Domestic Violence and Challenges of Mitigating Women's Abuse in Nigeria: Implications for Women Education

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Abstract

Women's abuse as an aspect of domestic violence is a threat to the life, value, and dignity of womanhood. Its persistence in contemporary Nigerian society especially in the COVID-19 era is an anomalous situation that stifles national development as well as the attainment of sustainable development goals as it concerns gender and education. In addressing the situation, the paper x-rayed domestic violence, women's abuse, a brief historical situation of women's abuse, forms of women's abuse, and challenges of mitigating women's abuse that revolves around customs and traditions, individual perceptions, legal and economic considerations. The paper further highlighted solutions to women's abuse and its educational implications. Based on the discussions, it was concluded that ending women/girls' abuse as domestic violence should be given priority by everybody as it fosters individual development, achievement of sustainable development goals, and contribute meaningfully to national development.

Keywords: domestic violence, women's abuse, educational implications

Introduction

Domestic violence is a global threat to peaceful human co-existence. It is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon with a significant public health impact. It is a total violation of human rights beyond geographical, cultural, religious, social, moral, and economic conditions. It consists of a pattern of coercive behaviors used by a competent adult or adolescent to establish and maintain power and control over another competent adult or adolescent (Popoola, Oguntayo, Opayemi & Omolara, 2020). It is also violence in a domestic setting, such as marriage or cohabitation. Domestic violence is committed by a spouse or partner in an intimate relationship against the other. It can take place in a heterosexual relationship, and/or between divorced partners. It also involves violence against children, parents, or the elderly. It is not usually limited to one act, rather it's a pattern of behavior, involving some tactics, and the abuse follows a pattern and gets more serious over time. Domestic violence takes a variety of forms including physical, verbal, emotional, economic, reproductive, and sexual abuse. It can range from subtle, coercive, marital rape to physical abuse such as beating, slapping, female genital mutilation, and

acid throwing that result in disfigurement or death (Cleen Foundation, 2003; Shipway, 2004).

In Nigeria for instance, domestic violence seems to be a common practice acceptable by the society. Among the Efik of south-south Nigeria, beating of a wife is wholly accepted and seen as a way of imposing man's authority over the wife in a conjugal relationship (Bazza, 2009). A similar practice is common place in some northern states of Nigeria as allowed by their penal code (Section 55(1)(d)) which sees nothing in a man beating the wife provided there are no physical injuries and this is seen as being correctional and lawful (Shija, 2004). In some cases, brave and wealthy women cause domestic violence in an attempt to control their husbands. Men being victimized by their wives in such condition, are not bold enough to report such incidence. This is buttressed in a recent doctoral study conducted in Kosofe Lagos, Nigeria, which found that more married men are becoming victims of spousal abuse but suffer in silence due to stigmatization (Chukwma, 2021 cited in Premium Times of February, 2021). Notwithstanding who is victimized in a domestic violence, domestic violence especially women abuse is a menace that needs to controlled.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Women's Abuse

Among the aspects of domestic violence is women's abuse. Women's abuse is any kind of abuse a woman is subjected to because of her gender status as a woman. It may involve physical, sexual, social, or psychological harm meted against women based on their gender status. According to United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) in Noah (2000):

> Violence against women is a manifestation of unequal power relations between men and women which has led to dominion over and discrimination against women by men and the prevention of the full advancement of women; that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men.

Thus, the purpose of women's abuse is to engender fear, establish control, gain power, domination and undermine the humanity of women. This is further explained by the dominance theory captured later in this work.

Brief History of Women's Abuse

Women's abuse occurs across various cultures and affects women of every economic status. However, studies have shown that women of lower socio-economic class are at higher risk of women's abuse. This is because of differential access to economic and political power, control of material resources, freedom to acquire knowledge through education, and other basic needs of life (Bazza, 2009). In Nigeria, women's abuse is a problem as in many parts of Africa. It is widespread and shows no signs of reduction. Women's abuse is entrenched in the family and seems to be institutionalized by the social structure. It is driven by the patriarchal arrangement or class-gender stratification.

