

Domestic Violence among working-class Nigerian women

F. Abasiubong^{a,*}, S.B. Udoh^b

^a Departments of Psychiatry, Faculty of Clinical Sciences, College of Health Sciences, University of Uyo, Nigeria

^b Family Medicine, Faculty of Clinical Sciences, College of Health Sciences, University of Uyo, Nigeria

Abstract

Domestic violence is increasingly being experienced by women all over the world. In African countries including Nigeria, failure to stamp-out this immoral social behaviour is largely due to the unusual attitude of the victims and poorly developed judiciary process. The purpose of this study was to determine the prevalence of domestic violence among working-class Nigerian women in Akwa Ibom State, with a view to identifying some contextual variables responsible for its perpetuation. This was a cross sectional descriptive study of 563 female civil servants in Akwa Ibom State. They were randomly assessed for the incidence of domestic violence, using the Healthcare Provider Domestic Violence Questionnaire. The mean age of the women was 36.9 ±4.3 years; 67.9% were married; 49.6% had tertiary education and 19.9% were senior cadre staff. A total of 218 (38.7%) were abused; 67.9% were ever and 32.1% currently abused either physically, verbally, sexually or economically by the husbands; 68.8% and 31.2% by ex-husbands; while 69.7% and 30.3% were abused by boyfriends. Significantly, 17.9% were ever abused sexually and 30.7% physically by unknown persons. Age with odd ratio (OR) of 2.37 (p=0.001); level of staff with odd ratio (OR) of 1.505 (p=0.003) emerged as predictive factors for domestic violence. Reasons such as shame; fear of reprisal attack; cultural taboos and religious obedience were major factors for concealing information. Domestic violence appears to be common in our environment. Adequate and prompt information from the victims remain the key strategies for its prevention.

Keywords: Domestic violence; Abuse; Risk factors; Working-class; Nigerian Women

*Corresponding Author: Dr. Festus Abasiubong, Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Clinical, Sciences College of Health Sciences, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.
E-mail: fesab200@yahoo.com

1. Introduction:

Domestic violence is a major societal problem, though commonly ignored and underreported in many countries [1]. There is abundance of evidence that many women are often severely assaulted by their male partners or co-habitants [2]. Although studies have shown that these abuses are more common than is usually reported, the variation in rates seems to suggest that no culture or race is spared [1]. Evidence from several studies have shown that even in countries with a adequate legislation and social/legal supports systems, the rate is high [3,4]. Many of these abuses usually occur behind closed doors. The abusive partners often engage in actions that threaten the victims' self-esteem and subjective well-being. This could result in the development of serious psychological distress, with an overall adverse impact on the quality of life in women [2,5,6]. Despite the efforts made to address the social and economic imbalance, which are perceived factors responsible for increasing incidence in many countries, very little is achieved in terms of prevention. The degree and level of abuses are the reasons for the increasing global concern about the domestic violence. Therefore, this presumably vicious societal malady must be checked if efforts made to advance the human rights for women are to yield positive results. There is need to impose strict penalty and sanctions on perpetrators.

Domestic violence against women poses serious adverse consequences [6,7,8,9]. The term violence has been used to describe various forms of abuse, maltreatment and neglect women experience in their intimate, kin or dependent relationships [1,10]. The abuse could be physical, emotional,

sexual, economic or even spiritual. In the developing countries, the challenges of domestic violence among women are more and adverse effects have been widely reported [2,9,11,12,13,]. There is increasing negative impacts including long-lasting psychological trauma, depression and weakening of family support systems [1,5,6].

Despite the fact that women are culturally subservient and male dominance is the norm in Nigeria, the increasing difficulties and depreciating standard of living have put strains on many relationships, with attendant increase in violence [14,15]. Evidence from previous studies has shown potential harmful effects of domestic violence on women in Nigeria [16,17,18]. With the increasing incidence of insecurity resulting from upsurge of cult activities, kidnappings, armed robberies; rapes in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, women are daily and regularly being exposed to various forms of abuses. Therefore, there is need to take cognizance of the physical and psychological well-being of these women living within the region. This study attempts to add to the pool of information currently available from the developing world on the frequency of occurrence and risk factors for domestic violence among working-class Nigerian women in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. It is hoped that the findings would help in policy formulations and efforts geared towards protecting female genders from adverse consequences of domestic violence.

