

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHURCH INTERFERENCE: THE NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Violence Against Women (VAW) is a global trend, not particular to Nigeria. News abound about forms of violence inflicted on women by their husbands or other males. Though Gender Based Violence (GBV) connotes harm inflicted on individual or individuals as regards their sex. Males are not exempted from such violent acts, but females are vulnerable to these unscrupulous acts. Forms of violence are being inflicted on women as they are seen as the victims and men as the perpetrators. The forms of violence range from physical, economic, psychological or emotional to social. As women are perceived as the weaker sex, they are subjected to extreme dehumanizing abuses. It is ascertained that religion opened ground for violence against women as the Christian Bible enjoins wives to be submissive to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22-24). The society too which the females find themselves is not exonerated as some societal norms have empowered men to be dominant over women. Some cultures demand women to be subordinate to their husbands, while some have subjected females to genital mutilation which is improper and has unhealthy effects. Four theories are used in this paper, the Social Learning Theory which states that children are prone to learned behaviours exhibited by their parents, relatives, etc, that is, they learn violence through their parents, relatives, etc; the sociocultural theory which gives men power of dominance in the society as a result encourages them to exert control over females by force when such control is not recognized by their female counterparts; the Victim-Blaming Theory which blames the victims of violence as the cause; and the Resource Theory which stipulates that once a person is economically viable, there is the tendency of low

violence. It is recommended among others that the Church should consider situations at hand and issue certificates of divorce if need be, especially as some churches abhor divorce. There should be counselling departments in the Churches where perpetrators are educated to desist from violent acts. It is imperative to include in the schools' curricula (private and public) a subject that deals with Gender Based Violence in order to eradicate the ugly situation.

Keywords: Violence Against Women, Gender Based Violence, Church interference, causes and effects, Nigerian perspective.

Introduction

Violence Against Women (VAW) which is a subset of Gender Based Violence (GBV) is a recurring issue throughout the world. The paper is interested in domestic violence as pertains to women. It is unarguable that men do experience violence from their wives, but violence experienced by women is on the high side. It is evidenced that some men do suffer such domestic violence as physical abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse which goes with array of verbal missiles from their wives. This type of abuse is on the increase and has led to some men being encapsulated outside, always afraid of going home to stay with their wives, while some resort to drinking excessive alcoholic drinks to calm down their nerves which is a sort of mechanism that moves them away from troubled wives and gives them relaxed mind. In as much as men experience violence from their wives in whatever forms, it is still obvious that women suffer the most. It is against this background that the paper seeks to look into Violence Against Women and the Church interference. The Church as based on some of the researches made is being blamed for Violence against women as the Bible enjoins women to be submissive to their husbands (Ephesians Chapter 5 verses 22-24). Oke (2021), agrees that religion has relationship with violence against women and also in a society where religion is predominant there is high rate of violence against women. The two religions he emphasized are Islam and Christianity. Oke (2021, para. 5) also asserts that:

Religious houses are the bastions of chauvinism and women oppression in this country. They exercise not just influence, but also real power over the teeming millions of their devotees. The religious leaders' word is unquestioningly taken for gospel by the believer. The worship centres commandeer the women folk to be "submissive" to the men folk in all circumstance, then chastise the woman for not being submissive enough the moment the man turns nasty. There is

hardly a dispute between a couple that is not traced to the woman's conduct or misconduct in the lead up to the attack on them. Both Islam and Christian doctrines reference women as chattels of their men; a nod and a wink to the misogynistic impulse in men. It creates and augments the man's propensity to violence against women.

Some cultures have given men the ultimate power to ride over women as these cultures demand women to be subordinate to men. With these men see themselves as superiors, while women are inferiors and are regarded as the weaker sex. It was rightly viewed by Aisyah & Parker, 2014; Ansari et al, 2016; Bowman, 2003; Ishola, 2016; Kelmendi, 2015; Lee, Moon & Gomez, 2014; Othman, Goddard, & Piterman, 2014, in Abdullahi, et al, 2018, that literature abound about patriarchal cultures which have opened the door to domestic violence on women in the world. On the other hand, Ilika, 2005; Ishola, 2016; Ofeibea-Aboagye, 1994; Oluremi, 2015 also in Abdullahi, Lusairi & Abdullah, 2018 further explain that in African societies violence against women is ingrained in marriage and women have come to accept the idea.