Furthermore, statistics from National Population Commission [NPC] (2013) estimated women's lifetime exposure to abuse from their current husband or partner at 19% for emotional abuse, 14% for physical abuse, and 31% for sexual abuse. Again, NPC (2013) reported that studies conducted in different regions in Nigeria have shown abuse against women ranging from 42% in the North, 29% in the South West, 78% in South East, and 41% in the South-South. Also, according to the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team [D.S.V.R.T.] (2020), there is a sudden increase in the rate of women's abuse across the nation in March 2020. Women's abuse was revealed to have significantly increased from 40% to 50% after the imposition of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in Nigeria and the most affected states were Lagos and Ogun states as well as Federal Capital Territory, Abuja (D.S.V.R.T.2020). Although other states were not devoid of the increase, the scourge poses serious mental and reproductive health challenges to women and girls. Women's abuse as a result occurs in various forms.

Forms of Women's Abuse

According to an Amnesty International report on Nigeria (2005), women daily, are violated through women trafficking, rape, and even murder by members of their family. In the worst-case scenario, acid was poured on them, leaving the victim with permanent disfigurement. Such vicious attacks often were tolerated and treated as a family matter and sometimes not condemned. There are differences in frequency and severity but the outcomes have negative and impactful consequences. Women's abuse on a general note

can take many forms such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, psychological abuse, and economic deprivation.

According to World Health Organization (2013), sexual abuse is any action of forcing a partner or a spouse to perform sexual acts against her will. This includes sexual activity with a partner that is not fully conscious, uninvited touching, and unwanted sexual intercourse (Rape). In addition, it includes obligatory inspections of virginity, female genital mutilation, forcing a woman to watch or take part in pornography, using other objects to penetrate a woman, and forcing a woman into prostitution. Physical abuse, on the other hand, is an act of violence designed to control, hurt/harm, or physically assault a partner or a spouse. This includes pushing, punching, kicking, pulling hair, and slapping. Psychological abuse involves any action to degrade, humiliate, or demean, both in public or private. It includes verbal threats, yelling, intimidation, harassment, and criticism, as well as isolation from family or friends. Economic deprivation is any action of forcing a partner to become dependent on the abuser for money and survival. This includes withholding money or other resources, sabotaging women's attempts to make money independently, or controlling all family finances (Goldsmith, 2019). The statistics of the incidence of women's abuse show that it seems to defy all regulatory mechanisms that proscribe it and this calls for the consideration of challenges of mitigating women's abuse in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Dominance theory is a feminist legal framework propounded by Catherine Mackinnon in 1946. The theory is premised on the power differential between men and women. Dominance theory postulates that society, and more especially men use gender differences to perpetuate power imbalance and inequality. It specifically focuses on men's sexual control over women's sexuality and those men choose to behave abusively toward their female partners because they can get away with it and moreover, doing so get them what they want in form of power and control.

This theory supports the purpose of the study on women's abuse as it explains certain recurring patterns in violence against women that indicate violence is not due to

intense anger or argument, but rather to dominance. It is ideal to x-ray the situation of women's abuse in society.

Challenges of Mitigating Women's Abuse

Some of the challenges of mitigating women's abuse in Nigeria are explained hereunder.

Perceptions: The social context of women's abuse in Nigeria is premised largely on its patriarchal society. How women's abuse is perceived varies from person to person, and from culture to culture, and because of this perception, violence against a wife is seen as a tool a husband uses to chastise his wife and/or to improve her. Historically, it is believed that the relationship between the husband and wife is not only considered a partnership but also unequal, in which the wife must submit herself to the husband. This underscores why wife-beating is seen as justified in some circumstances, most commonly in situations of actual or suspected infidelity and outward "disobedience" toward the husband. Violent acts against women are not often considered a form of abuse by some societies. For instance, the Tiv people in Benue State view wife-beating as a "sign of love" that should be encouraged as evidenced with the statement "if you are not beaten by your husband, then you do not know the joy of marriage and that means you are not married (Oyediran & Isiugo, 2005).

Custom and Tradition: Local customs and traditions are often responsible for maintaining certain forms of women's abuse. According to Human Right Watch (2003) "custom such as the payment of pride price by a man to the family of a woman he wishes to marry is a sign that a man essentially "purchases" his wife's sexual favors and reproductive capacity. This qualifies a man socially as he has a full entitlement to dictate the terms of sex and to use force to do so where a wife deprives him of the conjugal right. With the pride price, a woman gives irrevocable consent for her husband to have sex with her when he wishes, and this ideology of marital conjugal rights to sex justify marital rape, which is non-consensual penetration perpetrated against a spouse. Discriminatory marriage practices like swearing an oath before a shrine plays a role in the proliferation of woman abuse, and this constitutes a challenge in mitigating it.

