



ISSN : 0795-3909  
Number 7  
June 2011

# **JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL GENDER STUDIES (JIGS)**

**An Annual Publication of  
the International Association  
for Gender Equity (IAFGE)**

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: THE POLICY DIMENSION

Akpan, D.A.

### Abstract

For many years now issues of violence against women have been variously discussed and written by scholars and non-scholars alike. Most of these discussions centre on the physical battering or beating of women by hostile husbands, relations or even bosses at work places. This paper adopts a historical approach to critically discuss violence against women in Nigeria since 1960 to date. Violence against women takes two forms - physical and non-physical. Physical violence usually appears in the form of beating, shooting, sexual abuse kidnapping/hostage taking, trafficking while non-physical appears as verbal abuses, curses and name-calling. The Nigerian State is also responsible for violence against women. These, to a large extent, create some impacts on the women and the society. The paper sees psychological and mental impacts to be longer lasting than the physical impact. Consequently, life expectancy of the women is shortened. The paper concludes that women like men have equal rights in the society. As a result, the government should make policies to protect women against men's negative attitude towards them. Men and women are partners in the development of any nation.

### Introduction

Violence is becoming a daily phenomenon the world over. It is so alarming that many people as found in families, communities, nations and nation-states think and live in fear. About 1.6 million people die every year as a result of violence and violence-related cases, the world over (Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, 2010). Violence involves both men and women. Violence against women is not a new phenomenon; it is as old as man that cuts across developed and developing societies. It is a common scenario among literate and non-literate groups as well as different religious and non-religious groups. In other words, violence against women is practiced in all societies. However, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, violence against women was becoming too alarming and a discussion topic in international fora. Hence, by 1993, it gained international attention during the world conference on Human Rights in Vienna-Austria. It was an epoch-making conference that for the first time, violence against women was internationally recognized and declared a human rights issue (Chukwuma, Osakwe, Ekpenyong and Imona, 2003).

Indeed, many scholars on women studies such as Nosike and Ganny concentrate on domestic violence (Oruwari 1996). This paper would not only look at domestic violence but also consider general violence against women in the Nigeria. The effects of this violence are enormous and long lasting in women and, to a large extent, have deleterious impact on their economic contributions, social well-being, psychological imbalance and mental fatigue. Often times, the effects of this violence get to children and become injurious to their future growth and development. The sum is frustration which often reduces women's lives expectancy. Violence against women is often discussed without taking into cognizance whether the man is on defensive or offensive dimension. Whichever, violence against women is abhorred because, socio-culturally, women are seen as 'weaker vessels'.

In Nigeria, violence against women continues to be an endemic problem. It is known that there is lack of safety and security among women and men, but by creation, men tend to be stronger and have little need for security especially at home. In other words, in the homes, men are the head and are strong on their own to withstand any physical abuse outside armed attacks and related cases.

### **Historical background of women's violence**

Before Independence, Nigerian women had been passing through phases of violence either in the hands of men or women themselves. Violence against women by women or some men in most instances was as a result of genital mutilation (female circumcision). Unfortunately, till date, this is still on-going in some parts of the country (Mendie, 2009; Ekpe-Ekpe, 2009 and Gelles, 1982).

There are two types of violence against women. These are domestic and non-domestic. Domestic usually involves the husband and, sometimes, members of the nuclear or extended families. The non-domestic violence usually comes as a result of political disturbances and or ethnic causes. Politically for instance, in 1964 in Western Nigeria, the activities of the Action Group Party, a dominant party in the West against other parties such as the Northern People's Congress (NPC) sparked off trouble in which a number of people lost their lives, the majority of whom were women and children. In 1966 crisis in the Northern Region, a number of people estimated to be over 50,000 were massacred and women and children were the worst hit (Cervenka, 1972; Uwechue, 1969). In 1967-1970 civil war in Eastern Nigeria, women were violently abused by both Nigerian and Biafran soldiers as well as other security agents. Some were violently killed, raped and tortured (Edet, 2008). Discussing this aspect, political violence against women became necessary because in Nigeria before now, a good number of women were apolitical. This was so because they were unaware of their role in politics. Secondly, they had little education; hence they were not involved in the business of governance. In the

### The need for gender equity in the Nigerian Education System

Women play diverse role in the home and in the nation as a whole. The saying, *when you train a woman, you train a nation* cannot be overemphasized. Women are intelligent, loving, expressive, determined, courageous, devoted to family, enterprising and versatile. They are not inferior to anyone; the more equal opportunity is given to both male and female, the better for a nation.