Women who suffer dehumanizing acts of violence in the hands of their male counterparts are afraid to come out and speak because of fear of shame and stigma.

Therefore, Bourke (2020, paras. 7-8) states:

For these women, domestic abuse can become a routine occurrence that intrudes on all aspects of their lives, affecting everything from the way they carry out domestic chores, what they wear and who they see victims and survivors are reluctant to reveal what they are going through, even to friends and other members of their family. They report feeling ashamed, even though all shame resides with the abuser. They feel stigmatized and embarrassed to admit that they have been victimized.

In the same vein women endure toxic relationships just to keep to their vows of "for better, for worse" as it is perceived that divorce is not the last resort as it is condemned by the Holy Scriptures. For this reason, some Christian denominations do not welcome the idea no matter what the woman is facing and the minister continue to encourage the women to be steadfast in prayer until change occurs in the life of their husbands. Violent acts against women have tremendous impact

not only on women, but on the entire families they come from and on their children who would be potential abusers when they engage in marriage relationships. The situational depression faced by women in such traumatic relationships as a result of mental abuse or emotional abuse lead to indulgence in excessive in-take of alcohol which could eventually lead to untimely death or which could cause cardiological problems.

Conceptual Clarification

a. **Violence:** The World Health Organisation defines violence as The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual against oneself, another person, or against group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation (Safterspaces, 2022, Para.12). According to Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2022), it is “the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy. Musodza et al (2015, p. 125) define violence as “the destructive application of physical force against property or people and can cover systems of domination and oppression.” In these three definitions, there is the involvement of physical force which incurs injury on an individual. Violence can occur in these ways physical, cultural, psychological, financial, verbal, spiritual, sexual, and emotional. Violence is physical when someone inflicts injury on another with physical objects. Such objects could be knife, stone or any other deadly object. It could be by hitting or kicking someone. Cultural violence is when cultural practices are used to injure an individual. The cultural practices are regarded as obnoxious, for example, female genital mutilation and other harmful practices meted on individuals as punishment or mere adherence to the dictates of the culture. Psychological violence is when an individual inflicts fear on another individual, thereby allowing fear to gain control of the victim; financial violence is when an individual is denied their finances as their income are being controlled by another without their approval; verbal violence is when an individual uses words to cause harm on another individual. It is evidenced that speech can severely cause great mental trauma on individuals if said in a derogatory way. Spiritual violence is when one’s religion is used as an attack on one by another. It comes in different forms. It could be attack for not professing the religion of the abuser or the abuser persecuting the abused for embracing their religion, or the abused not converted to the religion of the abuser and termed as unrighteous and may be abandoned for such reason; sexual violence is when one is lured into engaging in sex or forcefully taking advantage of by someone sexually, and

emotional violence is when an individual is reduced to nonentity by another individual, thereby causing emotional distress.

b. **Violence Against Women:** Any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private (United Nations, 1993, as cited in World Health Organisation, 2021, para .6). Such violence can be physical, mental, emotional, sexual, economical, verbal et cetera. These violent acts are not without consequences which can lead to physical injury, mental imbalance, health problems as regards contracting Sexually Transmitted Diseases and can even lead to death of the victim. The economic consequence is not left unturned as the families of the victims will spend money in their treatment.

c. **Gender Based Violence:** Gender Based Violence (GBV) is violence that is directed at an individual based on his or her biological sex or gender identity (Ott, 2021, para. 2). Gender-based violence (Or GBV) is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty (United Nations Population Fund, 2020, p.9).

d. **Domestic Violence:** According to United Nations, domestic violence can be defined as a pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner which could be physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person (Morohunfola, 2021, para. 12). Domestic violence is a phenomenon which refers to all forms of violence perpetrated in the domestic sphere by one family member against another, which is perpetrated in the form of stalking, physical, sexual and emotional violence; and child abuse which includes sexual, physical, emotional abuse, and neglect (Ilesanmi, et al (2020, para. 4) (Ekweonu, (2020) in Ilesanmi, et al, 2020, para. 4).

