

Domestic Violence: The Nigerian Experience

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ABSTRACT—From the international and local media one reads about domestic violence every day. This paper however is limited to cases of domestic violence in Nigeria. The article considers the concept of domestic violence incorporating the forms and causes of domestic violence. The implication and negative effects of this vice on different members of the society is highlighted in the article. The article concludes by suggesting possible remedies to the abnormality of domestic violence. It is hoped that this article will help in no small way to bring about a reduction in cases of domestic violence not only in Nigeria, but across the globe as this article is being read.

Keywords: Domestic, Violence. Nigerian Experience

I. Introduction

On a daily basis in the Nigerian society there is shocking news of domestic violence everywhere. If the news is not about the growing trend of “baby making factories” dotting the nooks and crannies of Nigeria, it may be about a husband killing the wife or wife killing the husband. Sometimes, it may be about a father violating his daughter by sexually abusing her. Nigerian women are beaten, raped and even murdered by members of their own family for a supposed transgression, which can range from not having meals ready on time to visiting family members without their husband’s permission. Some women even experience acid attacks from their husbands or boyfriends which cause extreme pain and disfigurement, sometimes leading to the death of the victims. Domestic

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violence affects all social groups in the society and can consist of physical, sexual, emotional, economic and psychological abuse (America Psychiatric Association 2005, p. 1 and Oifig an Tánaiste, 1997, p. 141). Although men can also be victims of domestic violence (Denis 2014), women and children suffer it most.

The prevalent culture of silence and stigmatization of victims of domestic violence hinders public acknowledgment of the problem. There is an urgent need to challenge the social prejudices and the institutional structures of the Nigerian society in order to protect women, not just from danger, but also from ridicule, fear and isolation. The Nigerian Government as well as Nigerian Christians should rise to the occasion and find ways to tackle the menace of domestic violence. Typically, the police have been reluctant to intervene in incidents involving domestic violence; they prefer to regard the family as a private realm. Erroneously, wife beating is considered a “private affair” of the home. Wife battering is “culturally” acceptable; it is considered as a “normal way of life” and even as a “sign of love” (Nwankwo, 2003, p. 5). In other African societies domestic violence is viewed as a private issue between spouses which does not call for legal intervention. Women continue to suffer in silence and even accept domestic violence in their marriages as part of their destiny (Curran and Bonthuys, 2004). This is rather unfortunate for such women to accept this cruelty as their destiny.

II. Meaning of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is the intentional and persistent abuse of anyone in the home in a way that causes pain, distress or injury. It is a common occurrence throughout Nigeria and “wears many faces”. It involves disrespect and powerlessness that runs through women’s lives. It is a violation of human rights (Nwankwo, 2003, p. 7). It refers to any abusive treatment of one’s family member by another, thus violating the law of basic human rights. It includes battering of intimate partners and others, sexual abuse of children, marital rape and traditional practices that are harmful to women (Ahiie, 2009, p. 1). The revelation from these definitions is that domestic violence is usually a deliberate action and not a mistake or an act of the devil.

According to Scott and Marshall (2009, p. 4), domestic violence is specifically male violence (physical or psychological) against women. The term is believed to have been popularized by feminists in the 1970’s,

some of whom established refuges for battered women. They argued that domestic violence is a reflection of gender inequalities in power and of women's oppression. More broadly, the term encompasses any violence within the family, although violence against children is usually described specifically as child abuse. Researchers estimate that one out of every three girls and one out of every seven boys will be sexually abused by the time they are eighteen (Roehlkepartain, 1988, p. 8). This may be the case in the USA; the situation may not be far from the above in the Nigerian society.

Harrison (2014, p. 1) and Oyelade (2012, p. 10) however see domestic violence as physical, sexual, emotional, economic, psychological action or threats that influence another person. It includes any behavior that, isolates, frightens, terrorizes, coerces, threatens, hurts, injures or wounds, or even controls another person negatively. Different authors give various angles to the meaning of domestic violence. From the various definitions, one thing that is common is the fact that domestic violence has negative effects on the parties involved in the violence.