Economic Distress: One of the serious factors perpetuating the surge of women's abuse is economic distress. Socio-economic challenges such as loss of job, and financial constraint have worsened as a result of the global covid-19 pandemic and its concomitant recession. The majority of Nigerian citizens were economically distressed, thereby causing a decline in families coping skills. In this era of the covid-19 pandemic, socio-economic activities are at their lowest ebb. The inadequate income and the dwindling economy of the country impacted adversely on many households. Generally, the purchasing powers of many families are greatly reduced, and at the same time, the cost of living is on the increase. Families find it difficult to feed a meal a day, and when couples can no longer provide for their children, this situation can degenerate and brew tensions in the family which will eventually snowball into abuse at the slightest provocation.

Laws: Lack of adequate legislation and implementation which criminalizes domestic violence hinders the progress concerning mitigating the incidence of women's abuse. In 1984, Nigeria became a signatory to the United Nations Convention on Elimination of all forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW). This was ratified in 1985 but has done little to protect women from discrimination and abuse due to the long and laborious process of enforcement. The Nigerian criminal code makes provision for punishing unlawful and indecent assault on women and girls, but the penal code, which governs the states in Northern Nigeria, allows a husband to "correct their wives using physical punishment, as long as the woman is not seriously harmed". In this penal code, (section 55(1) (d) states that:

> nothing is an offense which does not amount to infliction of grievous hurt upon any person and which is done ...(d) a husband for the purpose of correcting his wife, such husband and wife being subject to any routine law or custom on which such correction is recognized as lawful.

This section of the penal code contradicts the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria which upholds the rights of the dignity of women and men. Commenting on the provision of the penal code, Shija (2004), observed that, the law fails to provide a yardstick for measuring grievous hurt. It is apt to note that the law provided a subtle backing of those who perpetrate the act of battering their wives.

Furthermore, cases of abuse against women in Nigeria are under-reported and hardly ever brought to trial, as law enforcement agents consider women's abuse to be a family affair that should be resolved within the family. Contributing to the campaign

against the rising cases of rape of minors, Betty Abah, the Executive Director, Centre for Children's Health Education, Orientation and Protection [CEE-HOPE] (2016), bemoaned the leniency with which our courts handle rape cases. Abah further observed that most of the cases merely die naturally and sadly, the victims are the ones that end up being shamed even in the courts sometimes for lack of evidence. In rural areas, in particular, police do not respond if they consider the cases to be within the context of cultural norms. To illuminate the preceding viewpoint, in 2010, the traditional ruler of Akure in the Ondo State of Nigeria (Deji of Akure) Adesina Adepoju, physically assaulted one of his wives, resulting in her death. At the urging of the public, the police made a statement that they would press charges, but unfortunately, the case was dismissed in 2012 (Ayobami, 2012).

Also, the cultural laws that a woman will not leave the marriage under any circumstance, due to the fear that she might be struck dead by the gods make it difficult for the victims of women's abuse to leave the relationship and this further increase the abuse (Agene, n.d). Traditionally, divorce is forbidden and frowned at in many rural communities in the Igbo land of South-East of Nigeria. As a result, divorced women often feel rejected and ostracized even by their families. To avoid stigmatization, many prefer to remain in the marriage and endure the abuse. In addition, in these communities, a woman's access to property depends on her relationship with a man, and if she separates from her husband without a male child, she risks losing her home, household goods, and other properties. Failure to secure equal property rights upon separation or divorce discourages women from leaving violent marriages as women may be forced to choose between violence at home and destitution in the street (Wana, 2018). The persistence of these challenges cripples the eradication of women's abuse in society and calls for solutions.

Solutions to Women's Abuse

Female Empowerment: Female empowerment can be increased by the expansion of education opportunities for women. Non-Governmental Organizations could work with the Ministry of Education to increase female enrolment. Additionally, women empowerment Organizations such as Roost Foundation, Nike Foundation, and others can work with schools to create mentorship programs to teach secondary school girls about

various entrepreneurial skills. Also, increased opportunities in education will enable women to attain higher positions in the workplace.