e. **Church:** It is translated from the Greek term ekklesia which is formed from two Greek words meaning "an assembly" and "to call out" or "the called out ones". The New Testament church is a body of believers that has been called out from the world by God to live as his people under the authority of Jesus Christ. This group of believers of "the body of Christ" began in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost through the work of the Holy Spirit and will continue to be formed until the day of the rapture of the church (Fairchild, 2019, paras. 5-7). Church is commonly defined as a building used for public worship. However, many people

refer to a church as an organisation. Examples are the Catholic Church, the Church of England, and the Southern Baptist Church amongst many others (Williams, 2014, para. 2).

Forms of Violence Against Women

Women experience various forms of violence in the hands of men. These forms of violence are not without pains both physical and emotionally or either of them. Some women try to endure just to save their marriages, while some have taken the decision of going back to stay with their families in order to avoid being maimed or faced death. Sources have proved that Violence Against Women was on the increase during the COVID-19 era. This is supported by Sharifi et al (2020) that domestic violence increased in the universe in the COVID-19 period because people were instructed to remain indoors which led to women and girls being faced with high risk of violence. In the same vein, Shahid- Iheanacho (2021), asserted that cases of Gender Based Violence were on the increase in Nigeria during the months of the lockdown. As stated by Oluremi (2015), the forms of violence against women are as follows:

Physical Abuse: This involves physical force that might injure the victim or puts the victim at the verge of being injured. Such abuses include beating, kicking, knocking, punching, choking, confinement, and female genital mutilation. Morohunfola (2021) affirmed that physical abuse is a deliberate act that inflicts injury or trauma on another individual which might come inform of hitting, kicking, beating or any other form of physical force.

b. **Sexual Abuse:** This constitutes sexual attacks or harassment. It is a force applied on someone to engage in sexual activity. It also involves exposing a child to sexual activities, prostitution and pornography. Marital rape is not left out under sexual abuse. Morohunfola (2021) added unwanted touching as part of sexual abuse.

c. **Neglect:** This is negligence on the side of the caregiver to provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, protection and love for the children or for other adult members of the family.

d. **Economic Abuse:** This involves when one steals or defrauds a person deared to one or refuses to bring out money for food and healthcare, or exploit a family member financially, or prevents someone deared to one from working or taking decision on the person's choice of job.

e. **Spiritual Abuse:** This is when one is prevented from professing one's religious practices or being in control of one's religion.

f. **Emotional Abuse:** This involves threat to life or property or injuring a person's self-esteem by making the person to pass through severe behavioural, cognitive, emotional or mental trauma. Shouting, name-calling, criticism, social isolation, intimidation, frequent unnecessary requests, verbal and Physical abuses, and violent attack on a child are forms of emotional abuse.

Causes of Violence Against Women

- The following are causes of violence against women. As emphasized by UN WOMEN (2010), gender inequality and discrimination are perceived as the root causes of violence against women which are caused by imbalance in power between women and men and social norms that define the roles of men and women in the society.
- Another cause of violence is poverty. There is a tendency of violent acts on a woman when her husband has no means of livelihood, and may be the woman is taking care of the family. This is rightly supported by Salami (2022) that poverty is seen as the main cause of violence against women in Nigeria.
- Childhood experience is a cause of violence against women. Children who have witnessed how their father has violently attacked their mother are liable to be violent when they become adults. The children have been psychologically affected by the frequent battering of their mother by their father, thereby making them to be psychopaths Kaira (1996) in Oluremi (2015) opined that abuse experienced during childhood can lead to violence in adulthood.
- Suspicion can lead to violence against women. A husband who feels that the wife is having an affair outside can with anger be violent to his wife.
- The daring attitude of women is a resultant cause of violence. Some women challenge their husbands by saying "if you call yourself a man, beat me". Elenwoke (2022), observed *bad mouthing* as a cause of violence against women.
- Experiences have shown that excessive in-take of alcohol can lead to violence against women. Some men who swim in alcohol are violent to their wives as they are highly intoxicated. They usually batter their wives.