III. Biblical View of Domestic Violence

A careful study of the Bible reveals that there are cases of domestic violence addressed in the Bible. The record of Cain killing Abel his brother (Gen. 3:8) is a form of domestic violence. Cain killed Abel because God accepted Abel's offering, but rejected Cain's offering. This brought sorrow into the family of Adam and Eve. Another domestic violence in Genesis is Lot offering his daughters to the men of Sodom when they wanted to attack the men that visited Lot. He pleaded with the men of Sodom, "Behold, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof" (Gen. 19:8). In spite of this action, Lot is still remembered in Christian tradition as a righteous man (cf. 2Peter 2:7).

In addition to the above, there is story after story of domestic violence especially against women in the Bible. Among them are: sexual violence against Dinah (Gen. 34); another sexual violence against Tamar (2 Samuel 13), the Levite's concubine (Judges 19), and Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11); the banishment of Queen Vashti from her royal position because she refused to display her beauty in the public (Esther 1). The parable of the persistent widow in Luke's Gospel (Luke 18) is probably

another case of domestic violence against this woman. The judge refused to avenge the woman of her adversary, possibly because she was a woman and widow for that matter, until the judge became weary of the woman's persistent cry to him. Even though the Bible may be silent on some of these violent cases, it is sufficient ground for anybody to use the Bible to support domestic violence.

IV. Forms of Domestic Violence

There are different forms of abuse a person may be subjected to in the home. Abuse may occur once, or it may occur repeatedly and often in an escalating manner. A person may be subjected to more than one form of abuse or domestic violence. Some of these forms of domestic violence are discussed in this section of this article.

A. Forced Marriage and Underage Marriage

Forced marriage is a situation whereby young adult girls even though they are of marriageable age are forced to marry someone against their will. A few months or years into such marriage since it was not contracted on the basis of love, the girl will no longer enjoy the marriage and she will begin to do everything it takes to end it. This could be one of the reasons why divorce cases are on the increase in Nigeria.

On the other hand, underage girls are forced into marriage again on religious persuasion. This form of abuse is mostly practiced in the northern part of Nigeria, where young immature girls are given out in marriages to wealthy men to become a part of their harem.

B. Physical Abuse or Battering

This is the use of physical force in a way that injures the victim or puts him/her at the risk of being injured. It includes beating, kicking, knocking, punching, choking, confinement, etc. Female genital mutilation is equally physical abuse. The physical abuse or battering form of domestic violence is one of the commonest forms of abuse in the home.

C. Sexual Abuse

This form of domestic violence includes all forms of sexual assaults, harassment or exploitation. It involves acts like fondling, digital or penile

penetration, exhibitionism done to the opposite sex through the use of force. It also involves using a child for sexual purposes including child prostitution and pornography. In fact, sexual violence against children (especially little girls) is becoming a common phenomenon in Nigerian society. Hardly can a day go by, without one newspaper reporting a case of defilement and incest against a young girl, sometimes as little as two years of age.

Marital rape also comes under this form of domestic violence. The question may be asked about how a husband can rape the wife! The answer is found in the fact that any sexual act that is done in some unwanted, degrading manner and sometimes involving threats to the life of the victim/wife should she want to resist such an act is regarded as marital rape.

Also, in this category is incest. This takes the form of any inappropriate touching or fondling or sexual intercourse with someone who shares a biological relationship with the victim who might be a sister, mother, cousin, or someone who has been adopted into the family.

D. Hard Labour or Child Labour

Child labour takes the form of street vending, shop, market, or mall minders, beggars, guides for disabled beggars, head loaders in the markets, “wheel barrow boys”, bus conductors, etc. All of these violate the right of the child to education (Ayantayo, 2011, p. 49) and good welfare. All over the country, many children are used for child labour. At times, a whole family is dependent on the money these children bring home daily. Child labour offence is a serious crime in Nigeria but the truth is that it is only a crime on paper because one has never heard of parents being arrested because their children are hawking on the streets.

E. Emotional Abuse

This is a chronic pattern of behaviour in which a person is belittled including threatening a person of his or her possession or harming a person's sense of self-worth by putting him/her at risk of various behavioural, cognitive, emotional or mental disorders. Shouting at a partner is a very common form of abuse. Also included in emotional abuse are name calling, criticism, social isolation, intimidation or exploitation to dominate, routinely making unreasonable demands, terrorizing a person verbally or physically and exposing a child to violence.

