JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND CULTURE

FOR ENLIGHTENMENT AND SELF RELIANCE

TOWARDS ELIMINATING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN AKWA IBOM STATE: THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

John O. Umoh

Abstract

The paper examines the extent to which gender-based violence (otherwise called violence against women or domestic violence) is a common practice in the culture of Akwa Ibom State. Using the interview instrument, an opinion survey of an availability random sample of 300 residents across the various Local Government Areas of the state was carried out. Among others, the interview revealed a high incidence of gender-based violence, which in turn is seen to be associated with diverse causal factors, prominent among which are illiteracy, improper socialization, poverty as well as undue adherence to outdated traditional practices. All (100%) of the sample agreed on the health implications of the practice. The religious institution considered as a grassroots organization is highlighted as an effective instrument in sensitizing the populace on the danger, health and social implications of the practice. Accordingly, the paper advocates a greater empowerment of the religious institution to better perform its role in curbing the menace of gender-based violence in order to integrate the womenfolk in the developmental mainstream of the State and the larger society.

Introduction

In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on women in Beijing, China highlighted gender-based violence as a serious problem confronting women and girls in all cultures. The problem was seen as a manifestation of the social, psychological and economic subordination of women that remains largely hidden from common knowledge. The conference identified instances of gender-based violence to include trafficking in girls, sexual intimidation at work, rape, and battery in the home, among others. Globally, the list could be expanded to include female infanticide, incest, child prostitution, partner violence, psychological abuse, female genital cutting, widowhood inheritance and forced early marriage, etc.

According to estimates by the World Health Organization (Population Reference Bureau, 2000), at least one in every five of the world's female population has been physically or sexually abused at some point in time. In order to focus properly the issue under discussion, the paper, following the conception of the United Nation's General Assembly, uses interchangeably the concepts of gender-based violence and violence against women, and adopts the definition of *violence against women as* used by the same Assembly in 1993. In that Declaration, violence against women consists of "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 act, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life."

Gender-based violence, which breeds in silence and in many instances, is culturally legitimated cuts across social and economic dimensions. Although the problem is as old as human civilization, it has been given national as well as global recognition and attention over the last thirty years. As contained in the said Beijing Conference, it is time to eliminate and prevent the problem from further escalation. Gender-based violence has, therefore, assumed the status of a special class of social problem. It is one thing, however, to acknowledge the existence of a social problem and its damaging consequences and another to propose an effective solution towards the same problem. Therefore, gender-based violence is conceived in this paper as a special category of social problem. It has, however, to be admitted that finding the solution to the problem is not simple because of the complexity of the issues involved.

This article looks at the above problem in all its ramifications and proposes what it hopes will be an effective means towards exterminating or, at least, curtailing the problem of gender-based violence. Accordingly, the problem is addressed under the following captions: Instances of gender-based violence in the Nigerian society; An analysis of Gender-based violence – an opinion survey; Health implications of gender-based violence; Sexual abuse; The role of the religious institution as an effective remedial institution; Conclusion and Recommendation.

Instances of Gender-Based Violence in the Nigerian Society Generally

Contemporary Nigerian tribes have inherited diverse family structures whereby female members of the family are treated

differentially from their male counterparts. These differential treatments have formed the basis for role allocation as well as the rationale for the legitimating of unequal distribution of rights in disfavour of the female folk. For example, the young child in the family is socialized to know, and accept his or her rights and privileges as different from those of his female or male sibling. This family structure becomes part of his/her mind frame and vision right from infancy as she/he matures into adulthood. Violation of this cultural make-ship is viewed with contempt and impunity, and may place the individual at enmity with other members of the family and the larger society.

The importance attached to these sex differentials as well as the various areas in which they apply varies from society to society – but they are certainly there. In Nigeria, the cultural segments that dictate their operation vary from minor daily activities to those that condition the girls' livelihood and determine her advancement. Some of those female cultural constraints include:

➢ Female Genital Cutting – This is also referred to as female circumcision or female genital mutilation. Female genital cutting is steeped in tradition in many countries in Africa, as well as in some Asian, Middle Eastern, European and North American countries. The practice varies from partial or total removal of the external genitalia to the narrowing of the vaginal opening. It is meant to minimize the sexual enjoyment of the girl so that she will have less desire for sex, thereby reducing the chances of sexual promiscuity. Being performed on the body of the girl, it is associated with intense pain, bleeding, abnormal menstruation, infections and psychological trauma (especially when performed at a latter age).

