

Violence Against Women: Why Men and Women Should Unite

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ABSTRACT This paper looks at violence against women. The paper sees violence as illegal use of or application of force, threat or aggression to cause emotional, mental or physical pain, injury or degradation on person. Violence against women is also seen as a product of cultural and social norms that imbue men with power and authority over women. The paper identifies some forms of violence against women to include: domestic, sexual, psychological, and physical violence. The paper examines the consequences of violence against women to include: socio-economic, health, and civic consequences. The paper also looked at ways in which violence against women can be stopped, including orientation programmes through workshops, conferences, and mass media on understanding the psychology of women in order to improve male-female relationships. The paper concluded that there is need to pay attention to the causes and impacts of female discrimination and that gender diversity and main-streaming should be encouraged.

INTRODUCTION

Statistically, women constitute over half of world's population and contribute in vital ways to societal development, generally. In Nigeria, like in most other societies, women assume five key roles: mother, producer, home-manager, community organizer and socio-political activist (Agbalajobi 2009). Despite these invaluable roles played by women, they are grossly disregarded, discriminated, abused and in worst cases, violently assaulted.

In recent years, the international community has increasingly recognized violence against women or gender based violence as an urgent, criminal and global problem with devastating consequences for women, children and families. Violence affects millions of women and girls worldwide and it cuts across all geographical, regional, national, religious and socio-economic barriers, impeding the woman's right to participate fully in the society. It is also instructive to note that though is a global phenomenon, studies have shown that its prevalence in Sub-Sahara Africa ranks high even in comparison with levels in other developing regions.

It was in response to the dangers that violence against women pose to the human society that the UN General Assembly, on 17th December 1999 and through the instrumentality of Resolution 54/134, decided to declare 25th November of each year as the International Day of Elimination of Violence Against Women. Basically, the intention of the global body is to raise interna-

tional public awareness and the need for action among governments, international governmental organizations as well as NGOs against the scourge of violence against women (Shindi 2005).

However, in spite of the efforts and activities of the UN, it is glaring as evidenced in the following pages that has been on the increase thus, the theme of this year's Women's Day Celebration is quite timely and appropriate; it awakens us to the fact that violence against women is not just a gender issue, but a complex societal problem that demands the concerted and collaborative efforts of all and sundry.

Therefore, the simple task of this paper or presentation is to act as an instrument of advocacy geared towards making a concerted framework for confronting the ugly, dehumanizing and shameful phenomenon of violence against women through the presentation of its meaning, forms and societal consequences.

DEFINITIONS AND FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The term violence generally speaking refers to the illegal use of or application of force, threat or aggression to cause emotional, mental or physical pain, injury or degradation on person (Ngban et al. 2007). And when this act of violence is specifically directed to the female gender, it becomes violence against women or synonymously referred to as gender based violence. In defining gender based violence or violence

against women, Goldberg (2001) sees it as a group of harmful customs and behaviour against girls and women, including intimate partner violence, domestic violence, assaults against women, child sexual abuse, and rape. From this definition, it is clear that violence against women is a product of cultural and social norms that imbue men with power and authority over the women.

In a similar vein, the 1993 UN General Assembly non-binding Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW) describes violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (UN doc, A/RES/48/104, 1993). The UN Declaration on the elimination of violence against women definition of violence against women is broad, encompassing both physical and psychological harm as well as making provision for the context and arenas of violence against women. The UN declaration breaks violence against women into the following components:

GBV could include physical, sexual and psychological abuse by a person with whom the victim has had an intimate relationship or by a stranger.

- Psychological abuse can take the form of biting, slapping, punching, or kicking.
- Sexual abuse/forced or coercive sex includes rape, within marriage or dating relationship, rape by strangers, unwanted sexual advances or harassment, forced marriage, denial of the right to use contraceptives or other measures to protect against sexually transmitted diseases (STIs including HIV/AIDS), forced abortion, forced prostitution, and trafficking of people for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Psychological abuse includes belittling, humiliating, and intimidating an individual (Krug 2002).