Legislation/Laws: Laws against women's abuse should be passed by the National and State Assemblies as well as the judiciary. The executives and judiciary should be strengthened to implement the laws and ensure that offenders are punished within the ambit of the law. In addition, to prevent the government from appearing inconsistent, there must be repercussions in place for recalcitrant law enforcement officers who fail to provide consistent and timely responses to women's abuse reports.

Perceptions: The perception as taboo of discussing gender-based issues like rape, incest among others creates a space in which socially unacceptable behaviour becomes allowable and even commonplace in society. In this respect, the government should create and sponsor community programs and safeguards for the victims to stem future occurrences. Victims are therefore advised to seek refuge in cases of domestic violence to ensure that the conflict doesn't escalate and to heal up, emotionally.

Awareness creation on the dangers of harmful traditions: Such practices as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), early child marriage, and poor widowhood practices among others must be stopped by creating awareness to the dangers they portend for the girl child. Helping rural families to learn about the facts of these traditional and harmful practices and changing their attitudes will help the practice come to an end. Also, it is appropriate to engage respected community elders in the fight against gender-based violence. In remote areas, where most of these traditional practices hold sway, traditional leadership is often the major and influential power structure communities recognize. Hence, they should be used to champion this campaign against the abuse of the girl child.

Say no to victim-blaming**:** Some persons erroneously prefer to hold the victim responsible for the action of the abuser. This may seem strange but victim-blaming is the order of the day in our contemporary African society. The negative consequence of victim-blaming is that it makes the victims feel responsible for the actions of their abusers. It will make them disoriented. Some end up not leaving marriages that they should have left, some end up not seeking the help that they should have gotten because they don't want to be judged or criticized by society. Victims, therefore need our love, understanding, and

acceptance, not ridicule, condemnation, or isolation. We need to learn to comfort victims of domestic violence instead of the common practice of stigmatizing them.

Abstinence from alcohol and drugs: Alcohol could contribute to violent behaviour. Where this is the case, the abuser should reduce, or better still, stop the consumption of alcohol or drugs, completely.

Women's voices must be heard: It is commonplace knowledge that one who does not say where it hurts him/her may die in silence, hence the need for the women to speak out for a solution. To overcome the barriers preventing societal reform, it will be necessary to enable women to break out of traditionally engrained gender roles and expectations. With an increased sense of status, Nigerian women will no longer be bound to expected roles acquiescence. Given a voice, women will be able to challenge the established differences in status between men and women. The solutions if properly implemented will have robust educational implications.

Implications of Women's Abuse for Women Education

Mitigating women/girls' abuse has pertinent educational implications. For instance, it will upscale school enrolment, participation of girls in learning activities, and fulfillment of their potentials. The prevalence of women/girls' abuse is among the barriers that are capable of preventing girls from fulfilling their full potentials (Plan International, 2021). Its perpetuation through physical abuse, bullying, sexual harassment, and/or abuse makes effective learning across schools difficult. For instance, a bullied girl-child in school or at home tends to develop debilitating fear that can inhibit effective learning during learning episodes. Also, a sexually harassed and/or abused girl-child develops negative emotions such as depression and fear among others that limit school enrolment, stifle participation in learning activities, fosters the tendencies of school absenteeism as well as tend to increase the dropout rate. Therefore, mitigating women/girls' abuse removes debilitating fears, increases girls' school enrolment, enhances their active participation during instructional activities, reduces the absenteeism and dropout rate that are induced by women/girls' abuse; thereby increasing their achievement and development of their full potentials.

Furthermore, it will promote the enrolment of girls in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields that are male-dominated. It could be learned that women/girls are abused stereotypically and this tends to affect their choice of career in STEM fields where their ingenuity, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication skills are needed to produce gender-balanced products. Right from home as Nzewi (2010) observed, the child-rearing practice which is culturally influenced, shapes the female away from science and science-related disciplines. This could be noticed in some homes where difficult tasks are allocated to boys while girls who are believed to be the 'weaker sex' are given the relatively easy task. Thus, gender stereotype influences preferences of subjects or courses in schools. For instance, Reddy (2017) stated that in terms of subject preference, boys were more inclined to study physics and chemistry whereas girls showed a higher preference for Biology. Also, the stereotypic abuse of women/girls makes some Nigerian parents advise their girls against choosing careers in engineering, pure physics, and other STEM courses but recommend their choice of careers from arts, humanities, and education. Such parents seem not to understand that a child can do well in any STEM field irrespective of gender in so far as he/she has the requisite mental ability. Therefore, nipping stereotypic abuse of women/girls in the bud will increase their enrolment opportunity in STEM fields so that they become capable of injecting women's perspectives in some scientific products that can boost sales. Through this also, women contribute effectively to national development.

