civil war, and continues to be difficult in contemporary Freetown, especially in conditions of poverty, does not diminish the significance of these concepts. Each person is embedded in different moral economies. Male research collaborators often described the social pressure to beat their partners as 'heavy', stressing that trying to solve a dispute with their partner through discussion would make them the 'laughing stock' of the whole community. Consequently, the gendered ideals woven into the fabric of the moral economy of relationships can cut into a person's flesh when trying to transgress them. The visible marks it leaves can easily be decoded by a person's social network and can involve a repositioning of that person within the moral economy of the household or community. Hence, the social pressures accompanying their roles within a relationship, household, and community bear down on both men and women. If within the moral economy certain forms of violence are symbolically tied to love, partners do not automatically appreciate their absence. Such an absence can be interpreted as a form of emotional violence on the part of a partner, who may then share their pain with the community, thereby threatening the gendered identity of the other partner. Certain acts of violence are therefore understood as part of what constitutes a relationship.

### *Violence as a Form of Communicating Emotions and Preserving Relationships*

As a result of gender parallelism, in which men and women have distinct yet complementary roles, many research collaborators believe that women and men are fundamentally different and cannot be friends (with the exception of the partner of one's best friend). Any contact between men and women has sexual implications and is fraught with misunderstanding

and disagreement. Even within a relationship, men and women primarily speak to and spend time with individuals of their own gender whom they describe as 'their own kind' rather than with each other. Similar findings have been recorded in other ethnographies of Sierra Leone. Mariane Ferme's (2001) ethnography of the Mende, for example, describes distinct male and female spheres, activities, and gendered material worlds, which are complementary but hardly overlapping. Even in marriage, Mende men and women seldom cohabit, and their daily routines are firmly organised around people of their own gender.

In Freetown, gender can form a dividing line, which is said to hinder mutual understanding. Sab (33), from Goderich, said: 'Men don't talk, and they don't understand much of my sufferness. I keep them yes, but I rely on my friends. With the women you find understanding; with the men you find company'. And MSaw (29), from EAUC, added: 'You see, me and this woman now, we have been loving for many years, but still I don't understand her. At all, at all not. All the women, their mind is different from us. It is complicating. You can only communicate with heart, body, hands'. Amidst these struggles, violence is often interpreted as a form of communication and a demonstration of emotions. This communication of the heart, the body, and the hands, as MSaw said, serves to indicate emotions between women's and men's worlds, thereby building one of the pillars of the moral economy. Normal, even desirable, signals of a partner's affection include social monitoring, the isolation of a partner, tying the gift of money to certain conditions, and other forms of manipulation and emotional violence.

Here we can refer to the role of the mobile phone. Its importance as a tool by which 'virtual spaces of intimacy' (Archambault 2018: 22) are found, relationships are created and fostered, and authorship over personal life is sought was analysed by Julie Archambault (2018) as well as others. She shows how young people in Mozambique create elaborate profiles of their selves, characterised simultaneously by the 'display and disguise' of various relationships, social status, and (multiple) identities. This game of pretence and self-making is present in Freetown as well. Here, as Michael Stasik points out, 'elaborate monitoring systems' (Stasik 2016: 228) allow people to navigate their relationships. During my research, I observed that the phone was a constant source of anxiety and mistrust. Handing over one's phone to a lover for 'checks' was the only way in which truthfulness could be ensured. People unwilling to surrender their phone at a moment's notice were, without exception, understood to value intimate relationships through the phone over the one with the partner making the demand. These demands were made by men and women equally. In fact, the failure to insist on phone checks or

other monitoring practices often caused pain and raised questions about the partner's fidelity or interest in continuing the relationship. The violence of these monitoring practices represents efforts to preserve a relationship and to hold on to somebody.