➢ Polygamy – This is the cultural practice, which confers on the man the right to marry as many wives as he desires. The practice portrays the women as objects which the man can "buy" as many as his financial strength carries him. In many instances, wives of polygamous households are made to carry the responsibility of their own children with little or no support from their husbands. Women from such backgrounds risk easy contraction of sexually transmitted diseases, especially AIDS.

Harmful traditional practices serve as a general name tag for all kinds of cultural practices with negative consequences for womanhood. The two outlined above are considered the most injurious especially because of their profound health implications. Others include:

➤ *Widowhood practices* – These practices embrace any negative attitudes towards widows generally. Although such negative attitudes may differ by cultural setting, the most common factor consists of the denial of the right of inheritance of the husband's property by the deceased relations and/or her community. Other negative attitudes commonly exhibited towards widows include being locked up with the corpse for days before the burial; being forced to wear the same (black) clothes for as long as the mourning period as determined by the community lasts; being prevented from bathing during menstruation; and being forced to engage in sexual relationship with the family members of the deceased; etc.

➤ *Male preference* – Because of the belief that only male children are entitled to inherit family property, the males are regarded as precious jewels and are given the best treatment in terms of food, role allocation and education. This leads to female children being given out in early marriage even when they are least prepared for such an important role in life. It is the highest form of sexual discrimination.

The above cultural practices are very common in other African societies as well although the degree of intensity is fast eroding in many countries due to the forces of westernization, technological advances and cross-cultural contact. But success in reducing their frequency and magnitude, however, should not be restricted to the control of the influences of these indirect forces alone. More direct and positive approaches have to be applied in order to achieve a situation of total elimination. Such approaches should be able to emphasize the negative aspects of the practice as well as the benefits, if any, for the individual and the larger society.

An Analysis of Gender-Based Violence in Akwa Ibom State: A Random Opinion Survey

Table 1: causes of gender-based violence

FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR GENDER- BASED VIOLENCE	NO IN SUPPORT OF FACTOR	PERCENTAGE (%) IN SUPPORT OF FACTOR
Ignorance	183	61
Poverty	189	63
Tradition	162	54
Improper socialization	288	96
Has serious health implication	300	100

Source: Opinion survey on gender-based violence in Akwa Ibom State, 2006.

So far we have used gender-based violence (also referred to as violence against women or domestic violence) to refer to any form of harmful practices meted out to women because of their gender as females. These practices range from various forms of sexual abuse to other socio-cultural practices whether in or outside the home that do not promote the cause of womanhood and her advancement. In order to determine the extent of this menace in Akwa Ibom State, an opinion survey of an availability sample of 300 men and 300 women of diverse social backgrounds across some Local Government Areas was carried out with the use of the interview instrument. The interviews, which revealed a high level of violence against women gave the following results (see table 1): There was a consensus that there is an increasing frequency of domestic violence and violence against women in Akwa Ibom State generally. 63% of the sample felt that the greater number of the cases occur in low income families, thereby considering poverty as a factor in the occurrence of domestic violence as well as violence against women. Lack of education was considered as crucial by 61% of the sample, given that so many of the cases were said to be committed by those with little or no formal education. While many (96%) in the sample attributed

domestic violence and violence against women generally to poor family upbringing, 54% associated the unwholesome practice to unwarranted adherence to outdated tradition. On the issue of health, all (100%) agreed that certain classes of violence against women have serious health implications, especially sexual violence, wife battery and female genital cutting, among others.

Other socio-cultural practices identified as having negative and undesirable consequences, include:

- Denial of equal rights to family property: The girl child is often treated as an unwanted second class family member because tradition bestows an exclusive right to family property on the male child who is also considered as the rightful heir. This practice has sometimes led to the unfortunate occurrences of broken marriages when such marriages have only produced female offsprings.

- Domestication of women: Until recently women were prohibited from engaging in activities outside the home. The girl child was expected to imbibe the household behaviour of the mother – to cook, clean the house, wash dishes and clothes, farm and engage in similar domestic activities. The boys, instead, were trained and expected to take to activities outside the family, such activities like trading, petty business enterprises and even make friends with members of the community outside of the family. Although the practice is changing, the girl child is still seen as one whose activities should be exclusively restricted to the family circle.

