VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Violence against women, in Africa, is a pertinent issue, which is affecting many families. Africa is a continent, which comprises of many different communities with varying cultural backgrounds. For this reason, violence against women is viewed differently. This paper will focus on examining violence against women as presented in northern, southern and western states, in Africa. The principal discussion in the paper will be on cultural practices, religious affiliations, stress, marital unions, education, and their effect on promoting violence against women. This paper will examine each issue independently by drawing upon previous research, which was done by other scholars. This paper will also briefly examine the strategies women use to reduce violence in their homes, and protect their families. Finally, it will also examine intervention strategies, which may help to reduce violence against women, in Africa. The paper will conclude by noting that since Africa is a country with different views on violence, it is imperative that policy makers develop geographically differentiated interventions.

Keywords: Violence against Women, Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against African women is an imperative human rights and social issue, which affects all communities and cultures. Although this predicament was previously studied in high-income countries like the United States, scholarly research on violence against women in Africa has not received such attention. For this reason, this paper will examine this issue with regard to Africa, with special focus on West and Southern Africa. Violence against women in these countries has been linked to high rates of mortality, as well as long-term psychological distress in the lives of women. In Africa, this phenomenon is manifested in different ways. This issue will be attributed to the different cultures, societies, and religious affiliations. Indeed, many cultures view it as a way of resolving relationship problems, and offers men a sense of power, in places where they feel powerless.

The factors affecting the status and thinking of women and men are numerous. These include demographic, social and economic factors prevalent within the society. In some instances, the characteristic of the relationship also influences the prevalence of violence against women. The discussion process of the paper will examine the issue further. In some circumstances, the attitude of women towards violence also affects the prevalence of violence in the society. The seriousness of this issue calls for greater forms of intervention than the one previously used. This paper will focus on exploring the issues brought forward in this paragraph. The paper will conclude that the diversity present in Africa calls for geographically differentiated intervention program.

DISCUSSION

There are a variety of factors that promote violence against women in many societies. This section will examine these factors and discuss them with respect to different countries. In Africa, different countries have different social, religious, and cultural, mindsets regarding violence against women. For instance, women in South Africa may not have the same problems as the women in Nigeria. To start the discussion, this paper will examine the forms of violence and the factors that promote violence in African nations.

Types and Nature of Violence Cultural Practices

Moore (2008) conducted a study of the forms and factors that promote female violence in Togo, using a representative sample from the population. From his examination, he concluded that Togolese women experience varying forms of violence at different rates. The common form of violence is physical beatings, which in some cases involved more than one perpetrator. He notes that the perpetrators of violence, in these cases, where the husbands, male relatives, parents, and sometimes the influential male members of the community. The causes of the nature of violence are culturally bound and far reaching. For example, Uthman, Lawoko, and Moradi (2010) believe that female genital mutilation is a factor that promotes this view in the society. In Togo, up to 19% of the women have undergone the practice. These women, eventually, believe that physical and sexual forms of abuse are a common phenomenon. Moore (2008) contends that these women do not take sexual violence or physical violence as a serious matter. Indeed, some of the women find it a common practice for the man to "exercise" his authority in the home. In cases where uncircumcised women report sexual violence atrocities such as rape, the help received is minimal. Many cultures in Togo believe that uncircumcised women tend to be arrogant, and they require men to "tame" them. This attitude has ruined efforts to reduce the cases of sexual violence within the society.

Violent homes

Coker, Smith, McKeon & King (2004) support this argument and also offer additional input with regard to family backgrounds of the women. They note that women that grew up in homes where violence was a common issue do not consider physical and sexual violence as a problem. In fact, up to 78% of the women, in his study, regard physical and sexual violence as a norm, in all marriages. In some cases, as those noted by Britton (2006) South African women are encouraged to be persevering in their marriage. After the problems experienced by men during the apartheid, the men exercise strict control in their marriages. Many of them feel it is their duty to show their women they cannot be controlled. Afrikaners educate their sons on the importance of showing authority and dominance in the home. This leads young men to believe that violence on their female partners is an issue, which must be promoted. In truth, policy makers should come up with programs that sensitize men and women on the long-term effects of gender based violence.

Marital Unions

According to Oosthusien & Wissing (2005), the number of children in a marriage, as well as the number of times a woman has been involved in a marital union reduces the chances of a woman experiencing sexual, physical, and psychological forms of violence in a marriage. They argue that women with many children are very compromising in their marriages. The women behave this way for the sake of their children. In many of the marriages, the women may not be able to support their children by themselves. For this reason, they allow their husbands or male companions to act in whichever way they deem fit. Priso (2006) argues that, in many communities, the husbands are not legally obligated to cater for the needs of their children. Indeed, it is the husband's decision to choose support he wants to offer. In cases involving rape victims, the woman might be forcefully married to the man, or the man may be told to pay a fine to the community leaders. In such cases, the woman does not get justice for the rape case, and may be left to cater for the child needs.

