Sociological implications of domestic violence on children’s development in Nigeria

Adebayo Anthony Abayomi

Department of Sociology, Federal University, Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State. Nigeria.

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Domestic violence against women is an issue of global concern that is gaining more and more prominence. It transcends national, cultural, racial and class boundaries. It is a social malady that is threatening the stable and balanced psychological development of children in the Nigerian society. Children raised in violent homes are known to imbibe violent tendencies as they grow up. This paper studies the domestic violence against women in Nigeria, and its implication on the development and growth of children. The study reveals that domestic violence makes children who grow in violent homes social misfits, prone to psychological imbalance and violent criminal tendencies. The study proffers solutions towards eradication of domestic violence as a way of reducing juvenile delinquency and fostering a more stable psychological growth of children in the society.

Key words: Domestic violence, social malady, development, children, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women has been a serious problem in most societies throughout history. Women in Africa, like their counterparts the world over, suffer domestic violence irrespective of age, class, religion or social status (Hamm, 2000). Violence against women, violence among both men and women is a universal problem in many countries. Physical violence in particular is very common among intimate partners in both developed and developing countries. Physical violence is the intentional use of physical force with the potential for causing death, disability, injury or harm. Physical violence includes but it is not limited to, scratching, pushing, shoving and throwing, grabbing, biting, choking, shaking, slapping, punching, burning, use of a weapon and use of restraints or one’s body size, or strength against another person (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). Also the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action defines Violence against Women as ‘any act of gender based violence that results in or 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” (WHO, 2005). Domestic violence is the intentional and persistent abuse of anyone in the home in a way that causes pain, distress or injury. It refers to any abusive treatment of one family member by another, thus violating the law of basic human rights. It includes battering of intimate partner and others, sexual abuse of children, marital rape and traditional practices that are harmful to women. Female genital mutilation is a form of domestic violence (UNICEF, 2005). Incidents of domestic violence include honour battery, beating, torture, acid baths and even death through honour killing (Heidi, 1998; Adebayo and Kolawole, 2013). It has been estimated that one in every three women suffers domestic violence from the hands of those who claim to love and protect them. Also, it is estimated that one in every five women faces some forms of violence during her life time leading to serious injury or death in some cases (WHO, 2005).

E-mail: adebayo_nthny@yahoo.com.
Global view of domestic violence against women

All over the world irrespective of culture and religion, women are suffering physically and emotionally from different forms of violence. Around the world, at least one out of three women is beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused during her lifetime. Most often, the abuser is a member of her own family (WHO, 2004). According to UNFPA (2002) report, more than 60% of women worldwide have been abused. In 48 population-based surveys around the world, 10 to 69% of the women reported assault by an intimate partner (Krug et al., 2002; Yusuf et al., 2011). Tjaden (2000) report that in the United States of America, each year, women experience about 4.8 million intimate partner-related physical assaults and rape. Also, statistics show that every year in the United States, 1,000 to 1,600 women die at the hands of their male partners, often after a long, escalating pattern of battering. The estimated number of deaths due to intimate partner violence does not include those women who kill themselves to exit violent relationships, or who die homeless on the streets avoiding batterers (Websdale, 1999). 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. For instance, 56% of Indian women surveyed by an agency justified wife-beating on grounds like – bad cook, disrespect to in-laws, producing more girls, leaving home without informing the husband, among others. Statistics show that 25% of women in Dakar and Kaolack in Senegal are subjected to physical violence from their partners and that very few admit they are beaten – while 60% of domestic violence victims turn to a family member, in three-quarter of the cases they are told to keep quiet and endure the beatings. The report also reveals that a law passed in the Senegalese penal code punishing domestic violence with prison sentences and fines is poorly enforced due to religious and cultural resistance. In Ghana, spousal assaults top the list of domestic violence (Aihie, 2009).