- Early marriage: Another disadvantage suffered by the girl child in the African context is that she is given out to marriage at a tender and premature age, sometimes as early as age sixteen. This is done in order to get the money for the education of the male child. In fact the girl child is said to really belong to the family of procreation, not to the family of orientation.

- Denial of equal educational opportunity to girls: In the typical African family, education is a reserved privilege for the male child. Educating the girl child is in some African cultures considered an economic waste because she is being prepared, according to local belief, to enrich the family into which she will later be married, that is, family of procreation. This attitude leaves the girl child always educationally disadvantaged compared to the male siblings.

- Obnoxious widowhood practices: Apart from the denial of right to husband's property mentioned above, some African tribes do engage

in certain degrading practices that undermine the person and psychology of the widow. For example, the widow is required to drink the water used in bathing the corpse of the deceased husband, to shave the head and pubic hairs with blunt, unspecialized razor blade or even with a piece of glass, and to sleep with the corpse.

Gender-based violence can occur in many forms. The most common form, which is domestic in nature and cuts across cultures, typically occurs when a man beats his wife (wife battery). It is considered to be the most prevalent form of gender-based violence globally. The extent of the problem varies from country to country. For example, in a 1996 survey, Strauss and Gelles report that in the United States of America, more than a million and a half women are beaten by their partners every year (Strauss ad Gelles, 1996). Speaking in more general terms, Achor (1997) reported that women are exposed to a broad range of attacks, ranging from domestic violence meted to the girl child or women at home to different kinds of assaults outside the home. Sociologists and psychologists agree that there are more cases of sexual assaults than are actually reported. According to Achor (1997), many of the cases reported are associated with physical abuses by current or former partner/husband. Abuses or violent attacks in connection with sexual behaviour also include sexual misdemeanours outside the home. These range from rapes to prostitution to other forms of exploitation. The amount of time allotted to the investigation of rape by the 1995 Beijing Conference testifies to the magnitude of the problem globally.

Using statistics to further demonstrate the gravity of the problem, Johnson (1980) reported that a female adolescent has a 20-30% chance of being the victim of rape in her lifetime. Rapes involving more than one attacker range from 21-70% (U. S. Uniform Crime Reports, 1983). Most authorities (Ageton, 1983; Koss et al., 1987) hold the view that the proportion of unreported sexual assault, especially rape, is higher than 50%.

Unfortunately, our knowledge of rape, as a special class of gender-based violence, is limited because most researches on sexual assault have been conducted with only those victims who have reported the assault and with those rapists who have been convicted. Another bias on the research on rape results from the fact that researchers contact the rape victims long after the assault has taken place. This situation suffers a time lag of the trauma experienced by the victim, consequently affecting the victim's mental reconstruction of the event over time.

Here in Nigeria, the problem of gender-based violence has also been recognized as a national cankerworm. Highlights of the News Analysis of 6th September 1998 on "Protecting Women against Domestic Violence" underscored the fact that even in the midst of persisting national economic difficulties, Nigeria is not spared its share of increasing incidence of violence against women. Akwa Ibom State is only part of a larger spectrum.

Typology of Gender-based violence

PHYSICAL ABUSE	PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE	CULTURAL ABUSE
Wife battery	Abusive language	Domestication
Sexual abuse (rape)	Negative social image (sex objects, weaker sex, objects of gratification etc).	Denial of rights (educational, political, economic)
Molestation		Marriages (early, forced, sororal, etc)
Prostitution (structurally induced)		Female genital cutting
		Harmful traditional practice (e.g. polygyny, polygamy)
		Widowhood practices
		Male preference

A broad-based typology of gender-based violence, therefore, could be constructed as above to include:

❖ Physical abuse – for example, battery, molestation, abusive language, prostitution and commercialization of bodies;

❖ Psychological abuse – for example, the portrayal of women by the media as sex objects and as objects of gratification;

❖ Cultural abuse – for example, denial of access to economic resources, education and decision-making.