2. Materials and Methods:

Location of the study: The study was carried out in Akwa Ibom State civil service. The state is one of the major oil

producing states in Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. It occupies the south-eastern corner of Nigeria. It lies between latitudes 4° 33" North of Equator and longitudes 7° 25" and 8° 25" East. It is bounded on the north by Cross River, Abia and Imo States and on the south by Atlantic Ocean; on the south-west by Rivers State. The State has a population of 3.9 million people and the major occupations are farming and fishing.

Data collection:

This was a cross-sectional study of working-class Nigerian women in the Akwa Ibom State Civil Service. Using a two-stage random sampling, a total of 563 female civil servants aged between 23 and 59 years from 10 ministries were recruited into the study. The first stage of the sampling by balloting selected seven ministries as locations of the study. Using the same balloting method, 5 departments were selected from each ministry. Thereafter all the female civil servants from these departments were assessed for domestic violence, using a modified version of Health Care Providers Domestic Violence Questionnaire. The modified version of this instrument has been used in earlier studies [19,20]. The modification of the original questionnaire was done by previous researchers after results from various pilot studies showed marked differences in the understanding of 'psychological abuse' across different cultural backgrounds. This same version was used in this study to assess physical, sexual, verbal and economic abuses. The physical violence was assessed by asking respondents to tick 'yes' or 'no' if they have ever or in the last 12 months prior to this study been pushed, shoved, slapped, kicked, dragged, beaten or something thrown at them by the husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends or unknown persons. On the verbal abuse, the respondents were asked to indicate ticking 'yes' or 'no' on incidences of yelling or shouting at, curse, insult, belittlement or humiliation; sexual violence includes indication of being forced to have sexual or forced to do something sexually that humiliates or degrades an individual. Economic violence includes issues of financial deprivation or lack of autonomy to engage on things that could bring financial gains, such being

barred from working. An item used to elicit why respondents generally feel reluctant to freely volunteer information or disclose aggressors was added to the questionnaire. A semi-structured sociodemographic questionnaire was used to elicit information on age, educational background, designation and marital status. Permission to carry out the study was obtained from the Ethics and Research Committee of the hospital. Four assistants who were trained helped in the administration and collection of the questionnaires. A systematic random sampling method with a sampling interval of eight was used to recruit the subjects into the study. **Data analysis:**

The results of the study were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 17.0). The proportion of female civil servants who were abused was found from the study group. Sample means and percentages were calculated with which simple frequency tables were created. Standard deviation was calculated from the mean and logistic regression was done to determine predictive factors for domestic violence. The p-value of <0.05 was used to determine the level of statistical significance.

3. Results and Discussion:

A total of 563 female civil servants were recruited into the study. The mean age of the participants was 36.9 ± 4.3 years. Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. Eighty seven (15.4%) aged less than 20 years; 103 (18.3%) aged between 20-29 years, 133 (23.6%) 30-39 years; 149 (26.5%) 40-49; while 91 (16.3%) were 50 years and above. More of the participants 279 (49.6%) had tertiary level secondary school level of education; while 84 (38.5%) had tertiary level of education; 191 (33.9%) secondary school level; while 93 (16.5%) were primary school leavers). Many of them 284 (50.4%) were middle level staff level 1-6; 112 (19.9%) senior staff level 12-17; while 167 (29.7%) were junior staff from level 1-6. A total of three hundred and eighty (67.5%) of the females were married; 105 (18.7%) single; while 57 (10.1%) were either separated or divorced and 21 (3.7%) widowed.