Again, mitigating women/girls' abuse will help to reduce the incidence of death associated with suicides and sexually transmitted diseases among school females that in turn, offers them ample opportunity to develop their potentials for personal and national development. The abuse of women/girls makes some of them develop negative emotions such as depression which could lead to suicide. Adewuya and Oladipo (2019) pointed out that among the factors significantly associated with suicidal behaviours were being female, not staying with the mother, and witnessing domestic violence. Also, rape which is forceful sexual intercourse or sexual activity is among the risk factors that expose the victim to sexually transmitted diseases which could lead to the victim's death if not treated (Mayo Clinic, 2019). Therefore, reducing women/girls' abuse contributes

towards reducing suicide-related deaths as well as deaths associated with sexually transmitted diseases.

It can also be inferred that mitigating women/girls' abuse establishes a conducive environment that is free from threats which is a prerequisite for effective teaching and learning. Having a supportive environment that is free from women/girls' abuse through sexual abuse and other forms of domestic violence tends to protect the female gender. This reduces fears and keeps them in a relaxed state of mind for meaningful learning to occur. In essence, a threat-free environment will promote the active participation of girls in learning activities that is capable of improving their academic achievements.

Furthermore, since the incidence of women/girls' abuse is increasing at an alarming rate, it calls for the need to adopt curricula approach in schools. In this approach, sexual abuse and other forms of women/girls' abuse are integrated into the school curricula and taught across all levels of education (Action for Development [ACFODE], 2013). This kind of approach will make both genders, especially the females know about women/girls' abuse as domestic violence, its effects on personal and national development as well as ways to prevent them. The use of the curricula approach, therefore, could be helpful as as it is systematic and the knowledge learned from the curriculum will be applied by students in their everyday lives in curbing the menace of domestic violence.

Finally, reducing women/girls' abuse will indirectly promote the achievement of the 4th and 5th Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs] (United Nations [UN], 2020) which are "achieving inclusive and quality education for all" and "achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls" respectively. Thus, education is among the most influential and recognized channels for sustainable development whereby the SDGs can be integrated into the school curricula and taught across schools. This helps to encourage the needed awareness and knowledge of the sustainable development goals in students which they are expected to apply in their day-to-day activities for national growth and development. The outstanding commonality of the two stated SDGs is that they are geared towards ending inequality whereby women/girls are given equal opportunities to schools, in the labour market, to economic resources, in public offices, and in politics among others. Therefore, mitigating women's abuse is a positive step forward to ending

all forms of discrimination against women/girls, stopping violence and exploitation of women/girls as well as terminating harmful practices against women/girls.

Conclusion

This article elucidated domestic violence, women's abuse, the brief history of women's abuse, forms of women's abuse, theoretical support, challenges of mitigating women's abuse, solutions to women's abuse, and implications of women's abuse for women education. In conclusion, ending women/girls' abuse as domestic violence should be given priority by everybody as it fosters individual development, achievement of sustainable development goals, and contribute meaningfully to national development.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proffered:

i. Cultural practices that perpetuate women's abuse should be abolished or reformed.

ii. Harmful traditions such as poor widowhood practices and early child marriage should be eliminated.

iii. Laws against women's abuse should be adequately implemented.

iv. People should be sensitized to the dangers of women's abuse through various channels such as social media, seminars and workshops.

v. Women/girls' abuse and domestic violence generally should be integrated in the curriculum and taught in schools. This is systematic, sustainable and will enhance transfer of what is learnt about the abuse of women, and domestic violence to their everyday life geared towards stopping the menace.

vi. Proper orientation should be given to women/girls through seminars and workshops to correct some negative perceptions and poor attitudes regarding women/girls' abuse and domestic violence generally.

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