F. Neglect of Family

This includes failure to provide for dependants who may be adults or children, the ingredients essential for the development of someone's physical, intellectual and emotional well-being and capacities. This could take the form of denying family members food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and protection from harm or a sense of being loved and valued. Men going away from home and leaving the children and mother without any support (Nwankwo, 2003, p. 23) are causing the family a lot of discomfort. This is equally an abuse.

G. Abuse of Widows

When a man dies in a typical Nigerian context, the wife is put through all manner of abuse. She is always the prime suspect for the death of her husband. She is made to go through some horrible and dehumanizing rituals. Her case will be worse if she gave birth to only female children. She will be stripped of all her husband's belongings. One can only imagine what the case could be if the marriage did not produce any children. At times, she may be turned into a "property" for a family member to inherit.

V. Causes of Domestic Violence

There are many causes of domestic violence in Nigerian society. Some of these causes of domestic violence are discussed in this section of this article.

A. Family Upbringing and Moral Value

An individual's upbringing and moral values play a major role in the way that a person treats others, especially the family members. Often, abusive parents grew up in homes where their parents were emotionally uninvolved, physically absent, abusive, involved in substance abuse or caught up in the world of success (Rosenberger, 1989, p. 29). This issue may be one of the least reasons for domestic violence but it seems to be very foundational to the various causes of domestic violence. A man who grew up in a family where the father does not respect the mother or grew up to believe that one can beat the wife because that was what the father always did to the mother will equally do the same to his own wife; he

will become a wife beater. It is sad and so unfortunate that some husbands beat their wives openly in the presence of their children. Some men even bring their sex partners and concubines to their matrimonial homes and the wife dare not say a word, and sadly their children are watching all of these. Such children will grow up and do worse than the father unless God takes control of their lives.

B. Cultural Belief

Culturally, fathers are seen as semi god; his words must be obeyed and no one dare question his authority. His words are always the mother's command. In fact, it is not synonymous with one family; it is the general trend in African society. All the major ethnic groups in Nigeria- Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa- have strong patriarchal societal structures that encourage men to believe they are entitled to power and control over their partners (What is the cause of Domestic Violence?; Olateru-Olagbegi and Afolabi) that lead to the justification of domestic violence; however, the Hausa are more supportive of domestic violence and view it as an inherent right of a husband (Kritz and Makinwa-Adebusoye, 2006, p. 56). It is basically because most women look up to their husbands for everything. A typical orientation is that women should only be concerned about women matters. This has given the man great room to treat the woman as a piece of furniture and to exercise control at all levels of her life. And as Africans, men cannot swallow the pills when it becomes obvious that the woman is no longer submissive as a slave, the man goes berserk resulting in abuse-beating. It could also happen the other way round, that is, despite the woman's contributions in the home, the man remains unappreciative but suspicious of the good intentions of the woman. Some women who cannot bear the brutality of the man take drastic measures that either lead to divorce or brutality to the man.

Some people often hide under the guise of culture and religion to justify acts of domestic violence. One can hear people making statements like "it is our culture", "the African culture allows it", "the Bible says a woman should be submissive, and if she is not, she should be beaten", "a foolish woman breaks her home", etc. All these add up to keep women in abusive relationships, while encouraging their husbands to continue their abusive acts. A careful study of African culture will, however, reveal that there are encouragements for the man to treat the woman with dignity and respect instead of being abusive. The woman is to be most cherished and not brutalized.

C. Religious Belief

Apart from the culture, there is a religious aspect to this whole issue. Some religions one way or the other relegate women to the background. In these organizations, women are the ones who have to cover themselves when going out, they are the ones who should not participate in discussions when the men are talking even if it is just a visitor to their husbands. They are taught that women should be silent during religious functions no matter their objections; their view should not be heard. The challenge is that the more men keep hearing these sermons, they are hardened and anytime their wives violate these “commands” they will be ready for trouble.