Table 1: Socio characteristics of the women

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Age in years		
>20	87	15.4
20-29	103	18.3
30-39	133	23.6
40-49	149	26.5
50-50	91	16.2
Educational Level		
Primary school	93	16.5
Secondary school	191	33.9
Tertiary school	279	49.6
Levels or Cadre of Staff		
Junior level (1-6)	167	29.7
Middle level (7-10)	284	50.4
Senior level (12-17)	112	19.9

Marital status		
Single	105	18.7
Married	380	67.5
Separated	57	10.1
Widowed	21	3.7

Table 2 shows the distribution of the abused female servants and the perpetrators. A total of 218 (38.7%) female civil servants were abused out of 563; while 345 (61.3%) had no incidence of abused. Of the 218 that were abused, 43 (19.7%) and 25 (11.5%) were ever or currently abused by the husbands physically, 60 (27.5%) and 29 (13.3%) verbally; 26 (11.2%) and 11 (5.0%) sexually; while 19 (8.7%) and 5 (2.3%) economically. A total of 51 (23.4%) and 17 (7.8%) respondents were physically abused by ex-husband; 39 (17.9%) and 28 (12.8%) verbally; 41 (18.8%) and 23 (10.6%); while 19 (8.7%) of the females were ever abused economically by ex-

husbands. Twenty nine (13.3%) and 16 (7.3%) were ever or currently abused physically by boyfriends; 45 (20.6%) and 21 (9.6%) verbally; 51 (23.4%) and 23 (10.6%) sexually; while 27 (12.4%) and 6 (2.8%) were abused economically. Sixty seven (30.7%) of the women were ever abused physically by unknown persons; 112 (51.4%) verbally; while 39 (17.9%) were ever abused sexually.

Table 2: Illustrating Prevalence of Domestic Violence among women

Variables	Women	
	Ever Abused n (%)	Currently Abused n (%)
Husbands		
Physical	43 (19.7)	25 (11.5)
Verbal	60 (27.5)	29 (11.5)
Sexual	26 (11.9)	13 (5.1)
Economic	19 (8.7)	5 (2.3)
Total	148 (67.9)	70 (32.1)
Ex-husbands		
Physical	51 (23.4)	17 (7.8)
Verbal	39 (17.9)	28 (12.8)
Sexual	41 (18.8)	23 (10.6)
Economic	19 (8.7)	-
Total	150 (68.8)	68 (31.2)
Boyfriends		
Physical	29 (13.3)	16 (7.3)
Verbal	45 (20.6)	21 (9.6)
Sexual	51 (23.4)	23 (10.6)
Economic	27 (12.4)	6 (2.8)
Total	152 (69.7)	66 (30.3)
Unknown persons		
Physical	67 (30.7)	-
Verbal	112 (51.4)	-
Sexual	39 (17.9)	-
Economic	-	-
Total	218 (100)	-

Table 3 shows a univariate logistic regression of possible variables likely to predict domestic violence among respondents. The predictive variables emerging as factors for domestic violence among the respondents were age with odd ratio (OR) of 2.37 (p=0.001) and cadre or level of staff with odd ratio (OR) of 1.505 (p=0.003). Women who were younger were more likely to be abused than older women after adjusting

for duration in a relationship. Other independent variables such as educational level, type or nature of relationships and place partner is from were not predictive factor domestic violence. Domestic violence is often not reported by the victims. Table 4 highlights the possible reasons incidents of abuse and the offenders are not usually disclosed. Shame and public ridicule accounted for 29.8% of the reasons victims are often reluctant

to bring to the fore the incidents of domestic violence. Other significant reasons include fear of reprisal attack 21.1%; religious reasons 18.8%; cultural taboos and custom 17.0%;

while remorse from partners and not knowing what to do account for 8.7% and 4.6% respectively.

