

Assessing Domestic Violence in Nigeria

Article by Kehinde Oluseyi Macaulay
RN-MSN in Nursing, Nigeria
Email: *kennyibiks@yahoo.com*

Abstract

Domestic violence is form of violation of person's human rights or abuse of anyone in a way that causes pain, distress or injury. It refers to any abusive treatment of one person by another, thus violating the law of basic human rights. It includes battering of intimate partners and others, sexual abuse of children by parents or relative, such as marital rape and traditional practices that are harmful and inhuman to a person, men or women.

In this paper we will discuss the prevalent rate of domestic violence in Nigeria, the situation of domestic violence, cause, types, effect and managements of domestic violence in Nigeria. Lastly preventive and remedial is proffered as a panacea for the ugly phenomenon.

Keywords: *Domestic, Violence, Abuse, Nigeria, Counselling, Patriarchal.*

Introduction

Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. It is also known as domestic abuse, spousal abuse, family violence and intimate partner violence. It is violence or other abuse by one person against another in a domestic setting, such as in marriage or cohabitation. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person.

Domestic violence is an issue of global concern. Some societies have even seen it as norms as such, culturally accepted it as part of life. In 2002, Djaden and Thoennes (2002) reported that in the United States of America, women experience about 4.8 million intimate partner-related physical assaults and rapes each year, while men are victims of about 2.9 million intimate partner related physical assaults. In parts of the third world generally and in West Africa, in particular, domestic violence is prevalent and reportedly justified and condoned in some cultures.

Domestic violence is a social problem in Nigeria like many other parts of Africa. Reports from a Humanitarian News Agency, IRIN (2007) show that 25% of women in Dakar and Kaolack in Senegal are subjected to physical violence from their partners and that very few admit that they are beaten. These women would be told never to report such cases to anyone; as such they are told to keep quiet and endure the beatings. In Ghana, spousal assaults top the list of domestic violence (I-RIN, 2007) without any serious punishment or prosecution of any sort.

In Nigeria, Amnesty international (2007) reports that a third (and in some cases two-thirds) of women are believed to have been subjected to physical, sexual and psychological violence carried out primarily by husbands, partners and fathers while girls are often forced into early marriage and are at risk of punishment if they attempt to escape from their husbands.

There is sadly a deep cultural belief in Nigeria that it is socially acceptable to hit a woman as a form of discipline. Violence against women is a technical term used to collectively refer to violent acts that are primarily or exclusively committed against women. One third of women in Nigeria were believe to be subjected to physical, sexual and psychological violence carried out by husband, partners or father. Common forms of violence against women in Nigeria are battering, sexual abuse of children, marital rape, acid attacks, molestation, corporal punishment and homicide. The victims of domestic violence are women, men, boys and girls. However, women and girls are most affected.

The purpose is to create sensitization in the area of gender based violence in Nigeria, as the victims most often suffer in silence and fail to seek for help due to patriarchal society, attempt to preserve unity in the relationship or family while in some cases they sacrifice their life in the process.

Situation of domestic violence in nigeria

The purpose of this study is to assess the level of domestic violence in Nigeria and find a way of reducing it, if not eradicating it totally. Domestic violence has been on the increase. It is so common that it has often gone unnoticed and failed the level of concern it deserves in light of the devastating effects on children and families. There have been reports of cases of husbands killing and maiming their wives in the media. Father rapes daughter, husband beats wife to stupor, 67-year-old man defiles eight-year-old girl, wife stabs husband to death, these and many more have made headlines of various media. The statistics presented actually cause to lose courage. About 50% of women have been battered by their husbands. Shockingly, more educated women (65%) are in this terrible situation as compared with their low income counterparts (55%) must endure, believing they have nowhere to go and in any case, believing, for good reason, that the law will not protect them. Staggering 97.2% of them are not prepared to report to the Nigeria Police because of their patriarchal nature. Only four states of the Federation (Lagos is one of them) have passed laws against the insidious crime, whilst several Bills against it languish in our male dominated National Assembly. Of the states that have passed it, the law is yet to be fully tested.