SEXUAL ABUSE, which falls under physical abuse, is an emerging form of gender-based violence that deserves more explanation than others because of its frequency in institutions of learning and other bureaucratic establishments. Sexual abuse is a type of violence against women that is fast approaching untold dimensions if left unchecked.

The practice is associated with those in positions of authority at the detriment of their subordinates. The most common forms of sexual abuse include rape, sexual assault, sexual molestation, sexual harassment, and incest. Sexual abuse occurs most often in institutions of learning, at home, at work, and in public offices. Because it involves power exploitation, young people are especially at risk and violations can have long lasting consequences for sexual and reproductive health in later life. The immediate consequences of sexual abuse include unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, physical injury, and psychological and emotional trauma. Unfortunately, the stigma attached to victims of sexual abuse continues to hinder research into this important area.

The above cultural practices underscore the great disparity that exists between the girl child and her male siblings and do not promote the cause of womanhood in any way. Rather the practices deprive society of needed contribution by women towards national development as well as promote the low self-image of the women.

Health Implications of Gender-Based Violence

Some of the above cultural practices, as mentioned by all 300 of the respondents, have serious social as well as health implications for the female child. The World Health Organization defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well being of the individual, not merely the absence of disease. On the physico-biological level, practices such as female genital cutting and sexual abuse can cause harmful negative effects on the victim. These include infection, haemorrhage, pain, fever, and difficulty in urination. Sexual abuse, particularly rape, can result in the rape trauma syndrome. This syndrome consists of two phases, which can last for several weeks after the rape, and the long-term reorganization phase, which can last for several years. The long-term reorganization phase includes change of residence, switching of jobs, fears of situations that recall the rape environment, exaggerated startle response or hyper alertness, disturbance in sleeping patterns, impairment of memory or loss of concentration, and sad memories of the incident, including anniversary. All the above emotional and psychological conditions are in addition to the physical injuries that most rape incidents entail, making healthy living as defined by WHO close to impossible.

The social stigma attached to rape also affects the victim negatively to the point of inhibiting effective functioning among peers. The shame experienced by the victim drives her to always seek isolation and avoidance of others. It is this stigma of shame that compels most rape victims to conceal the episode, because they are likely to be viewed with contempt by others.

The social implications of violence against women are very much tied to the factors enumerated above in so far as it is the collective contributions of individuals that add up to the building of the social fabric. In fact, the health of the individuals in the community indexes the social condition of the community.

The Role of Religious Organizations in Eliminating Gender-Based Violence

The problem of gender-based violence can be traced to the historical power relations between the sexes. Women have always been portrayed as the weaker sex and as being inferior and subordinate to men. Because of the historical roots of gender-based violence, it remains a problem that cannot simply be wished away or removed by a simple wave of the hand. One of the most commonly advocated strategies to curb the menace of gender-based violence, a condition which can also be seen as a problem of sexism, is the resort to awareness campaigns. Another strategy commonly proposed is through a greater re-enforcement and empowerment of the traditional institutions of socialization, the family, school and the religious institution.

In both of the above strategies, the paper advocates the use of the religious institution and considers it the most qualified instrument towards the objective of eliminating gender-based violence, otherwise called violence against women. The religious institution is uniquely qualified to ensure effective awareness campaigns and to act as an effective instrument of socialization because of its closeness to the grassroots. Unlike other instruments of communication and awareness creation that may not be of ready and easy access to the rural populace due to cost and the requirement of a minimum of education, the religious institution suffers none of these handicaps. Rather, religion as an institution is available and accessible to people of all classes. Additionally, the language obstacle is easily overcome because of the use of indigenous pastors in local churches nowadays.

Since the increase in violence against women is most traceable to both tradition and ignorance, the traditional strategies of enlightenment and awareness creation with which the religious institution is equipped, still remain the most effective means of curbing the menace. Accordingly, the following reasons lend support to religion as a social institution that is capable of enhancing most effectively the proposed strategies:

1. Religion is accessible to all classes of persons because of its prevalence in every community.
2. Its availability can be assured because of the frequency of churches in most communities.
3. The religious institution is no longer restricting its role to spiritual concerns because of its acknowledged involvement in political and social issues in modern life.
4. There is an increase in church membership as a result of the proliferation of religious organizations in Akwa Ibom State nowadays than in the days past (Umoh, 2005b). With the development, religion has been brought closer to the people then ever before.
5. There is an increasing call today for the church, the custodian of religion, to come more alive to her social responsibilities in order to be relevant to modern man (Odey, 1997), and the church is responding accordingly.
6. The religious institution itself is becoming more conscious of its duty to serve both the spiritual and social needs of its members. This is witnessed in the many social institutions initiated and sponsored in recent times by various religious bodies in the state.
7. The greatest social responsibility of religion is to preach and enforce rules against evil; and violence against women is among the greatest evils of our time, against which religion can help to fight.
8. However, in order to more effectively pursue the above goal, the religious institution must see itself as the torchbearer in the fight against gender-based violence. Of course, the religious organization would only be able to achieve this objective by relaxing some of the sexist claims and doctrines that have been part of the religious structure through the centuries.

Conclusion and Recommendations

At the Fourth World Conference on women, there was a consensus that governments around the world should embark on an action plan to improve the social and economic status of women. All forms of violence

against women and girls including job discrimination should be eliminated. To this end, participants at the conference agreed to institute effective policies, programs and legislation to punish and rehabilitate perpetrators of any acts of violence while protecting and compensating those known to have been abused. In addition, the conference required that governments should increase awareness of the causes and consequences of *violence against women*. Those responsible for carrying out the policies were identified to include the police, medical, judicial and social workers as well as those who deal with minority, migration and refugee concerns.

The media were also considered to be crucial platforms toward the success of any programme. In the above regard, they are to act as watchdogs by highlighting abuses and encouraging better policies and legislation, thereby ensuring that governments follow through with their commitments. Particularly important is the role of the media to establish departments to eliminate gender-based stereotypes and erase negative and debasing portrayals of women in television, magazines, newspapers and other instruments of information dissemination.

Because of the advantageous position of religious organizations as grassroots institutions, the article advocates that the religious institutions be empowered in order to better perform the responsibility of waging the campaign on violence against women. This is considered essential because the contribution on the part of the religious institution would further supplement the efforts of other institutions mentioned above towards greater goal achievement. The empowerment of the religious institutions could be in the following areas:

1. Funding by governments and NGOs: This will facilitate the acquisition of necessary materials to boost awareness campaigns.
2. Recognition: Government should see religious institutions as partners in progress towards the realization of common goals as this will enhance cooperative work environment.
3. Annual budgetary allocation: If all social institutions are included in the annual budgetary allocations, one wonders why the religious institution as a social institution of great importance has never been considered in such allocations.

In line with the above, it is hoped that if the religious institution is tasked and empowered accordingly, it stands a good chance of acting as an effective agent in curbing *gender-based violence* in all its ramifications.

Reading List

Ageton, S. S. (1983): *Sexual Assaults Among adolescents.* Massachusetts. Lexington Books.

Johnson, A. G. (1980): On the Prevalence of rape in the United States. *Signs,* 6, 136 – 146.

Koss, M. P. et. al. (1987): The scope of Rape: Incidence and Prevalence of Sexual aggression and Victimization in a National sample of Higher Education Students. *Journal of consulting and Clinical Psychology,* 55, 162 – 170.

McCahill, T. W. et. al. (1979): *The Aftermath of Rape.* Massachusetts, Lexington Books.

Odey, John Okwoeze (1997): Nigeria: *Search for Peace and Social Justice.* Enugu, Snaap Press Ltd.

Population Reference Bureau (2000): Conveying Concerns: Women Report on Gender-Based Violence. *Measure Communications,* 1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 520 Washington D.C. 20009.

Prendergast, W. (1987): Delayed Reactions to Childhood Sexual Molestation. *Journal of Clinical Practice in Sexuality.*

Sack W. H. and Mason R. (1980): Child Abuse and Conviction of Sexual Crimes. *A Preliminary Finding, Law and Human behaviour,* 4, 211-215.

Strauss, Murray A. and Richard J. Gelles (1986): in Population Reference Bureau: Conveying Concerns – Women Report on gander-Based Violence. Measure Communications 1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 520 Washington D. C. 20009.

Umoh, J. O. (2005b): The Proliferation of Rural Religious Organizations and the Underdevelopment of rural communities. (A study of Etim Ekpo, Nigeria). *International Journal of Social and Policy Issues. Vol.3,* No. 1 pp. 97-105.