Female education will not hinder the role of women as wives, mothers and cooks, it will enhance them because educated women do things better than illiterate women. The former will be able to acquire some skills necessary for educating a child in the home. There is no doubt that education of women and men alike would contribute to sustainable development of the nation.

Today, one observes that poor economic status of women, lack of confidence, self-worth and poor participation in decision making are as a result of gender inequality. It is one thing to acquire educational qualification and another thing is the ability to practice the acquired skill or knowledge. Due to the realities in the home, some banks in the country do not employ married women especially the newly established banks. They are the ones to dictate to a lady banker when to marry and have children. This discourages some women from pursuing their desired disciplines.

Women are the main custodian of social, cultural and fundamental values of any society. Full sustainable development can never be achieved without their co-operation and effective participation. These can only be stronger when combined with equal education rights. That is why it is said, *behind a successful man, there is a woman*. Such statement shows the need for women education in the country. If women are given equal education right, it will boost their economic base and personality which will enable them to contest elections and occupy more prestigious positions in the country. When they are there, they will be able to fight the cause of women. Education will also facilitate optimum life fulfilment of women in the society.

If the society desists from limiting the worth of women in the home and rearing of children, the women will be able to possess higher educational certificate and secure creative jobs in order to perform their roles effectively. Erinoshio (1994) submits that "What a child learns and practices in later life originates from the very early lessons and exposure of life with the mother playing dominant role". Gender equity will enable women to contribute meaningfully to the development of the nation. They will be able to compete comparatively well with their male counterparts and help them to use their potentials to the fullest.

Educated women who are gainfully employed are sources of income to their families because they are able to support the family financially and prevent family misunderstanding. Women may be self-engaged and whatever they do could be enhanced if equal education opportunities are given to women to make them more

(iv) *Structure of social relations*

According to Goldstein and Pevehouse (2008), some scholars define poverty, hunger, and oppression as forms of violence referred to as structural violence because it is caused by the structure of social relations rather than by direct actions such as fighting or shooting. In other words, violence against women in a country like Nigeria is partly caused by the Nigerian state. It is the Nigeria state that is responsible through invasion of values. In Nigeria, numerically, women are more than men and the majority of these women live in the rural areas where there is rural poverty because of the structure of the Nigerian economy and governance. Many hardly possess what to eat, clothe or even send their children to school because they are poor and unemployed. Many engage in subsistence agriculture and the level of production is low because they use crude implements. Where they produce more, they lack access to exchange the products the roads are in very bad condition and makes transportation and communication extremely difficult. Life for this group is difficult. The good value system is the people within this structure should have social security to be able to cope with the difficult situation within the Nigerian project.

### **Nature of domestic violence against women**

The nature of domestic violence assumes the forms of murder, rape/sexual assault, kidnapping/hostage taking/abduction, genital mutilation (female circumcision), acid bathe and trafficking. Those forms of violence are very common in the cities and rural areas. Between 1960 and now, the period this paper is discussing, it would be difficult to give accurate number of occurrences as most cases are hidden from the public.

There is the non-physical violence. This appears in the form of curses and abuses. Abuses can be domestic or non-domestic. Most men usually abuse or curse their spouses in any slightest provocation. In addition, non-domestic violence, sometimes, takes the form of name-calling such as 'prostitute', 'idiot', 'animal', 'full' and the like. The commonest places where verbal curses on women are often noticed are motor-parks, traffic junctions, markets, funeral places, unorganized clubs and social party places.

### **Occurrences of non-domestic violence against women**

Violence against women in Nigeria is quite common. During the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War, many women in Eastern Nigeria were raped and tortured by soldiers. Some women who lost their husbands suffered immensely in the hands of their husbands' relations. Between 1980 and 2010, there have been ethnic-religious

crises in Northern Nigeria. In fact, in the recent Jos crisis, many women were killed, while some were maimed. Similarly, in the Niger Delta militancy problems, women and children lose their lives. Some are equally maimed and violently ejected from their homes (Oyediran, 1979; Ajaero, 2009; Suleiman, 2010). Specifically reporting on the magnitude of violence against women in some crises in Nigeria, Onabanjo (2010) observes:

In Plateau State alone, between November 2008 and March 2010, thousands of people have been killed or maimed in three major ethnic and religious crises ... quite expectedly, attracted local as well as international outrage. It was a cold-blooded murder of hundreds of villagers, many of them women and children.