On the other hand, partners often perform 'partial disguise' (Archambault 2018). They may conceal their devotion to a partner and, through invoking jealousy, try to maintain or revitalise the desire of a lover. There are many ways in which violence is interpreted as demonstrating passion. Diamond (32), a builder from Allentown, explained: 'Real love must come with passion and passion is also jealousy. When you are jealous, your heart will become warm too much. Then there is some slapping or some beating. But it is part of the love'. Furthermore, if the possibility of loss is performed, a relationship that had been taken for granted may be reinvigorated. In this sense, violence in relationships can be understood as serving not only a disruptive but also a 'restorative' function. It has come to demonstrate the stability of a relationship and to prevent its dissolution. In certain situations, violence between partners can be executed, endured, and even expected as a means of expressing affection. The conversation I had with Sabrina (19) from Allentown shows this:

SABRINA: You know my story, my sufferness. You saw it right here. That man is not good. He was always out, no providing for me anymore. He stopped caring, and he must be loving somebody else.

ME: How do you know that?

SABRINA: Well for one, he stopped buying things for me. He doesn't buy top-up [credit for her cell phone] and doesn't call me first thing in the morning. He does not care where I go and what I wear. Last week, I dressed in super short clothes and went out. I walked past his friend's place. I made sure that they see me. Normally, he would have called immediately, he would have been so suspicious. Before his heart got very warm, he would have fought me so much and then he would have sexed me all night (*laughs*). But now I am free to go wherever and do whatever. I even took money from a man and left it lying openly, and he did not even investigate where it is from. No interrogation. It is horrible.<sup>3</sup>

### *Violence as Neglect*

Neglect, as Sabrina demonstrates, is the opposite of caring and involves the public performance of lack of affection. It includes neglecting to spend time

<sup>3</sup> This statement reiterates the connection between genuine affection and the provision of money or goods.

with a partner, neglecting to put a partner's needs first and show respect to a partner's desires, but also omitting to show signs of possessiveness such as jealousy. Consider an excerpt from my fieldnotes (from October 2016) that describes the reason why Amina (26), the main girlfriend of Suge, the former leader of EAUC, publicly ended their relationship.

Two days ago, Amina terminated her complicated on-and-off relationship with Suge again. Like always, club members – myself included – visit her at her house to 'beg her' to take Suge back. It is my fourth time 'begging' at Amina's house. I expect to observe Amina to be angry at first but then flattered. The fact that Suge's friends come to beg her is a sign that they respect and value her and that they do not want to lose her. Previously, these visits were then followed by Amina's revenge – usually some other lover with whom she would attend an EAUC event – Suge's outbreak of jealousy, and then a reconciliation. Normally, these stages occurred in monthly cycles. Initial ruptures were usually due to infidelity, Suge's inadequate monetary provisions, lack of respect, or time. But this situation is different.

When Amina finally steps out of her house to greet us after letting us wait for almost an hour, what we meet with is a woman who feels deeply humiliated and maltreated. Amina's eyes flash dangerously at the small crowd and immediately the laughter collapses into giggles that ebb away and make room for suspenseful anticipation as she straightens her back, walks down the stairs, and sits up tall on one of the makeshift benches, fixing us with her stare and her silence.

The previous day, Amina had been unable to reach Suge. After repeatedly calling him, she made her way to 24. There, she met him with other EAUC members and Hellen (28), a former girlfriend of Suge, watching a football match on television. Hellen and Suge were immersed in conversation. Amina walked over to Suge and attempted to sit on his lap. However, Suge refused to let her sit down, remarking that he was having a conversation and attempting to see the match. Furious, Amina started to argue with Suge, who then grabbed her, carried her outside and shut the door on her. The fact that Suge had not allowed her – his girlfriend – to sit on his lap and had rejected her in front of his friends, led Amina to believe that there was no way to continue the relationship without losing face.

Now, one after another her visitors vouch for Suge, beg her to forgive him and assure to have her back and advocate for her in the future. Interchangeably, they praise Suge and condemn his wrongdoing. But Amina's mood does not change. She does not even look at the gifts of clothes and food they brought for her. After all arguments have been exhausted, Amina says: 'This man has no respect for me at all. Suge does

not care ... neglecting me like that, me? Leave it. Let me go my way and let him go his way'.

As this case shows, neglect is linked to selfishness. It constitutes a form of violence that can lead to an immediate and public break-up in a social world where partners usually see no value in severing ties completely (Chapter 3).