- Finally, barrenness is also a cause of violence against women. In African traditional communities, children are very important in a marriage, more especially, male children. There are situations where husbands resort to beating their wives because they have not given birth to children or they only produce female children. Some mothers-in-law and other family members are behind the scene of violence against women by their spouses. These mothers -in-law and their other children can instigate their sons/brothers to be violent to their wives because of hatred and barrenness.

Effects of Violence Against Women

- Children who witness domestic violence are at increased risk of anxiety, depression, low-self-esteem and poor school performance, among other problems that harm their well-being and personal development Children, both girls and boys, who have witnessed or suffered from gender-based violence, are more likely to become victims and abusers later in life (UN WOMEN, 2010, para 4).
- Health issues can develop as a result of violence. The victim in a physical assault may suffer from bruises, internal bleeding, broken limbs, damaged eye, miscarriage in the case of a pregnant woman, and even death. As cited in Oluremi (2015, p. 28), Jones (1997) listed bruises, broken bones, head injuries, lacerations, miscarriage, pre-term labour, injury to or death of the fetus as effects of domestic violence.
- It leads to mental and psychological problems which may be long-lasting if not handled appropriately.
- It may affect the economy of a nation as a part of the women workforce is affected. Therefore, United Nations Nigeria (2020, p.11), affirms that “Aside from being a human rights violation, poor emotional and mental health is likely to lead to lower productivity among working women and higher dropout rates among school girls”.
- In some cases violence against women can lead to divorce and this invariably affects the children who are supposed to be exposed to parental love and care from both parents.
- Exposure to domestic violence influences children’s behaviour, confidence, social skills, educational achievements, mental health, and future relationships (Bourke, 2020, para.3).

- In the case of a woman who has no means of survival, it will affect her greatly as the burden of catering for the children will be heavy on her when she finally moves out of the marriage. In some cases, the woman do not have any family member/members to help her financially. Citing Stop Violence against Women (2010), Oluremi (2015) is of the view that financial problem can make the victims not to leave their perpetrators.

Theoretical Framework

Four theories are used for this paper which are namely the Social Learning Theory, the Sociocultural theory, the Victim-Blaming theory, and the Resource Theory.

- a. **Social Learning Theory:** This theory as propounded by Bandura in 1973 tries to explain that violence is a learnt behaviour from childhood. Children are exposed to it through role models who could be the parents, relatives, siblings etc. The violence could be direct (as experiencing it) and indirect (as witnessing it). Children who are exposed to violence carry it on to adulthood as a response to stress or conflict resolution (Criminal Justice Research, n.d.) Therefore, violence according to this theory is transferred from the perpetrators to their children because these children have been exposed to it physically or have seen the perpetrators inflicting violent act on other persons.
- b. **Sociocultural Theory:** It states that culture and social norms can encourage or discourage the use of violence in conflict resolution. The mindset that men are dominant in a society has paved the men folk of using violence to resolve conflict (Criminal Justice Research, n.d.). Men use violence to exert control over women when such control is not recognized by women.
- c. **Victim - Blaming Theory:** It blames the victim for the ill-treatment or violence. It faults the victims who suffer from crimes or other misfortunes either partly or wholly responsible for the crime (Criminal Justice Research, n.d.). Victims are blamed in this theory for injuries inflicted on them. Some women dare their spouses to act violently either by their attitude or comparing their husbands to other men. This many men hate.
- d. **Resource Theory:** The theory states that when someone has fewer resources, they can only resort to force/violence to maintain control over the relationship (Walters, Basile, and Hall, 2013 as cited in Jewel, 2020, para. 2). The propounder of the theory William Goode in 1971 was of the view that

the more resources a person actually has, the less he or she will actually use force in an open manner (Academic Library, 2022, para. 1). Obviously, a man who has nothing doing to keep the family moving is often violent to the wife, more especially if the wife is the breadwinner. He would want to maintain dominance over his wife through violence.

Church Interference in Violence Against Women: The Steps Forward

The Church is a significant agent in tackling violence against women in the society. The following are expected of the Church to combat the devastating effects of violence against women.