From the foregoing, it is glaring that violence against women includes random acts as well as sustained abuse over time, which can be physical, psychological, or sexual in nature. Though there are many typologies to contextualize our presentation in the African and Nigerian situation, we observed that most of them are derivatives of what we refer to as Harmful Traditional

Practices (HTPs). Traditional practices are part of local cultures and are generally considered socially acceptable; in some cases, they are encouraged by family members and the community. Most of the HTPs in our respective cultures are damaging to the woman. Some of the traditional practices related violence includes the following:

INTIMATE PARTNER (OR DOMESTIC) VIOLENCE

Most studies have found that women are most likely to experience violence in the hands of someone they know, including authority figures, parents, sons, husbands, and male parents. As one of the commonest form of violence against women, intimate partner violence includes forced sex, physical violence, (mostly wife battery) and psychological abuse, such as isolation from family, and friends. In Nigeria on a daily basis, women are murdered, raped, and beaten by their husbands, male lovers and family members for offenses ranging from not having meals ready on time to visiting family members without their husbands’ permission. And a study revealed that up to two out of every three women have experienced this form of violence against women in some community in Lagos State (Mikala 2005). However, whether this form of violence against women constitutes harmful traditional practice depends a lot on the society. In some cultures, for instance, both men and women may view violence as a legitimate punishment for recalcitrant female and as a traditional part of male-female relationship. Moreover, some women may not view forced marital sex as rape, or endure frequent beatings from husbands, fathers, sons, or boyfriends because of cultural or familial legacies.

FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Female genital mutilation (FGM) or female circumcision is common in some African and Middle Eastern countries. The WHO estimates that between 100 and 140 million women and girls have undergone a form of the procedure, and that about 3 million girls are at risk each year (WHO 2008). FGM is considered as violence against women because it is a violation of the rights of women and also a threat to their lives as a result of its severe health implications.

FORCED CHILD MARRIAGES

This form of violence against women is particular prevalent in parts of the Middle East and Africa. In Nigeria, it is a common practice in Moslem Hausa/Fulani societies. In such cases, girls as young as 08 and 10 years old are married to much older men, often with, the approval of their parents. In most cases, these child brides become victims of unending domestic violence and also are exposed to all kinds of life threatening medical complications.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WIDOWS

Another common form of violence against women in Nigeria and most parts of Africa has to do with the obnoxious, dehumanizing and barbaric treatment of widows by in-laws in the name of burial rites and customs or had an extramarital or pre-marital affair- these may lead to such killings. The practice is most common in Middle Eastern and South Asian countries, though, it has been reported in other parts of the world, such as Latin America and Africa (Amnesty International 2005). Apart from traditional practices related violence against women, studies have identified other forms of violence against women.

RAPE AND OTHER FORMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Rape constitutes another form of violence that violates the well-being and rights of women. Rape is forcing somebody to have sex when she or he does not want to (Okolo 2004). Some research indicates that approximately one in five women experiences rape or attempted rape during her lifetime (Sen 2007). Rape takes place in all human relationships and arenas such as in the family (intimate partner relationships), work place, schools, prisons, night clubs, war situations, etc. Other forms of sexual violence against women include sex trafficking (or women and girls trafficking) whereby young girls are illegally transported across international boundaries to countries where they are sexually exploited as commercial sex workers.

Trafficking in women and girls is a high-profile form of VAW. It gained worldwide attention in the late 1990s and is considered by many anti-VAW advocates to be one of the leading criminal enterprises of the early 21st century. Female victims of trafficking are often subjected to physical and mental abuse in order to keep them in

servitude, including beating, rape, starvation, forced drug use, confinement and seclusion. Victims may be forced to have sex, often unprotected, with large number of partners, and to work unsustainable long hours. Studies have found that trafficking occurs in every country and disproportionately affects women and girls (UNHCR 2005).

An associated form of sexual violence is “survival sex” or (commercial sex worker) whereby a woman engages in sex in exchange for money or material assistance as a means of survival. Another form of sexual violence suffered by women is sexual harassment. It is true that not many women have fallen victim of rape but nearly every woman has at one time or the other faced one form of sexual harassment or the other. Unlike rape, sexual harassment does not involve the use of force or violence rather, it takes very subtle forms. For instance, it could take the form of a man using his official possible of authority over a woman to get her submit to having sexual intercourse with him. Invariably, what makes sexual harassment position is the existence of a power relationship between a superior officer and his subordinate female counterpart. This form of violence against women is a common phenomenon in public and private institutions including the workplace, schools, developing countries. In conflict situations, for example, potentially dangerous and fluid conditions may affect the ability of researchers to gain access or create condition conducive to victims coming forward (Farouk 2005).