In another case of neglect, Effe (23) left Amadu (24) from EAUC after more than three years because he refused to remove earrings that she did not like. After asking him repeatedly to change the earrings, she reiterated her demand in front of his friends during an outing. When he objected, she publicly broke up with him and left with another man whom she is now dating. The couple never reunited. Referring to this incident, Said (31) of EAUC, Amadu's best friend, told me: 'Amadu should have just taken out the earrings. It would not have mattered to him. Because, you see, if I love you and something is very important to me and does not make any difference to you and then you don't do it just because you are stubborn, then that shows that you have no care in the world for the other person. This selfishness cost him his woman'.

Alima (29), one of Effe's friends, reiterated: 'In a relationship, sometimes there is violence. But it depends. Fighting or arguing can be tough and beating may hurt, but all these things show that you care about each other, maybe even too much, so much that your emotions sometimes escalate. But if you don't do anything and refuse to even pay attention, that is like a declaration that the love has ended'. This shows that in a partnership it is expected that one partner will have access to the other person's body and will have a say in how that person dresses and styles their body. These expectations and questions of physical proximity – whether holding hands, hugging, kissing, or sitting on someone's lap – are not individual choices but mutual ones. The other members of EAUC unanimously agreed that both Amadu and Suge were wrong and that the neglect they displayed was unacceptable. Hence, while the acceptance of physical violence is often dependent on circumstance, failure to adapt one's behaviour even slightly and to show care and respect openly for a partner rips the fabric of the moral economy apart.

### *Sex and the Sharing of Bodies*

Another, more private form of violence is sexual violence. Sexual violence was perceived to be intrinsic to romantic relationships. When, in a relationship, two bodies melt into one, one partner has the right to do what they please with the other's body. Withholding or claiming ownership over one's body easily incites violence. Research collaborators would

often explain that sexual availability is part of traditional marriage terminology, in which both partners are described as possessions (Chapter 3). These terms are read as signs of a purposeful declaration of marriage, which regulate the interaction between a man and a woman. Consider Mr Mohamed's explanation: 'You know men and women; they are *very, very* different. Some yes, we keep for the company, but really we are all in it for the sex. I think also in your society, in every society. Men and women, why would they be together if not for the sex? So, if you withhold the sex, that is not correct'.

Forcing or coercing a partner into sex is seen to be the consequence of an unwillingness to meet one's duties in marriage, which is only acceptable when someone is ill. In that case, forced intercourse is ungently behaviour but was still described to me as 'acceptable' violence. Effie (41), a hairdresser from central Freetown, told me: 'Ah, Luisa, I am telling you, if maybe one time he says no [to sex] I will accept, but more than once, *no*. I will leave him or lay complaint'. When men or women report their spouses for withholding sex, communities usually heavily sanction them. However, among unmarried couples such cases are harder to win because there has been no official binding or public agreement about sexual availability. In that situation, women are said to have more power than men. One story that I heard in many different versions concerned young women withholding sex from young men, thereby embarrassing them in front of family or friends. Consider the story of Gas:

I don't know what it is about this woman. We have been together for three years now, but I desire her so much. Even when we are right done with sexing and she is only close to me, I want to sex her again immediately. But she, she will violence me too much. When I do something she does not like, she will just withhold the sex, yes. Imagine, then she calls me, and I go to her house and sit there in the parlour next to her family all excited to sex and she will not even let me into her room. No! She will not even come out. So, I will sit there, maybe with her sisters or her mother. It is a great embarrassment. I want to sex, why else am I here? Then she texts me and tells me to go and come back another day. They make us useless, these women. But I cannot stop it, I want her. I want her too much.

Gas's explanation, as well as his general attitude towards sex in relationships, creates a paradox. Like many research collaborators, Gas exclaims without hesitation: 'She is my girlfriend. I own her body for now. Can I not do to my own body whatever I want? We are in a relationship, so that means that she becomes my body as well'. Such statements can be interpreted as displays of systemic patriarchy that lead men to regard a woman's body as an extension of their territory to which they are entitled. Yet, the important consideration here relates to 'being in a relationship' rather than 'being a woman'. Gas refers to the implications of an

emotional metamorphosis of two bodies into one which creates mutual physical entitlements. However, this notion has severe limitations in that without having access to a woman's body men cannot exercise any degree of control. In a marriage, withdrawal breaks binding obligations and can therefore be reported. In other relationships, the same expectation meets with the practical impossibility of enforcement and the absence of enforcing institutions.