D. Financial Issue

Traditionally, the man is considered the bread winner of the home. He is expected to make money available for the family upkeep. However, these days it has become expedient for the woman to take on some kind of job either to fulfill her professional goal or to supplement the family food budget. Where this is not forthcoming is the beginning of a danger signal, especially if the woman can ill afford to make a substantial contribution. The danger becomes even more acute if the woman believes the man makes more money but fails to give sufficient amount to feed the family. The woman nags and complains in the presence of the children. She makes the children feel that their father has failed in his duty and therefore, is useless. Quarrels usually ensue; even fighting, swearing and cursing become the order of the day. Obviously, a poor emotional environment is created. The couple may now be co-habiting and not really be living as a happy family. Love is lost and respect is lost for one another. At this point, anything is possible.

E. Childlessness Problem

Another cause of domestic violence is childlessness. The reason why a woman might be treated so badly is because of the inability of the woman to bear children, which culturally is seen as a fault from the woman rather than the man, whereas the problem may be from both of them. The woman takes the whole blame for the childlessness of the couple. Any woman who has not been able to bear children is seen as an enemy of progress and so she deserves to be treated harshly. In most cases, both her husband and in-laws can ridicule, abuse, and even beat

her at will. Many women have to contend with serious rivalry because the man is permitted by tradition to take another wife who will bear him children. She could be subjected to violence for not preparing meals on time, having, or being under suspicion of having sexual relationship outside the marriage (Igwe, n.d; p. 66). These are secondary causes, which is a build up on the primary cause of childlessness.

F. The Male-Child Syndrome

Similar to the issue of childlessness is the male-child syndrome. Over 90% of men are obsessed with having male children. The failure of their wives to give birth to male children can bring real problems for the women. There was a case of a man who refused to visit his wife who gave birth in a hospital through caesarean section because the baby was a girl. He refused to pay the hospital bills. The woman was abandoned to her fate. It was her family members that rescued the situation. There are many more and perhaps even worse cases than these happening to women just because men want male children at all costs. Such men forget that the sex of a child is determined by the Y chromosome supplied to the woman during sexual intercourse.

G. Drugs and Alcoholism

Some of the deviant behaviours resulting in domestic violence are said to be traceable to drugs and alcoholism. According to Awolowo:

When a person, it could be a man or woman is now doing drug, he or she becomes a danger to those around him or her. Those who abuse alcohol, narcotics, morphine, heroin or stimulants such as cocaine, marijuana among others are capable of causing harm to other people under the influence of such substances. In Nigeria, many people easily get hooked to some of these drugs as a result of peer influence, particularly through constant association with bad people (Nigerian Tribune of August 3, 2014).

The magistrate courts in Nigeria are daily being inundated by divorce cases as one reads the daily newspapers. These cases of divorce are attributed to love lost in many homes.

VI. Effects of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence has wide-ranging and sometimes long-term effects on victims. The effects can be both physical and psychological and can impact the direct victim as well as the children who witness such parental violence.

A. Physical Effect

The physical effects of domestic violence may vary, but victims are known to suffer physical and mental problems as a result of domestic violence. Victims may likely experience physical injury (lacerations, bruises, broken bones, head injuries), internal bleeding, chronic pelvic pain, abdominal and gastrointestinal complaints, frequent vaginal and urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted diseases, and even HIV. Victims may also experience pregnancy-related problems. A study was carried out over the course of 3 months in 2005 in the Nigerian capital city of Abuja. The result revealed that physical, sexual, and psychological abuse among pregnant women was prevalent. One third of the female respondents reported experiencing domestic violence. Psychological abuse was found to be the highest type of abuse followed by physical and then sexual abuse. In terms of the physical abuse, about 20% of the women required medical treatment due to the nature of the abuse, and the most frequent medical complication reported was premature labour (Efetie and Salami, 2007). Women who are battered during pregnancy are at higher risk of pre-mature or more complicated delivery.

B. Economic Effect

Many victims have had to forgo financial security during divorce proceedings to avoid further abuse. As a result, they are impoverished as they grow older. If a man kills his wife for example, the implication is that he has endangered the children who will now be orphans, so to speak. This is because the man may not be a free person again to cater for the children. So, those children will rely on their peers and likely learn the negative parts of life. Their education will suffer as there will be no one to take care of them. They may be pushed to join bad gangs and become terrors in the society. Due to the fact that their education is stopped and also the fact that they are not able to learn any trade, a culture of poverty is unleashed on the society.