In Russia, 12,000 women die every year as a result of domestic violence. In Pakistan, the Human Rights Commission of that country says 80 percent of women there are victims of domestic violence. In South Africa, 49,280 cases of rape were reported in 1998 while the Non-governmental Rape Crisis Centre asserts that the actual number of rapes is higher since many incidents go unreported. In Bangladesh the killing of women by their husbands accounts for 50% of murders. In Peru, the National Police received 28,000 report of domestic abuse around the same period while in the United States, the Centre for Disease Control reports that at least 1.8million women are assaulted every year by the men in their lives. Also, a 1999 Government report in the United States indicates a serious problem of sexual abuse of women in State and Federal Prisons. And in Nigeria reports show that many babies are conceived, born and raised inside prison cells. A survey undertaken by the National Institute of Statistics in Metropolitan Lima shows that no less than 82 percent of the 2,460 women interviewed said that they knew someone who had suffered some kind of domestic abuse within the preceding twelve months (Project Alert, 2004; Eze-Anaba, 2006).

Current estimates of gender based violence indicate that between 8-70% of women worldwide have been physically and sexually assaulted by a male partner at least once in their lives (Heise et al., 1999). In Zambia, DHS data indicate that 27% of ever-married women reported being beaten by their spouse or partner in the past year and about 13 of 15-19 year olds were sexually coerced in the past 12 months (Zambia Demographic and Health Survey, 2001-2002). In rural Ethiopia, 49% of ever partnered women have ever experienced physical violence by an intimate partner, while 59% had ever experienced sexual violence (World Health Organization, 2005). All these variations may be a consequence of underreporting, stigma, shame or other social and cultural factors that deter women from discussing episodes of violence (Saiedi et al., 2008). In another hospital based study in Nairobi, the prevalence of sexual violence was 61.5%, while the proportion of physical assault was 38.5%. This study also reported that majority of the perpetrators of gender based violence were married (72.3%) and alcohol was a significant contributor in 10.1% of determinant cases (Oladepe et al., 2011).

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: THE NIGERIA EXPERIENCE

Traditionally, in Nigeria, as in many other African countries, the beating of wives and children is widely sanctioned as a form of discipline (UNICEF, 2001; Aihie, 2009). 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. This is especially so when the woman is economically dependent on the man. Amnesty International (2005) report on Nigeria indicates that on a daily basis, women are beaten and ill-treated for supposed transgressions, raped and even murdered by members of their family. In some cases, vicious acid attacks leave them with horrific disfigurations. Such violence is too frequently excused and tolerated in communities and not denounced. Husbands, partners and fathers are responsible for most of the violence against women. One in three of all women and girls aged 15-24 have been a victim of violence. Women both married and unmarried have been subjected to vicious attacks from men. Rape, sexual insult and assault, brutality and victimization, domestic violence on girls and women have in recent time been on the increase in Nigeria, with victims embarrassed to report such incidences to the right agencies for justice. Records have shown that between 50 percent and two thirds of...
Nigerian women are subjected to domestic violence in their homes. In Nigeria, sixty-five percent or more educated women are in this horrible situation as compared to their low income counterparts. (55 per cent). Unfortunately, a staggering 97.2 per cent of the abused women do not report the crime to the authorities.

The Nigerian society is basically patriarchal and women’s place within the scheme is decidedly subordinate. Domestic violence therefore functions as a means of enforcing conformity with the role of a woman within customary society. It therefore does not matter if the woman is economically dependent or not, her position, like that of the children is subordinate. Violence against women in the home is generally regarded as belonging to the private sphere in Nigeria and is therefore shielded from outside scrutiny. A culture of silence reinforces the stigma attached to the victim rather than condemning the perpetrator of such crimes (afrolNews 2007; Aihie, 2009).

In a survey by Project Alert (2001), as cited in Aihie (2009), interviews conducted with women working in the markets and other places of work and girls and young women in secondary schools and universities, in Lagos state, Nigeria, 64.4% of 45 women interviewed in the work place said they had been beaten by a partner (boyfriend or husband), 56.6% of 48 interviewed market woman admitted experiencing such violence. Similar interviews carried out in Oyo State and other parts of Nigeria, yielded similar results.