- Through propagation of the Gospel, the Church should kick against certain traditional notions that embrace discrimination in terms of masculine superiority, which has created imparity in the society. A gospel of love should be preached to instil the right mindset towards femininity in the cultural perspective.
- Provision of Guidance and Counseling for both the suffers and the perpetrators would go a long way to dissuade perpetrators from indulging in such atrocious acts. The sufferers are involved because some of them are the cause of their misfortunes.
- Organisation of seminars and workshops where issues on violence are discussed so that there would be awareness of the dangers of violence and the need to give a helping hand to the victims.
- The various churches must commit themselves to providing premarriage and postmarital counselling for couples as this would go a long way to preventing incidents of violence in future.
- Theological institutions responsible for the training of ministers should include in their curricula, courses dealing with violence so that the menace would be overcome as the trained ministers can handle properly issues on violence.
- Reorientation programmms could be organized to help children whose parents are involved in violence or have experienced violence to becloud their minds from seeing violence as a last resort to conflict resolution.
- Ministers should incorporate topics on violence into their sermons and even invite resource persons to have talks on violence during church services.

Musodza, et al (2015, p. 124) said, "For this study towards effectively resolving issues of gender based violence, teachings by different leaders and pastors among others were believed to act as tools in fighting the problem".

Recommendations

All hands must be on deck in the fight against violence as regards women. It is not only the prerogative of the church, the government, schools, family and the society are involved. It is therefore, recommended that:

1. Government and non-governmental agencies should incorporate church leaders as key partners for their fight against violence. The church leaders should be trained on issues of violence.
2. Government should endeavour to build counselling centres in both urban and rural areas where people are counselled on issues of violence.
3. Provision of rehabilitation centres is necessary for perpetrators of violence as some indulge in the acts as a result of psychology or alcoholism.
4. The Ministry of Education in conjunction with other agencies should organize seminars and workshops to discuss the dangers of violence to people.
5. The church should consider situations at hand and issue certificates of divorce if need be, especially as some churches abhor divorce. When there is no other alternative, especially when life is threatened, the only option is divorce. For it is better for a woman to stay in her father's house and live, than to die in her husband's house.
6. There should be counselling departments in the churches where perpetrators are educated to desist from violent acts.
7. It is imperative to include in the schools' curricula (private and public) a subject that deals with Gender Based Violence in order to eradicate the ugly situation as some of these children are exposed to or witnessed violence at a tender age.
8. Men who indulge in violent acts should know that initially they professed love to these women during courtship and they must try to keep to their words of love and see their wives as their images than mere wives.
9. Some women who are prone to daring their husbands should desist from such as this is provocative and could lead to unwarranted abuse.

10. Women should be conscious during courtship. Some see the *red flag* during courtship but disregard it. The essence of courtship is to study one's future partner, but many women discover certain traits and believe that after marriage their partners will change. We should understand that only acquired character is changeable, but inborn character is unchangeable and feeling that the man will change after marriage is a misconception.
11. Government in collaboration with the churches should provide skills acquisition centres for women who have fallen victims to domestic violence. These centres will help in empowering these women to be self-reliant as they are no more in the toxic relationships, and they can take care of themselves and their children without the assistance of their ferocious husbands.
12. All in all, patience and tolerance should be the key words to a successful marital life.

Conclusion

Violence against women is a trending topic in the world today. Stories abound about women who are violently handled by their spouses. Violence against women come in form of physical, emotional or psychological, sexual and economic assaults. The devastating effects have put the victims in a state of perpetual agony. It is undoubtable that violence is an intergenerational issue as the children who have experienced such wicked acts are liable to conceive violence as the only means of resolving issues. Some relationships that started well have gone sour as a result of violence. Women are vulnerable to these bestial attacks. Some cultures support male dominance and for this reason men use the superiority accorded to them to be volatile to women. Women experience all sorts of uncomfortable situations in relation to violence, situations unhealthy to their wellbeing such as heart problem, head injury, broken limbs, miscarriage and even death. Religion has been accused for instigating violence as women are requested to be submissive to their husbands. It is the responsibility of all to come out and say no to violence against women.

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