



The Murder of Women in Kenya and the Psychology of Blame

By Sitawa Namwalie



Have you ever wondered what it is like to be a Kenyan woman living in Kenya? Well, it's terrifying. And it's even worse if you are the mother of a Kenyan daughter. There is a place in your mind that is always preoccupied with concerns for her safety. Is she safe? What horrors might find her out there?

Velvine Nungari Kinyanjui died on March 9th 2021 while undergoing treatment at the Kenyatta University Teaching and Referral Hospital. A few days before Velvine's death, Jennifer Wambua, the Deputy Communications Director of the National Land Commission (NLC), was found dead. Both women had been raped and murdered. But their murders were not enough; social media launched its usual blame-the-victim game, focusing most viciously on Velvine. You see, Velvine Nungari Kinyanjui was 24 years old, working as a waitress, and she willingly went to a Nairobi hotel with a married man.

There is little hope that justice will prevail in both cases. But it wasn't always like this. Kenyan women did not always live at the mercy of sexual predators. American historian [Brett Shadle](#) has conducted research on attitudes towards rape among the Gusii in pre-independence Kenya. In his paper entitled, *Rape in the Courts of Gusiiland, Kenya, 1940s-1960s*, which he shared in response to the rape and murder of Velvine Nungari Kinyanjui, we get a glimpse into what can be defined as traditional African attitudes towards rape and the violation of women.

Shadle reviews the rape court cases in Gusiiland between the 1940s and the 1960s and sets out to show how seriously African courts treated the offence of rape. He notes the following:

“Court elders, and later magistrates, punished rapists harshly, in absolute terms and relative to crimes such as elopement. The courts’ conception of the crime was also strikingly “modern”: elders and magistrates treated rape as an offense against a woman as opposed to one against her male guardian. Perhaps most fascinating are cases in which an accused man claimed to have had consensual sex with his accuser. Unlike their contemporaries in Western and in Kenya’s British-run courts, Gusi elders did not expect a woman to prove that she had not consented to sex: instead, they demanded that the accused prove that she had consented. The record of these decisions complicates the notion of a progression away from a deeply rooted, deeply conservative patriarchal culture. In the absence of comprehensive historical studies of rape in Kenya (and indeed in most of Africa), this article suggests a different context in which to place contemporary debates surrounding sexual violence, and also offers another dimension to the historiography of gender and the law in colonial Africa.”

When I read this passage, I felt like crying with relief. African society was not brutal and did not treat women with violent disdain as so many Africans believe today. Just the idea that a man had to prove that a woman had consented to a sexual act is revolutionary for most societies in the world. It demands a level of responsibility on perpetrators that the so-called modern world has not been able to achieve. And it opens a sea of possibility for the reconstruction of Kenyan society in unimaginable ways.

In today’s Kenya blaming the victim even when she or he ends up murdered has become the norm. This blame game has become an echo chamber that is used to amplify the threat of violence. After the rape and murder of a woman, this echo comes from everywhere. It creates an element of unpredictability in our lives and makes us feel that we are surrounded by men who think nothing of subjecting women and girls to unspeakable violence.

So, imagine being the mother of a Kenyan daughter. The thing is she is now a teenager or a young adult and she is exploring life. She has discovered her beauty. Like many teenagers and young adults, she loves clothes, she is exploring her style, testing what looks best on her, how to maximise her beauty and of course she follows international trends from music videos. The fights you have with her about her preference for scanty clothing are endless. You try to get through to her that Rihanna and Beyoncé are musicians. Those skimpily dressed women in music videos do not dress like that in real life. Even they clothe themselves more fully when they go to the supermarket or to visit their grandparents. There is a lot of eye rolling and stamping of feet.

But she is young. Even when she tells you that Velvine’s murder has her scared, it doesn’t moderate her behaviour. You see, she is still a teenager and teenagers are immortal. Do you remember your immortal days?

Being the mother of a Kenyan daughter means that you walk a tight rope. You want to keep your daughter safe, but you can see her potential. You can see how high she can fly if only the monsters don’t get to her. And so, you are on that tight rope, trying to not clip her wings. The irony is that you must let her fly so that she can learn how to recognise monsters and how to evade the danger. If you keep her locked up in a dark room you will make her even more vulnerable and make her easy prey for the monsters you are trying to keep her safe from. What a conundrum.

The purpose of victim blaming

I have often wondered as to the purpose of victim blaming. If we examine the case of the two

recently murdered women, Jennifer Wambua and Velvine Nungari Kinyanjui, it is Velvine who has received an overwhelming onslaught of victim blaming. There has been much more empathy for Jennifer Wambua. In my view, it is quite easy to see why. Jennifer Wambua was cloaked in respectability in that she was a middle-aged married woman who was also a professional working in a prestigious organisation. And she was abducted the day she was due to testify in a land case. Her murder screams collateral damage in the high-stakes corruption that has come to overwhelm issues of land in this country. Somehow, the implication is that these are mitigating circumstances which allowed netizens to show respect for Jennifer Wambua.

Velvine Nungari Kinyanjui on the other hand was a young waitress who willingly accompanied a married man to a hotel. And therein lies her crime. No one asks why a married man is violating his vows. Velvine is to blame for leading him astray and for getting herself murdered. The murderer has been rendered invisible, despite the horrific injuries he inflicted on her, so let's bring him back to life. The murdering rapist's name is one Joseph Kinyua Murimi.

When you think about it, victim blaming is common in most societies around the world. In 2020, the United States of America showed us their limitless ability to blame black men, women and children for the often fatal violence meted out against them by the police. It appears that those who have the right to blame the victim are those people who hold the power in a community. The powerful perpetrators get to frame the violence, blame the victims of the violence and manufacture often outlandish reasons to justify the need for the violence and then they get to evade any consequences. Of course, many of the Kenyan people blaming Velvine for the violence inflicted on her protested vociferously against the horrendous injustice inflicted on African American George Floyd in 2020.