Traditionally, in Nigeria, as in many other African countries, the beating of wives and children in particular, is widely sanctioned and allowed as a form of discipline (UNICEF, 2001), to instill discipline into them. Therefore, in beating their-children parents believe they are instilling discipline in them, much the same way as in husbands beating their wives, who are regarded like children to be prone to indiscipline which must be curbed.

Recently in Lagos State, the western part of Nigeria, a woman named Titilayo Arowolo, 27-year-old mother of one was gruesomely murdered by her husband Kolade who allegedly axed her to death in their home at Isolo. Before that, the scandalous story of wife battering by one Nigerian Ambassador and a traditional ruler who engaged his wife in a public brawl made the rounds, thus bringing the issue of spousal abuse once again to the front burner.

Domestic violence constitutes a great problem to the family and the society at large. It occurs at home, in public places like streets, parks, familiar places like homes of friends and relatives, offices, involving highly placed executives; and also in churches and mosques.

Domestic violence that occurs in private within the family, including wife battery, rape, acid attack, and sexual abuse affect the physical and psychological wellbeing of women; and as such, they seem to erode the position of women, both at home and in the society at large.

Causes of domestic violence

Alumanah (2004) highlighted some of the cause of domestic violence against women as refusal of wife to submit to husbands' authority, sexual misconduct by wives, interference by in-laws, conflict between work and domestic duties by wives, religious conflict between partners, flirting of husband with other women among others.

Three major factors are responsible for domestic violence in Nigeria namely; patriarchal nature of our culture, economic dependence of one sex on the other and lack of legal framework to address domestic violence.

Generally, there are many different theories as to the causes of domestic violence. This includes psychological theories that consider personal traits and mental characteristics of the perpetrator. As well as social theories which considers the external factors in the perpetrators environment.

Psychological causes: these focus on personal traits and mental characteristic of the offender. Personal traits may include sudden burst of anger, poor impulse control and low

self-esteem. It often followed that abuse observed or experienced as a child lead some people to be more violent as an adult.

Jealousy: this is demonstrated when a spouse is suspected of being unfaithful or is planning to leave the relationship.

Social stress: stress may be increased when a person is living in a family situation with increased pressure. However, violence is not always caused by stress but may be a way some people respond to stress. A very good example of such is couples experiencing financial crises may be more likely to experience domestic violence due to increase stress and conflict about finances.

Social learning: (Crowell & Sugarman, 1996) established that violence is often transmitted from generation to generation in cyclical manner. If one observes violent behavior, there is possibility of imitating it if there are no negative consequences and more so if the victim accepts the violence with submission.

Power and control: the perpetrator of abuse does so in order to establish or maintain control over the partner. Abusers' effort to dominate have been greatly attributed to low self-esteem or feeling of inadequacy, unresolved childhood conflict, the stress of poverty, hostility and resentment towards women, personality disorder, genetic tendencies and social cultural influences.

No cause of domestic violence, however, justifies the actions of the abuser, nor should it be used as a rationale for their behavior.

Domestic violence is actually on the increase in Nigeria because the long arm of the law is not catching up with the perpetrators of this deadly act and also in some cases the punishments doled out on these perpetrators are not thorough enough to stop any other person with such intention from doing it.

Types of domestic violence

Domestic violence is perpetrated in different ways such as physical aggression or assault, sexual abuse, economic abuse, emotional abuse, spiritual abuse and negligence.

Physical abuse

Physical abuse is perpetrated mainly by men on women as a response to actual or suspected infidelity, relationship inequality, financial issues, over indulging in alcohol or substance abuse and rejection of sexual advances. Physical violence against women may occur in the form of acid attack, molestation, female genital mutilation and battering.

Victims of physical violence are inflicted with physical injuries such as minor or major cuts, scratches and bruises, broke bones, internal bleeding, head trauma, burn from acid, hot water or oil, electric iron, naked fire, hot soup just to mention a few.