Moreover, in such insecure environments like conflict situations, the high degree of fear, lawlessness, and lack of judicial procedure and enforcement means many perpetrators are not prosecuted or punished. Often, victims are left with little recourse and suffer related problems such as emotional and physical health risks, unwanted pregnancies, HIV infections, and rejection by family. In some cases, humanitarian workers are perpetrators, not the deterrent force of violence against women. Situations such as these are well documented in conflict settings such as Darfur, Sudan, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (UN documents 2002).

REASONS FOR VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

From our presentation so far, it is clear that the main perpetrators of violence against women are their male counterparts. In this section of the

paper, we will attempt to present several reasons given by scholars to explain why men are prone to the use of violence in their relationships with the female gender. Some of the reasons include the following:

Patriarchal and Masculine Nature of the Human Society Globally, especially the African traditional societies are dominated and under the control of the male gender. Because men dominate the political and socio-economic power structures, they are able to design legal instruments, customs and cultural practices that are inimical to the interests of women. This situation has also engendered the problem of gender inequality which has to a great extent bedeviled the sustainable progress and development of the societies where these anti-women practices are prevalent. Certainly, traditional practice such as FGM, seclusion, Purdah, forced marriage etc. will short change the society by making it impossible for women to fully participate in the society.

Low Self-esteem of the Male Gender The feeling of inadequacy arises as a result of how men perceive themselves and their relationship with the female folks. It is a common knowledge that some men feel very inadequate in their marriages. Men who exhibit this character tend to be over-suspicious, quarrelsome and aggressive in their relationship with their partners. Men that have low self-esteem tend to see their spouses as competitors instead as partners in the management of the home front.

The Stress of Poverty Men of low socio-economic status are those who lack stable and sustainable income, less possessions and therefore cannot meet basic needs of their families. And such men who cannot provide the basic necessities of life for their families tend to be unfriendly, aggressive and violent in their relationship with their spouses and children as a result of bottled up frustration and anger about their inability to play the role of a provider for their families.

The Crave for Power and Control Several studies have established that most men are infatuated with the belief that they are the heads of their families and therefore they are “in charge”. This explains why some men are never comfortable with industriously ambitious and progressive women. They see such progressive women as a threat to their authority and headship at home. As such to frustrate and discourage their partners, they become unnecessarily suspicious, abusive and aggressive.

Testosterone Certain chemicals have been identified which influence violent or aggressive behaviour. For example, the injection of testosterone in a male sex hormone will increase violent or aggressive tendencies in animals (Moyer 1993). Among human beings, there is a parallel finding: Dabbs et al. (1996) found out that naturally occurring testosterone levels are significantly higher among prisoners convicted of violent crimes than among those convicted of non-violent crimes. They opined that among adults worldwide, the great majority of persons arrested and convicted for criminal offences are men (such as forgery, arson, larceny and murder).

Gender Inequality and Discrimination Some experts have linked violence against women to discrimination against the female gender. Many in the international community view violence as a form of discrimination against women and maintain that discrimination also causes violence. In other words, violence against women is seen as a symptom of the historically unequal power relationship between men and women, and that over time this imbalance has led to pervasive culture, stereotypes and attitudes that perpetrate a cycle of violence.

CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: WHY MEN AND WOMEN MUST UNITE

A wide range of research highlights the serious socio-economic, health and civil consequences of violence against women as a grave threat to women’s ability to provide emotional, managerial, and financial support to their families and the larger society. Hence, the several societal consequences are highlighted below.

- Studies have shown that violence and the social stigma of violence negatively affect the ability of women and girls to participate fully in and contribute to their communities.
- Research has also found that women who experience violence are less likely to hold jobs and are more likely to live in poverty than those who do not experience violence (Lyon 2002).
- The consequences of violence against women affects productivity and employment in that women experiencing violence may have a reduced contribution to society as well as to their own potential self realization. Women may be equally intimidated by