In a study carried out by Obi and Ozumba (2007), on the factors associated with domestic violence, in South East, Nigeria, 70% of respondents reported abuse in their family with 92% of the victims being female partners and the remaining 8% being male. The common forms of abuse reported were shouting at a partner (93%), slapping or pushing (77%) and punching and kicking (40%) (afrolNews, 2007). Also, in a study of Igbo communities in Nigeria, 58.9% of women reported battery during pregnancy while 21.3% have been forced to have sexual intercourse (Okembo et al., 2002). It is however disturbing to note that many women do not know if they had been abused or not. This could be due to the acceptance of some abusive behaviour as ‘normal’. Oyediran and Isugo (2005), in a study of women’s perception of wife-beating in Nigeria, found that 64.4 and 50.4% of ever married and unmarried women, respectively, expressed consent for wife beating. Reports in the print and electronic media reveal vicious attacks on women by intimate partners in different forms such as acid bath, rape, beatings, some of which sometimes result in the death of the victim. However, many victims do not report to the law enforcement agents for fear of reprisal from abusers or the belief that the police and the judicial system cannot help. The police are also reported to frequently dismiss complaints of domestic violence as a ‘private matter’. Consequently, the cases of violence against women mostly go unreported because the victims prefer to suffer in silence (Adebayo and Kolawole, 2013).

Forms of domestic violence

The manifestations of the social malady of domestic violence, according to Aihie (2009) include:

1. Physical Abuse: This is the use of physical force in a way that injures the victim or puts him or her at the risk of being injured. It includes beating, kicking, knocking, pushing, choking, confinement and female genital mutilation. Physical abuse is one of the most common forms of physical abuse.

2. Sexual abuse: This includes all forms of sexual assaults, harassment or exploitation. It involves forcing a person to participate in sexual activity, using a child for sexual purposes including child prostitution and pornography. Marital rape also comes under this.

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

4. 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/her choice of occupation.

5. 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.

6. Emotional Abuse: This includes threatening a person or his or her possession or harming a person’s sense of self-worth by putting him/her at risk of serious behavioural, cognitive, emotional or mental disorders. Shouting at a partner which was found to be the most common abuse by Obi and Ozumba (2007) is included. 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.

According to Holden (2003), children exposed to domestic violence experience the following:

Exposed prenatally: Real or imagined effects of domestic violence on the developing foetus.

Intervenes: The child verbally or physically attempts to stop the assault, asks parents to stop; attempts to defend mother.

Victimised: The child is verbally or physically assaulted during an incident. Child intentionally injured, accidentally hit by a thrown object etc.

Participation: The child is forced or ‘voluntarily’ joins in the assaults; coerced to participate; used as spy; joins in taunting mother.
**Eyewitness:** The child directly observes the assault, watches assault or is present to hear verbal abuse.

**Overhears:** The child hears, though does not see the assault, hears yelling, threats or breaking of objects.

**Observing the initial effects:** The child sees some of the immediate consequences of the assault, sees, bruises or injuries; police; ambulance; damaged property; intense emotions.

**Experiencing the aftermath:** The child faces changes in his/her life as a consequence of the assault, experiences maternal depression; change in parenting; separation from father; relocation.

**Hears about it:** The child is told or overhears conversations about the assault. Learns of the assault from mother, sibling, relative or someone else.

**Exposure Type Definition Examples:**

- **Foetus assaulted in uterus:** pregnant mother lived in terror; mothers perceived that the domestic violence during pregnancy had affected their foetus.

- **Ostensibly unaware:** The child does not know of the assault, according to the source. Assault occurred away from home or while children were away; or occurred when mother believed child was asleep.

According to Stanley (2011), while research reviews do not consistently demonstrate worse or better outcomes for particular age groups exposed to domestic violence, research does suggest that the effects may be manifested differently for differing age groups as follows.