Sexual abuse

This includes all forms of sexual assaults, marital rape, harassment or exploitation. It involves forcing a person to participate in sexual activity, using a child for sexual purposes including child prostitution and pornography.

Economic abuse

This includes stealing from or defrauding a loved one, withholding money for essential things like food and medical treatment, manipulating or exploiting family member for financial gain, preventing a loved one from working or controlling his/he choice of occupation.

Emotional abuse

This includes threatening a person of his or her possession or harming a person's sense of self-worth by putting him/her at risk of serious behavioral, cognitive, emotional or mental disorders. Shouting at a partner which was found to be the most common abuse. Also included in emotional abuse are name-calling, criticism, social isolation, intimidating or

exploitation to dominate, routinely making unreasonable demand, terrorizing a person verbally or physically and exposing a child to violence.

Spiritual abuse

This includes preventing a person from engaging in his/her spiritual or religious practices or using one's religious belief to manipulate, dominate or control him/her.

Negligence

This includes failure to provide for dependents who may be adults or children, denying family members food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and protection from harm or a sense of being loved and valued.

Effect of domestic violence

Domestic violence has devastating effect on the victims who are mostly women with a resultant effect on the children. Some of these effects are highlighted as follows;

Effect on children: It is highly believed that a child who is exposed to domestic violence during his/her upbringing will suffer in his/her development and psychological welfare. Some emotional and behavioral problems that can result due to domestic violence include increased aggressiveness, anxiety, and changes in how a child socializes with friends, family and authorities. Problems with attitude and cognition in schools can start developing, along with a lack of skills such as problem-solving. It has been discovered that children who witness mother-assault are more likely to exhibit symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Physical effect: Acute effects in domestic violence incident are bruises, broken bones, head injuries, lacerations and internal bleeding which most time require medical attention and hospitalization. Some chronic health conditions that have been linked to victims of domestic violence are arthritis, irritable bowel syndrome. Most victims of domestic violence who are pregnant experience greater risk of miscarriage, pre-term labour, and injury to or death of the fetus.

Psychological effect: High level of stress, fear and anxiety were reported among victims who are still living with their perpetrators. Depression is also not left out, as victims are made to feel guilty for provoking the abuse and are always subjected to intense criticism. It was discovered that 60% of victims meet the diagnostic criteria for depression, either during or after termination of the relationship, and have a great tendency for risk for suicide. The most commonly referenced psychological effect of domestic violence is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD experienced by victims is characterized by flashbacks, nightmares, exaggerated startle response, intrusive images, and avoidance of triggers that are associated with the abuse. These symptoms are generally experienced for a long time even after the victim has left the dangerous situation.

Financial effect: Once victims leave their perpetrator, they can be stunned with the reality of the extent to which the abuse has taken away their autonomy. Due to economic abuse and isolation, the victims usually have do not have enough money of their own and few people to rely on when seeking for help. This has been one of the greatest obstacles facing victims of domestic violence, and a strong fact that can discourage them from leaving their perpetrators. In addition to lacking financial resources, victims of domestic violence often lack specialized skills, education, and training that are necessary to find gainful employment especially in cases of house help, nanny, or even house wife may also have several children to support.

Long-term effect: Domestic violence can trigger many different responses in victims, all of which are very relevant for a professional working with a victim. Major consequences of domestic violence victimization include psychological/mental health issues and chronic physical health problems. A victim's overwhelming lack of resources can lead to homelessness and poverty.

Management of domestic violence

The response to domestic violence is typically a combined effort between law enforcement, counselling services and health care.

Medical response: Medical professionals do not see themselves as being able to play a major role in helping women in regards to domestic violence. Injuries are often just treated and diagnosed, without regard for the causes. Health professionals have an ethical responsibility to recognize and address exposure to abuse in the patients, in the health care setting. For example, the American Medical Association's code of medical ethics states that "Due to the prevalence and medical consequences of family violence, physicians should routinely inquire about physical, sexual and psychological abuse as part of the medical history."