- their husbands' violence, which may prevent them from advancing at work.
- Economic impact of violence may extend to losses in women's earning potential. This may be partly because girls who are victims of violence are likely to be anxious or depressed, and unable to perform to the best of their ability at school, because of their own experience of having no control over their own bodies, the world may become a threatening place where they avoid challenges of any kind.
 - In areas where sexual abuse of female students by male teachers is prevalent, girls may stay away from school to escape unwanted attention, elsewhere, parents, who fear that their daughters will be sexually assaulted, may keep them at home until they are married. In many countries, a girl who is pregnant is expelled from school, regardless of whether or not the pregnancy was the result of rape. The consequence, in every case, is a curtailed education, a decreased chance of securing gainful employment, and reduced contributions to the quality of life for community (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000).
 - In the same vein social and economic cost of violence against women are enormous and have ripple effects throughout society. Women may suffer isolation, inability to work, loss of wages, lack of participation in regular activities, and limited ability to care for themselves and their children (WHO 2008).
 - The health consequences of violence against women are also significant with many victims suffering from severe physical and mental health consequences-both immediate and long-term. These vary from immediate medical conditions such as fractures, gunshots wounds, bruises and lacerations, ultimately death to long-term health consequences such as chronic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, chronic urinary tract infections, STIs, as well as HIV/AIDS.

From the above, it is obvious that the consequences of violence against women is not limited to the female gender alone rather it is a societal problem that one way or the other affects every one of us, irrespective of our gender. This invariably means that for any anti-VAW measure to be effective enough, it must be collaborative and all-encompassing in nature. We shall now

turn to possible solutions to the problem of women related violence.

CONCLUSION AND AGENDA FOR ACTION

From the preceding pages we have been able to demonstrate that violence against women and girls is not just a female issue but a societal problem that demands a concerted and collaborated platform for action. Some of the strategies advocated by experts through which men and women can come together to stop violence against women include the following:

* Since violence against women is partly a consequence of human perception and values, advocates are of the opinion that there is need for psychological orientation of men through workshops, conferences and the mass media on understanding the psychology of women in order to improve men-female relationships. This orientation programme should also include courtship, pre-marital counseling, parenting and some basic knowledge of the psychological make-up of women. This means our uninformed men need to be trained in order to make them understand and appreciate women more.

* The male child should be taught and properly oriented by socialization institutions such as the family, churches, schools at levels and other social structures on the need to be appreciative, tender and loving towards the girl child. There should be enduring socialization processes that will indoctrinate the male child to respect, protect and share roles and responsibilities with the female child. It is our belief this will encourage healthy and complementary male-female relationships- a partnership that is geared towards solving common problems.

* Advocates and other relevant NGOs should partner with governments to create awareness on societal consequences of violence against women and girls. This could be achieved through the instrumentalities of workshops, symposia, conferences and the mass media. The objective is to break the silence about violence by raising public and community awareness and by establishing zero tolerance for all forms of violence women and girls.

* There is also need to address the issue of harmful traditional practices (HTPs) through anti-VAW enlightenment programmes. Advocates and governments should focus not only on

treatment and services for victims of violence, but also on eliminating HTPs. It is also instructive to note that HTPs cannot be significantly altered without sustained, long-term efforts on the local level with national and international support. Again, finding the most appropriate balance and means of intervention is a challenge that highlights a broader debate- with human rights and individual freedom on the one hand, and the right to preserve culture, group identity, and tradition on the other.

* As earlier reiterated, some experts have linked violence against women to gender discrimination. Therefore, to successfully combat VAW, there is need to pay attention to the causes and impacts of female discrimination. To tackle the problem of women discrimination and inequality, affirmative action should be put in place to encourage gender diversity and main-streaming.

And since violence against women is not just local but an international issue, there is need for the international community-including governments, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs and others-to work on collaborative and separate initiatives to development prevention and response strategies to protect vulnerable women and girls. These projects should be undertaken with an eye towards strengthening the protection of displace women and promoting gender diversity and main streaming. It is therefore our strong belief that if the aforementioned strategies of action are integrated into national policies, it will go a long way towards addressing the dehumanizing, inhuman and embarrassing menace of violence against women and girls.

Our women must also live up to their responsibility as mothers, especially on how they bring up their daughters. The female child should be made to inculcate the right values especially in how they talk, manners, how they should relate with the male gender and most importantly they should be thought how to dress that is clothes they should wear and should not wear. This is important because the way one dresses will determine how you will be addressed in the public. Girls should be made to understand that the body of the woman speaks volume and sends a lot of message.

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