Here are some examples of social media posts including the exchange between Onyango Otieno, a leading gender activist and trauma healing counsellor, and various victim-blaming netizens:

The function of victim blaming

According to [Wikipedia](#), It was the American psychologist [William Ryan](#) who first devised the phrase "blaming the victim" in his 1971 book of the same title, which described victim blaming as "an [ideology](#) used to justify [racism](#) and [social injustice](#) against [black people in the United States](#)."

Victim blaming "occurs when the victim of a [crime](#) or any wrongful act is held entirely or partially at fault for the harm that befell them". The term has now been expanded to include victim blaming in other circumstances such as sexual assault and murder as was the case for Velvine Nungari Kinyanjui.

In examining the psychology of blame I have identified several reasons for this phenomenon. First, and ironically, victim blaming often stems from a desire to keep ourselves safe. Psychologists note that people need to believe that the world is a just and fair place and it is those people who take unnecessary risks who get what they deserve. People need to believe that their world is a place where one can safely get out of bed every morning and one in which a person can develop long range goals and have a chance of living long enough to make them happen. And so, when a person near us is the victim of violent crime such as rape or murder, we have the tendency to point the finger away from themselves. We must re-stabilise our disturbed world by blaming the victim and recovering our sense of security. Violence cannot be just a random thing. This is what some of those people blaming Velvine are doing.

But others are engaged in a subtle form of control of women and girls by spreading careless, randomised fear. Thus, Velvine may be gone but fear is being used to shrink women and girls into submission. These social media posts reveal some of the blame arguments.

“... 6% of rapes occur to innocent girls who meet evil men, while 94% of rapes occur to girls who are not so innocent who go out seeking rapists...”

This form of control also says something about the fears of those in power. What it says is that they may be afraid that they are losing control of the privileged position that patriarchy assigns them in society.

Victim blaming and lowered inhibitions

As I conducted [research](#) on the psychology of victim blaming, I came across a third and most surprising impact, which is that it removes inhibitions from those deploying it. The powerful would-be perpetrators use blame to remove their brain’s natural inhibitions that are there to prevent people from behaving poorly toward others. Victim blaming helps build thought patterns that allow people to act in a way that their moral compass would normally prevent. Thus, in the case of Velvine, many justified her murder because she accompanied a married man to a hotel. She was after easy money. She was young. She was not rich. Several social media posts are captured below to illustrate this point.

So what do you want?. Men castrated?. Among those, <https://t.co/vbxsZygl40> many are just false alligations?.<https://t.co/fd7f2rN2Qe> many of the girls had taken gifts from the men.<https://t.co/rT0jWONK6p> many of those were raped in lodgings and clubs?

— Arsbuc kitonyi (@ArsbucK) [March 19, 2021](#)

Greed is what is killing our sisters.....why would you want ro be with a total stranger.surely there are more than enough pple around them for relationships

— patrick (@patrickbett174) [March 21, 2021](#)



Gathigira Iwords

I don't support rape in any way ,but the victims make it easy for the happenings because they trust the wrong people they shouldn't

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These reasons prepare the groundwork to invalidate another woman and gives another man permission to violate her. In the process, the lowering of inhibitions that blame creates will allow more men to kill women.

In research on the phenomenon of victim blaming recently conducted by Laura Niemi, a postdoctoral associate in psychology at Harvard University, and Liane Young, a professor of psychology at Boston College. The researchers worked with 994 participants and was based on four separate studies. The two professors published their findings in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. One of the [findings](#) relevant to the Kenyan situation is quoted below and relates to the impact of moral values on victim blaming which helps in understanding the contrasting reactions to the rapes and murders of Velvine Nungari Kinyanjui and Jennifer Wambua.

“First, they noted that moral values play a large role in determining the likelihood that someone will engage in victim-blaming behaviors, such as rating the victim as “contaminated” rather than “injured,” and thus stigmatizing that person more for having been the victim of a crime. Niemi and Young identified two primary sets of moral values: binding values and individualizing values. While everyone has a mix of the two, people who exhibit stronger binding values tend to favor protecting a group or the interests of a team as a whole, whereas people who exhibit stronger individualizing values are more focused on fairness and preventing harm to an individual.”

People are always surprised when women join in the blame game. One [Winnie Wadera](#) caused uproar on social media when she blamed Velvine despite acknowledging that she herself was a victim of rape.

Yet it is widely acknowledged that [for systems to work and to do the job they were designed to do, every part of society must play its part.](#)

In this case patriarchy is the system that is being upheld by this form of victim blaming. And “it’s the woman’s fault” story must be sustained not only by those using it to evade responsibility, but must also be believed and defended by its victims. Thus, women blame themselves and blame other women for the violence they experience at the hands of men. [Winnie Wadera posted:](#)

“I know women are killed in hotel rooms and it is SO WRONG and are we ready to also start the conversation about “women stop following materials in those hotel rooms” or women are innocent and I should leave them alone?”

This ganging up on the victim turns the spotlight on the woman, leaving the perpetrator to go scot-free. The impact of victim blaming is that the victim is isolated and re-victimised by those she should count on for support. And for those women and girls Velvine left behind, the world becomes an even more dangerous place.

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This article could not have been written without the help of Onyango Otieno a Gender Activist and Trauma Healing Counsellor who kindly shared his social media posts with me, Prof. Brett Shadle who kindly shared his research on traditional attitudes to rape in the courts of Gusiiland between the 1940s and the 1960s giving me relief and hope. Writing the article was also made possible by the rage of Kenyans at the murder of Jennifer Wambua and Velvine Nungari Kinyanjui.

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