Similar to the involvement of the female population as victims of non-domestic violence, Aba (in Bilewomo, 2010), referring to the Niger Delta crisis during the International Women's Day notes:

... women of the Niger Delta region ... suffered hunger and forbidden deprivations as a result of the mindless environmental pollution being orchestrated by multinational oil companies and perpetuated by mindless government and politicians for their indifference to the plight of the women folk ...

### **Impact of violence against women and society**

It would appear that discussions on violence against women are always domestic centred. Domestic violence demeans the humanity of womanhood. It makes wife or spouse lose self-confidence and self-worth in the community. Besides, battering a woman by some husbands usually may leave behind bruises either temporary or permanent on them, and that keeps reminding them thus giving them some psychological effect. The affected women usually live the rest of their lives in fear, depressed and inclined to the children. Those without children in the marital home are always afraid and lonely. They tend to suffer from inferiority complex. This mental depression usually leads to low life expectancy.

However, in areas that are non-domestic, women still suffer some form of depression and psychological dislocation when recalling their ugly experiences in sex violence such as rape. Peters (2010) though married, recalled how she was raped when she was thirteen years old. In her words, "... hate men, sex is a problem, I hate working with men. I am always being upset at the slightest provocation by men". Peter's statement is an indication of psychological damage can do to relationships after many years of experience of violence.

There are many women who are permanently disabled as a result of battering, genital mutilation, gun shooting and tortured by agents of Nigerian state cause by political struggles or vice versa. This group, at one time, must have contributed to the development and growth of the Nigerian economy. Presently, they are dependent upon their relations. Indeed, the traumatic experience suffered by these women has a long lasting impact on the spiritual side of their lives. The spirit gives life to the physical; hence the disturbance on the physical realm affects their spirit. Since the spirit gives life, and when threatened or badly conditioned, it tends to abandon the physical, it shortens life expectancy.

### **Violence against women: The policy dimension**

Violence against women is of great concern among nations of the world. As a result of the magnitude of women's suffering in times of violence that conferences were held in Africa. An example of the outcome is the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. The Conference of Heads of State and Government adopted the document in Maputo-Mozambique in July 2003. In spite of this adoption, the issue of violence against women and the rights of women in national issues are yet to be properly addressed. Women are still being regarded as seconded class citizen in most homes, communities and religious bodies. In many families, women are still treated according to societal customs fit only for the kitchen, farm work, keeping the 'master' happy and production of children (Chuckwuma et al, 2003).

The Nigerian State through appropriate agency should come up with a policy that would shield women against the harsh hands of their spouses, the public and the Nigerian State. Such policy should include access to gainful employment and limiting the number of children for each household. There should be women's courts to try cases of violence by men against women and stiffer penalty placed on the violators. Nigerian government should reinforced the African Charter on Women's Rights and make them punishable by violators. Indeed, good governance is a panacea to the well-being of individuals. For instance, when there is development, there is security in all ramifications and vice versa. Development implies good housing, gainful employment and availability of food, good education and less stress-felt society.

For men and domestic violence, marriage is a serious affair. It is not for 'boys' and 'girls' but for adults. The government should come up with a policy where every adult of marriage age attend counselling sessions on marriage in government funded and controlled agencies. Counselling is important and would assist in minimizing domestic violence. Religious bodies owe this nation a duty to educate and or indoctrinate their adherents on the need to abstain from violence, whether in the home or in public because every religion abhors violence.

The Federal government should legislate on the provision of social policy for those who are of working age but lost their jobs temporarily. This will ease the problems including domestic violence at home.

### **Conclusion**

Violence against women is a global and very contentious issue. Many scholars usually address the issue of domestic violence against women, whereas the states also violate and abuse women. Nigeria is culprit, since poor governance exacerbate violence as seen in 1964 Western crises, Ibo Massacre in 1966, Nigeria-Biafra crises of 1967-1970, the Niger Delta crises, and the recent ethno-religious crises in parts of Northern Nigeria.

Nonetheless, violence against women had taken a new dimension than what it was forty years ago and is on the increase on daily basis. Violence phenomena such as acid bathe, kidnapping/hostage taking are emerging. Violence against women has far reaching consequences on the physical, mental or psychological, economy and society. It tends to limit women's contribution to development and high reduction on life expectancy. Since women contribute to societal development, their dignity should be respected. The time is ripe for the Nigerian government to come with a workable policy to place women where they rightly belong. Women are human beings and they are as important as men in the context of give and take both in the household and in public. Women are partners in the development and growth of the Nigerian economy. Governance should be proactive and pragmatic for the well-being. Stress from violence must be reduced to prolong longevity.

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