**Impact on Infants and pre-school children**

The evidence for the impact of domestic violence on infants and pre-school children comes primarily from US studies undertaken by clinicians. Studies have identified delayed language and toilet-training, sleep disturbance, emotional distress and a fear of being left alone in infants and toddlers (Ososky, 2003; Lundy and Grossman, 2005). Bogat et al. (2006) used mothers’ reports to explore infants’ responses to domestic violence and found that 44 per cent of infants exposed to one incident of domestic violence showed at least one trauma symptom – that is, increased arousal, numbing or aggression. This study found that infants were most likely to show symptoms of trauma when their mothers also showed such symptoms. Pre-school children have been identified as the group exhibiting most problems (Levendosky et al., 2003), which include aggressive behaviour, temper tantrums, sleep disturbance, anxiety and despondency (Cunningham and Baker, 2004; Lundy and Grossman, 2005; Martin, 2002; Stanley, 2011).

**Impact on school-age children**

A UK survey examining the impact of domestic violence on the mental health of school-age children and young people (Meltzer et al., 2009) found that witnessing domestic violence was significantly associated with conduct disorders in children. A history of domestic violence was strongly associated with children receiving borderline or abnormal scores, as well as having difficulties in concentration and problems with attainment (Stanley, 2011).

**Impact on adolescents**

As young people attain adolescence, their responses to living with domestic violence are more likely to attract a mental health diagnosis or a label of delinquency. A large scale survey of nearly 4,000 American adolescents found that anger was the most evident trauma symptom in young people exposed to domestic violence (Song et al., 1998). In their study with Scottish schoolchildren aged 11 to 17, Alexander et al. (2005) reported that when young people were asked to identify the feelings that would characterise young people living with domestic violence, those who were currently experiencing domestic violence at home described feelings of fear, sadness and loneliness, including suicidal feelings. Experience of domestic violence is also associated with delinquency in adolescence.

**Impact in adulthood**

Violent behaviour and tolerance of violence in intimate relationships can be carried into adult relationships (Edleson, 1999). A large-scale US study found that the risks of being a perpetrator or victim of domestic violence were significantly greater for those who had experienced domestic violence as children (Whitfield et al., 2003). Another US study of 1,099 adult male perpetrators of domestic violence (Murrell et al., 2007) found that those who witnessed domestic violence as children committed domestic violence most frequently as adults. Perpetrators who reported having witnessed their parents threatening to use (or using) weapons were more likely to replicate such behaviour in their own relationships (Stanley, 2011).

**IMPLICATIONS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN IN NIGERIA**

The effects of domestic violence can be devastating and long lasting especially on children and adolescents. Children are often principal victims of domestic violence. Witnessing abuse and living in an environment where someone else, usually a care giver is a victim of abuse, can be psychologically devastating for a child (Aihie, 2009). Straus (1994) reports that children who are hit by parents have higher rates of depression than those
whose parents disciplined in other ways and are more likely to think about suicides. Some researchers have also found that children whose mothers were abused by their partners have intelligence quotients (IQs) lower than usual (BBC. New Education, 2003; Aihie, 2009).

Anikweze (1998) identified violence as a threat to adolescents’ well-being. The adolescent may become socialized in violent behaviour. He or she may become confused and angry. A child who has undergone or witnessed violence may become withdrawn, anxious or depressed on one hand; on the other hand, the child may become aggressive and exert control over younger siblings or other people’s children. They may become aggressive, becoming troublesome at home and at school. They may also become withdrawn, isolating themselves from others and may underachieve, academically. These adolescents may develop low self-esteem, finding it difficult to trust others. The anger and stress experienced by victims may lead to depression and other emotional disorders sometimes leading to suicide (CDC, 2006). Victims may also exhibit harmful health behaviour like excessive smoking, alcohol abuse, use of drugs and engaging in risky sexual activity. An abused child, for instance, may grow up not to trust other people, may go into relationships with an aggressive mode or may become withdrawn, afraid to go into intimate relationship. This usually results in involvement in risky sexual behaviour.