C. Social Effect

It is believed that children from families that have experienced the situation cited above will miss the affection of their mother and father. Children are better raised by both parents, and when it is no longer possible under a terrible situation as domestic killing, it becomes a serious problem. They carry a stigma that makes it difficult for them to relate well in society, as people will always see them as replicating the wickedness of their parent or parents as the case may be. In a situation where a father is killed by a son, such an episode is bound to place a heavy load on the woman, who might be tempted to do things she ordinarily would not want to do just to provide for the children left behind by the husband.

D. Psychological Effect

The long-term effects of child sexual abuse include depression and self-destructive behaviour, anger and hostility, poor self-esteem, feelings of isolation and stigma, difficulty in trusting others (especially men), marital, relationship problems and a tendency toward re-victimization.

E. Stigmatization

Stigmatization is one of the factors that cause victims of domestic violence to remain silent. Stigmatization is surely an issue as it causes victims to keep quiet and not cry out for help. The greatest challenge however is the poor response from the criminal justice system (police and courts) and social service providers (hospitals, social welfare) to victims and their families/friends.

VII. Conclusion

Both husband and wife have a right to be safe from all harm. Children have the same right. Most battered women care about their children's safety and want to protect them. In many cases, the best way to protect the child is to protect the mother from an abusive partner. A child's safety is, in fact, often dependant on his mother's safety. It is the responsibility of any society to make that society safe for the woman. Conversely, if it fails to inquire about whether the mother has been abused, or fails to respond to evidence or information about such abuse, that society leaves

both the child and mother vulnerable to further assaults. The society needs to switch the frame of reference and intervention strategies to hold assailants, not their victims, accountable for abusive behaviour. Battered women with abused children constitute a significant subset of child abuse cases, numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

VIII. Recommendations

This article has the following recommendations to present to curb the growing trend of domestic violence in the Nigerian society.

On the part of the Church:

- Pre marital counseling should be made compulsory for intending couples and should cover areas of domestic violence. This counseling session should be well handled by the Pastor, and if possible, it should be handled by an expert marriage counselor.
- More emphasis should be laid on discipleship training by the church. When believers are well discipled they will see the evil in domestic violence and do everything possible to avoid it in their homes.
- Enlightenment and continuing enlightenment in the form of seminars, workshops, talk shows, and Sunday sermons should be organized regularly within and outside the Church and by various organs of the Church to educate the congregation. This will help to educate men and women on their rights and responsibilities, and expose them to various facilities of Government and organizations that are involved in taking care of victims of domestic violence.
- Visitation to homes by the church members where domestic violence is prevalent will go a long way to helping such homes stop the evil. As church members visit, counsel and pray with families experiencing domestic violence, they will be helped to see the foolishness of the acts of domestic violence and thereby stop it.
- The church should encourage, as much as possible, couples to be open to each other in truth and sincerity about financial and material management. There should be corrective disciplinary measures meted out to church members who get involved in domestic violence.

On the part of the Government:

- The Nigerian Government should not only legislate concerning domestic violence; appropriate punitive action should be taken against offenders. In 2013, Nigeria passed a federal law to reduce

gender-based violence. The Violence against Persons Bill gave harsher punishment for sexual violence and also provides support and measures such as a restraining order to prevent the continuation of abuse (Repila, 2013, p. 68). However, when cases of domestic violence are taken to court, they are usually stagnant. In 2010, there was a case of a traditional ruler of one town in a state in South-West Nigeria who physically assaulted one of his wives resulting in her death. No action was taken against the king until a public protest ensued. The police then made a statement that they would press charges against him. Unfortunately, the case was dismissed in 2012, with the king going without any punishment. He was however dethroned as a result of this incident (Ayobami, 2012). Even though the traditional ruler was dethroned, he was not jailed for the crime he committed in killing the wife.

- There should be strict enforcement of laws prohibiting any form of marital or domestic violence. This will help to curtail the spread of domestic violence and also encourage people that are victimized to have the courage to report cases to law enforcement agents for criminal proceedings.
- The role of the media in this matter cannot be overemphasized as the tool by which government can disseminate information and sensitize the general public through jingles adverts, dramas, documentaries, etc, on the evil of domestic violence. The media should not just report cases of domestic violence, but should see it as a social responsibility to relay programs to curb cases of domestic violence in Nigerian society.

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