Table 3: Logistic regression of Predictive factors for domestic violence

Variables	OR	95% CI	P-value
Age in years	2.371	0.311-0.613	0.001*
Educational level	0.789	2.056-4.313	0.234
Levels or cadre of staff	1.505	0.549-1.337	0.003*
Types/ nature of relationships	0.613	1.553-3.711	0.743
Duration in a relationship (yrs)	0.181	3.191-4.095	0.213
Partner place of birth	0.157	0.226-4.633	0.818

* Statistically significant

OR=Odd ratio

CI=confidence interval

Table 4: Highlighting reasons for not making public or disclosing the perpetrators

Variables Percentage	Number	
Religious obedience	41	18.8
Cultural taboos & custom	37	17.0
Fear of reprisal attack	46	21.1
Partner showing remorse	19	8.7
Not knowing what to do	10	4.6
Shame/public ridicule	65	29.8

Discussion:

The results of this study have demonstrated the extent and the degree of domestic violence in Nigeria. Although, evidence all over the world from previous studies have shown that the abuse is more common than is usually reported [1,2,11,13], our findings seem to suggest that women in Nigeria are regularly being subjected to various forms of abuses in both intimate and non-intimate relationships. The high rates of ever and currently abused working-class women in this study are indications that probably more women who are not economically well positioned may be suffering in silence. Although, it is more difficult to understand the enormity of domestic violence in many countries, one significant narrative in this study is the increasing incidence in Nigeria. This may be attributable to a number of factors other than the difficulties encountered as a result poor economic situation. One major concern in our environment is the issue of culture, which seems to strip women of their rights and forbids them from taking decisions on issues concerning them. This may have explained why reports on domestic violence in Niger Delta region of Nigeria are scarce, in spite of the increasing incidence. Considering the fact that some of the women in this study are highly educated and enlightened, one finds it difficult to understand how and why many of them are fond of concealing information thereby shielding the perpetrators from the public and law. It may be important to emphasize that there can be no meaningful efforts to stop or prevent domestic violence without the cooperation of the victims. One of the daunting challenges in the strategies to prevent domestic violence in our environment is lack of information, which is the clue to fish out the perpetrators. Therefore, women who are often the victims have important

role to play in exposing this oppressive and inhuman behaviour. This is important because evidence from previous studies have associated serious physical injuries, loss of morale and psychological morbidity with domestic violence [2,5,6]. Our study also highlights the possible factors in women that could predispose to or perpetuate domestic violence. Although, opinions differ as to the causes of violence against women, findings from our study suggest that there is a strong association of violence with the age and cadre (position in office) of women. In this study, women who were young, as well as those in the lower cadre were found to be violated more. Although, educational level has not been directly implicated in this study as one of the predictive factors for domestic violence, however, it plays a major role on the progression and socioeconomic standing of an individual, especially in a working environment. Our findings seem to corroborate various reports from previous studies that have found increase risk of violence in young, unemployed partners with little education [12,15,17,21]. However, the young age and violence is inconsistent with reports from other studies [14,22]. In this study, it is difficult to understand why women are the target of abuse since many of them might be doing well economically. Probably, the difference between their income and that of their spouses could result in social and economic imbalance, which has been found in several studies to account for women’s vulnerability to abuse or violence [15,17,23]. Also the complexity and interrelatedness of unemployment, social inequality and poverty are known factors associated with long-term adverse problems, including the risk of violence [24]. These factors may have directly or indirectly contributed to the levels of domestic violence seen in Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It is also possible that more incidents of violence may be emerging

because of the prevailing economic environment. The communal family system being practiced in Nigeria seems to put more pressure on few individuals who are bread winners in families. This could cause conflicts within the family dynamics, leading to abuse. More importantly, the culture which customarily places the responsibility of family upkeep and care on men presupposes that it is the right of the women to be taken care. Therefore, no matter the level and the income power of some women, many including those that are doing well or highly placed would still depend on men for their daily living and maintenance. The poor economic downturn has made it difficult for men to earn good and regular wages. The seemingly role reversal has resulted in conflicts because more women are becoming breadwinners and are assuming significant role in the families. The resultant inferiority complex and total loss of control could make women target of abuse. Also some men, regardless of their partners' educational attainment would still want to detect and control their activities and resistance could result in violence.