Growing up in an abusive environment is what makes a person find the sight of a suspect being beaten or burnt to death, entertaining and enjoyable. Emotional or psychological abuse that is woven into family interactions and communications is also difficult for children to escape and may result in a home environment dominated by fear, control and the anticipation of violence (Stanley, 2011). It is what makes the youth happy and excited about being thugs for wicked politicians, as well as become hardened criminals who see nothing wrong in inflicting pain or death on others in the society. Domestic violence gives rise to a violent society because charity begins at home.

Some grow up to become armed robbers as seen in the example of the recently arrested robbery kingpin, Abiodun Ogunjobi, a.k.a. Godogodo. The Vanguard newspaper reports:

“The infamous robbery czar from South-West, Abiodun Ogunjobi, a.k.a., Godogodo, has revealed that lack of parental care was one of the main reasons why he became a deadly robber. Godogodo was responsible for terrorising the zone for over 14 years; he was in charge of most bank robberies and other deadly operations. On August 6, 2013, in an interview at the state Police Command headquarters, Ikeja, Lagos, he confessed that his parents abandoned him at an early age to tend for himself after series of violence in the home. The 36-year-old notorious criminal spoke in an emotional laden voice, said he was the eldest of the children and his mother who he said was a sickler, died from her sickness. “My father was a wayward man. He was a drug addict and a gambler who used to beat my mother. My mother was a sickler and she died after giving birth to my youngest brother. But my father, who got married to another woman, didn’t bother to take care of me. As a little child I struggled through primary school, picking bottles, iron and rubber from refuse dump. The little money I made from it was what I used in paying my school fees in primary school and after I graduated I went into the business of robbery fully. As a little boy I was sleeping on the street and my father didn’t care. All he cared about was to gamble away his money and take drugs. Gradually I started stealing and when I got of age I started robbing people at Katangura market, Iyana-Ipaja, but in 1999, I was arrested and sent to prison for fighting and when I came back some of the boys who were operating with me then had become big time robbers. I joined them and in one of our operations, I was shot in the eyes by some vigilante men that accosted us in Ogun State and I ended up losing one of my eyes” (Vanguard, 7 August 2013).

This is just an example of many children who were raised in violent home and have taken to crime in the society.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The prevalence of domestic violence against women has serious implications for the development of the society and the psychological development of children. The future of any nation depends on the quality of its children and youths. Consequently, government must pay urgent attention towards eradicating the evil phenomenon of domestic violence in the Nigerian society. Efforts must be made to ensure that children grow up in stable and responsible homes, so that they can become responsible citizens.

The Nigerian society needs to eradicate the stereotype and patriarchal system that tend to give the man absolute power of life and death over the woman, which continuously serves as a catalyst for domestic violence. All stakeholders in the Nigerian society ranging from government, religious bodies, civil society groups, community leaders must embark on vigorous awareness creation and education on the negative implications of domestic violence on the growth and development of children in the society.

There is also the need to facilitate a training programme for the legislators who make the Nigerian laws at National and State levels, the Police Force, Judicial officers and other state Agencies as this will help them to enact relevant laws to eradicate domestic violence and enable them to stop treating cases of domestic violence as trivial family affairs, but as an issue of grave national
concern. Steps should also be taken at empowering women economically and educationally to make them less vulnerable to domestic violence. Also, all statutory, religious and customary laws that promote violence against women should be abolished. Perpetrators of domestic violence must also be severely punished legally to serve as deterrence to others who may have such tendencies. Nigeria is a country with a large number of churches and mosques with many followers. The religious leaders as a point of duty and commitment to balanced child development, should embark on a rigorous and widespread enlightenment of adherents on the dangers that domestic violence portends for the unwholesome psychological development of children in the Nigerian society.

REFERENCES


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