Law enforcement: A study was conducted by Lawrence Sherman in 1982, The Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment, to evaluate the effectiveness of various police responses to domestic violence calls in Minneapolis, Minnesota; including sending the abuser away for eight hours, giving advice and mediation for disputes, and making an arrest. Arrest was found to be the most effective police response. The study found that arrest reduced the rate by half of re-offending against the same victim within the following six months (Maxwell, Garner & Fagan, 2001). In the replication studies which were broader and methodologically sound in both size and scope, arrest seemed to help in the short run in certain cases, but those arrested experienced double the rate of violence over the course of one year (Schmidt and Lawrence, 1993). Generally, it has been accepted that if the understood victim has visible (and recent) marks of abuse, the suspect is arrested and charged with the appropriate crime.

Counselling for person affected: Since marital violence is major risk factor for serious injury and even death, and women in violent marriages are at much greater risk of being seriously injured or killed; counselling intervention is much needed. Initial assessment of the potential for violence in a marriage can be supplemented by standardized interviews and questionnaire which have been reliable and valid aids in exploring marital violence more systematically. Counsellors and therapists should also make the distinction between situations where battering may be a single, isolated incident or an ongoing pattern of control. If it becomes apparent to the therapist that domestic violence is taking place in a client's relationship, the therapist must explore options with the client; and also refrain from blaming the partner or telling the client what to do. It is unreasonable for the therapist to expect that a victim will leave her abusive spouse solely because she disclosed the abuse. The therapist should respect the victim's autonomy and allow her to make her own decisions (Lawson, 2003). Therapists must be aware that supporting assertiveness by a battered wife may lead to more beatings or even death. Even in few cases, when the wife leaves because of life threatening situation, therapists should not relax their vigilance after a battered wife leaves her husband. Some data suggest that the period immediately following a marital separation is the period of greater risk for the women. Many men will stalk and batter their wives in an effort to get them to return or punish them for leaving.

Counselling for offenders: The main goal of counseling for offenders of domestic violence is to minimize the offender's risk of future domestic violence, whether within the same relationship or a new one. Treatment for offenders should emphasize minimizing risk to the victim, and should be modified depending on the offender's history, risk of reoffending and criminogenic needs. The majority of offenders' treatments are conducted in a group setting with groups not exceeding 12 participants. Groups are also standardized to be gender specific (Colorado Domestic Violence Offender Management Board, 2010). According to Roberts (2002), anger management alone has not been shown to be effective in treating domestic violence offenders, as domestic violence is based on power and control and not on problems with regulating anger responses. Anger management is recommended as a part of an offender treatment curriculum that is based on accountability, along with topics such as recognizing abusive patterns of behavior; it also requires a great deal of personal change and

the construction of a self-image that is separate from former abusive while still being held accountable for it.

The way forward

To mitigate violence against women, there is need for continuous public education with the aim of raising awareness among Nigerian populace. The use of television, radio and newspaper media can go a long way in improving the masses knowledge on domestic violence. It is also important to put more efforts into empowering women through equal educational and employment opportunities.

Promulgating laws that will protect women and children against violence and abuse would stem the magnitude of the problem, but punitive approach without adequate education and counseling of perpetrators and victims of domestic violence may not yield the desired results. Perpetrators of domestic violence against women may need more social and psychological help rather than punitive measures than previously thought. There is then an imperative need to establish facilities for this purpose. Incorporating help centers with law enforcement – Lessons from other parts of the world.

Prevention of domestic violence in nigeria

Among other things, strategies aimed at reducing the negative impacts and the threats to the psychological well-being of people affected. This will bring to light the socio-environmental issues that fuel or perpetuate the violence and ways of tackling them. There is need to strengthen our judiciary system to ensure prompt and adequate trial of offenders, while the police in turn must be made to handle cases of domestic violence with utmost seriousness and professionalism. This will guarantee adequate protection and security for our women.