One of the striking findings from this study is the degree of various forms of abuses experienced by the women. The abuse is not limited to one pattern and it cuts across intimate and non-intimate relationships. For example, the high incidence of physical abuse seen in this study, and which appears to have been exhibited by almost all the perpetrators may be attributable to a combination of verbal, sexual and economic abuses. Therefore, the lack of direct causal relationship in this study does not invalidate the impact of educational level and the types of relationships as potential predictors of abuse. A very important finding from this study is the high percentage of women that have ever been abused sexually, especially by unknown persons. Although evidence has shown that it is more difficult for women to disclose experiences of sexual abuse as compared with other types of abuses [10,13,21]. However, our findings seem to suggest that many women may have been suffering from sexual violence, yet information is often not revealed. The high rates of ever (lifetime), as well as current experiences of sexual violence in this study could have wider implications, not only to the women but entire population. Since the lifetime sexual violence portrays a cumulative experience over a period, while currently experienced sexual violence occurred 12 months prior to the study, there is need to halt the trend. This is because it could pose a major problem on our economic and national development, with respect to the control and prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, ravaging our country.

Our study also revealed various possible reasons victims have been reluctant to disclose cases of violence and their perpetrators. This is because victims are more likely to prefer an unencumbered ambience environment and would want to be secured from the destabilizing vagaries of the perpetrators. One major concern has been the lack of sufficient coping strategies to adapt successfully to the stresses and problems caused by domestic violence in every day life. Therefore, there is need to focus on this important area, if the efforts at preventing domestic violence are to yield positive results. Our study highlighted fear of reprisal attack as one of the reasons victims are often not willing to disclose incidents and perpetrators of domestic violence. This alone accounts for about 21% of the reasons. This may not be unconnected with the highly compromised judiciary system. There is also the issue of unprofessional attitude of the law enforcement agents. Sadly and much to the chagrin of the public, the usual snail-speed procedure for the prosecution and frequent postponement of

judgments seem to fuel and perpetuate violence in Nigeria. A few individuals who are often implicated are made to walk freely on the streets. Another major reason identified in this study militating against public disclosure is shame/public ridicule. This is serious and seems to be a major challenge of domestic violence in terms of prevention. The escape from fatal damage resulting from stigma is one of the major reasons victims are often reluctant to disclose the ordeal.

The limitations of this study are worthy of note. It is a State-based study and due to the cosmopolitan nature of the country with diverse ethnic background, the population used may not be a true representation of the working-class women in Nigeria. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized. Furthermore, it is a self-report, the responses are bound to be biased and information on nature and degree of violence concealed because of the public stigma,

4. Conclusion:

This study seeks to conclude that domestic violence in Nigeria is widespread and a major problem. Nonetheless, the offenders have often not been fingered out and convicted. Besides, the widely reported hazard associated with domestic violence, women fundamental human rights and privileges are the issues that need to be addressed. It is difficult to explain why women would keep silence on issues bordering on their right abuses. There is need to constantly remind them that one of the reasons domestic violence seems to be thriving in Nigeria is because the victims do not always volunteer information that would lead to the disclosure of the offenders. Women who experience domestic violence in our environment have to deal with the religious and cultural dilemmas, as well as the consequences of public negative attitudes. Therefore, strategies aimed at reducing the negative impacts and the threats to their psychological well-being must include enlightenment campaigns. This will bring to light the socio-environmental issues that fuel or perpetuate the violence and ways of tackling them. There is need to strengthen our judiciary system to ensure prompt and adequate trial of offenders, while the police in turn must be made to handle cases of domestic violence with utmost seriousness and professionalism. This will guarantee adequate protection and security for our women.

Evidently, the findings from the present study do not invalidate the widely held views that domestic violence constitutes a major social and health hazard. The experience is more likely to disabled the victims and predisposes them to serious mental health problems, especially if intervention is not prompt and optimum. The fact that socio-economic consequences and social discrimination may directly or indirectly increase the risk of domestic violence calls for prompt psychological intervention, in terms of assessment and care to ensure improved quality of life.

Finally, our policy makers can do more to curb domestic violence by enacting laws that will fully protect the female gender within the society. This will definitely serve as an instrument to tackle a lot of the social issues that may complicate domestic violence in Nigeria.

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