Additionally, agreeing to sex but then withdrawing consent during the process was widely considered unacceptable. Said explained this in the following way: 'When you say yes to sex, you cannot stop in the middle. That we consider violence. You already promised'. According to these conversations, violence often occurs when one partner is seen to deviate from expectations. Darren elucidates: 'When you are in a relationship, you are entitled to that particular person, so if you refuse or withdraw in the middle, that becomes a suspicious thing. Now that you are refusing this, then I believe that you are seeing someone else. That can become a sexual violence'. Darren states further that withholding sex will provoke the suspicion of infidelity, loss of interest, or alternative motives for having entered the relationship (such as to gain status, increase one's circle of friends, or obtain money). Sabrina shed light on the reasons why women may attempt to 'stop in the middle'. She said:

Some of the men, they try to trick you and say 'just some playing in your garden', which is the soft kind with kissing and everything and then when they start they want to try different positions and *bambrusing*, and maybe you don't agree at all anymore, but since you said yes to the sex it would be violence to stop now. That is why you need to negotiate terms *before* you start, because then when he breaks them, he is in the wrong.

Regarding sex, what is and is not acceptable is very clearly defined. Within the moral economy, give and take is paramount. If, according to the terminology around sex described in the last chapter – 'cut' for men and 'play' for women – a person only 'cuts' but does not 'play', they quickly become a passer-by (Chapter 3). Such men open themselves not only to female revenge, but they may also ruin their social position. Moreover, people who cut and pass, thereby withholding oral pleasure, just like people who withhold sex, may be accused in front of the household or community.

### *Pornography, Re-enactments, and the Economy of Naked Pictures*

Another alleged cause of sexual violence was related to watching pornographic films and then wanting to re-enact scenes with a person

who was not willing. When I spent time at EAUC, hardly an evening went by without members sharing, watching, or asking for naked pictures of girls and women they were interested in. Among these friends alone, several groups were opened on WhatsApp, such as 'MaturedMinds' or 'SexStuffs', dedicated to sharing and watching pornography. Alie (17) from EAUC was convinced that

one actual violence factor is pornography. With WhatsApp now, we watch all these films, and we send sex videos around or film women when they shower, and we want to try the techniques we see. Sometimes, the women they don't, but then we make them ... and we the men we always ask for naked photos and videos and then we share them. But the women they cannot refuse; otherwise, you will go to somebody else.

Bockare (38), a journalist, told me that the

stimulation of men and women is different. A man can view a porn movie and then get something out of that. The possibility for a woman to get something out of that is somehow slim. That can lead to unwanted sex ... We will say 'please baby do that for me, I want you to', especially oral sex or anal sex and when she hesitates, either we just take her, or we go to another one. So, mostly she will just shut up and do it because even if she leaves, her next man will surely want the same.

While I also met women who shared similar images and found watching pornography desirable, they did so privately since it was not considered 'natural' or desirable for them to do this openly. They were supposed to be the providers of such materials, not the consumers. The bigger problem, however, was not with pornography itself, which was considered a matter of personal taste, but with the actions inspired by pornography. When I spent time with women under the age of 30, they would usually share stories about those they sent their pictures to and what they had been asked to do sexually in the past few days. The question was not whether one wanted to share naked photos or engage in re-enactments of scenes from pornographic videos, but rather with whom one decided to do so. Many women and girls were less than keen but felt that, if they did not strategically choose one of their partners to do the things men wanted of them, they might be forced or their partners might leave them. Mabinti (24), a catering student, told me that 'there is no way around it, really'. Between lovers, the re-enactment of pornographic material has somehow become part of the reciprocity underlying the moral economy. A genuine lover must please a sexual partner. This pleasing requires men to ensure they attend to women's sexual needs and women to engage in practices important for men. Similarly, men who had no interest in these images still felt the need to ask their sexual partners for them so as not to show up



empty-handed at the next meeting with their peers. However, because naked photos and videos do not stay within the confines of the moral economy but are shared with others, they breach the foundation of reciprocity. As the next chapter reveals, the involvement of others often constitutes the breaking point of the moral economy and the moment when violence becomes unacceptable.