Other following measures can be taken:

Educating community: one of the major and important approach is through education from primary education to tertiary level through teaching. It means that there is need for inclusion of domestic violence in our school curriculum. People in the neighborhood should also be educated and how to detect and intervene safely in any form of domestic violence in their area, which can be done in collaboration with the local domestic violence shelter and police community outreach officers.

Organization of the community: community should be organized in such a way that it does not condone or tolerate any form of domestic violence. As neighbors will watch to stop the crime, network of folks should also be organized who will be committed to intervening in domestic violence situation, and help victims leave their abusers with communal support structure for survivors

Advocacy with the community leader: there is need with advocacy with the community leader, as we know that prevent domestic violence is an inclusive approach, and as such there is need for high level advocacy with the community leaders, especially in areas where there is high level of illiteracy.

Advocacy with religious leader: apart from advocacy with community leader, there is need for advocacy with the religious-based leaders, especially in a country like Nigeria where religion plays high relevance in the life of the people.

Culture and tradition: domestic violence is deeply embedded in culture and tradition because of our patriarchal structure which says that husband is the head and he owns the woman, so he could do whatever he likes to her. On the other hand the woman needs to be submissive even at the detriment of her health or life in marriage As such there is need for cultural-based approach to prevent this, such as addressing the cultural bias of the traditionalist who do not see any wrong in domestic violence.

Information and communication: information and communication will also play a key role in preventing violence. With the proliferation of social media there is need to use this tool to address some salient issues regarding domestic violence in our society.

Not conviction of offenders: This has also caused increase in domestic violence especially in country like Nigeria where impunity is order of the day. Until the offenders are made to face the music which will cause deterrent for others from repeating a similar offence we may not be able to stop domestic violence in the society.

Training and enlightenment with our police force: due to patriarchal nature of the society, and having more of men in our police makes it difficult for them to protect especially women from domestic violence as it seen by them as family issue which should not be discussed outside the home and a means a man corrects his wife.

Advocacy to the legislature: domestic violence is not illegal in many states in Nigeria and that means victims are not entitled to legal support. In fact due to stigmatization or fear of being labeled, most women that are victims have chosen to stay in such marriage even if it means losing their lives and leaving the children to suffer. If law is passed against domestic violence in all the states and is being implemented not only documented is a good step in the right direction, though there are still facts that even in the states which such laws domestic violence is the order of the day.

Abolishing some federal laws: there is law that permits husband to use physical means to correct the wife, so far it does not result in grievous harm such as losing of speech, sight, hearing, facial disfigurement or life threatening cases. Example is section 55 of the penal code in northern Nigeria that permits a man in wife battery so far it does not degenerate to excessive bodily injury. The question is how do we measure what is excessive.

Enlightenment from mass media: domestic violence is under reported, poorly documented and hardly investigated. Through different media domestic violence can prevented by educating people about it through different means and campaigning against it.

Finally, policy makers can do more to curb domestic violence by enacting laws that will fully protect the female gender within the society. This will definitely serve as an instrument to tackle a lot of the social issues that may complicate domestic violence in Nigeria.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite the fact that women are culturally subservient and male dominance is the norm in Nigeria, the increasing difficulties and depreciating standard of living have put strains on many relationships, with attendant increase in violence, women are daily and regularly being exposed to various forms of abuses. Therefore, there is needed to take cognizance of the physical and psychological well-being of these women who are expose to different domestic violence in our society.

The Nigerian Government through the Ministry of Women Affairs needs to pay more attention to issues of gender based violence. More research investigations are also needed in the area of gender based violence in Nigeria. This would help in policy formulation to prevent gender based domestic violence and protect women and children from attendant complications arising from gender based domestic violence. Routine screening of women for domestic violence in clinical facilities that attend to women and children's health may help in early identification of victims and perpetrators and assessment of the magnitude of the problem in this environment.

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