In some communities, the women stay with their abusive husbands because they fear the responsibility of being alone. Baleta (2004) argues that many women in North Africa will stay with their abusive husbands because they are sure it is difficult to get married by other men. For this reason, women will find it beneficial to avoid circumstances, which may anger their husbands. Baleta (2004) & Thomas (2007) argue that women fear making their husbands angry or contradicting their husbands' thoughts. In these cases, their husbands may leave them for other women, or their husbands may beat them. In many communities, women that have more than one marital affair are looked down upon since people question their interpersonal and marital skills. This phenomenon is not only practiced by men, but also by the women.

Women do not act as sources of support for other women, but act as sources of criticism. The United Nations (2008) notes that many women experiencing partner violence are afraid of what people may say concerning their marriages. Consequently, the women will avoid conflict and maintain peace in their marriage. Women also maintain peace since they are afraid the community will consider them ill-mannered people. When women experience continuous violence in their homes, they receive a lot of blame from the society. They are regarded as uncontrollable people that do not know how to maintain their marriage. This issue is, however, less prevalent in the villages than in the cities. Lenoir (2006) notes, in South Africa, women that stay in the city are likely to be educated women.

Education

According to Lenoir (2006), the number of women that experience violence in the city is much higher than that in the village. Moore (2008) supports this literature with her findings. Moore notes that Togolese women with a seven or tenth grade education, are 1.5 more probable to withstand abuse than the women that do not have an education. Those women that finished high school also experience extreme forms of violence than those that did not go to school. Appiah & Cusack (2010) support these findings in their

study. They argue that many women in the cities are physically and psychologically abused by the men in their lives. In truth, women with extensive education are deemed as assertive. Consequently, these women would not settle for less than they deserve, in their relationships. Men in these relationships feel that their control and power is threatened. The men exercise control by becoming violent or creating situations that make their women unhappy. In environments where the men do not answer to any moral or legal law, which protects women, they become physical to exercise control.

Amoakohene (2004) contends that even women with a college education do not escape the atrocity. In Ghana, however, this number is much lower than those of women that have no education. This is because, these women are financially stable and they will not allow their husbands to ruin their lives. Ghanaian women also want to provide stable environments for their children, which leads them to ask for a divorce or advice from cultural elders. This situation is, however, not similar to the one experienced in Togo. Although Togolese women may be economically independent, they still face extreme violence in their homes. In truth, education is not a means for women to escape violence. In many communities men's dominance is continuously exercised through violent relations. Adomako (2000) argues that this is a disturbing phenomenon since, in other communities; education offers women autonomy and power in their relations.

Togo, however, does not share in this premise. Adomako (2000) argues that a possible cause for this situation may be because; Togo is a country that has experienced dictatorship ruling. In the past, the people that occupied the controlling share of the country abused the people below them. The absence of equal power distribution infiltrated itself from the government into the homes. Britton (2006) supports this point by contending that the same practice is prevalent in Southern African States. In these nations, men that have power want to control women that occupy diminished positions. For instance, one may hear news on ministers wanting to sleep with women that are in need of favors. Men view it as their right to demand favors from women that are in need. This mentality has resulted in an increase of cases involving rape in South Africa. Men that have control abuse the rights of women in the unions. Religious practices in different countries are also a promoter of violence among women.

Religion

Bates (2004) notes the relationship between religion and female based violence is strong and ongoing. In the case of Muslim, men are conservative in nature, but they are allowed to discipline their women. In truth, both Christianity and Islam, elevate the status of men with respect to that of women. Women are required to occupy a submissive role in their homes. This issue is also prevalent in capital cities than in the villages. In the cities, the people come from various regions with different beliefs about violence.

Many neighbors may not be disturbed by the presence of violence in a home since it is not their business (Bullock, L., & McFarlane, 2005). This is contrary to the villages. In the villages, family members are likely to protect the woman, when they feel the husband is being unfair. They are aware that violence has negative implications for women and

the society. Violence within the home is linked to unhappy homes where the children do not get to see their mother cares for them. Women in the villages punish their husbands by not catering to the needs of the family, when they feel their husbands have wronged them. In the arguments, most of the violence is attributed to stress.

Stress

In many homes, husbands or men blame their acts on stress from many factors. Married couples, for example, fight because of the economic strain in their homes. Ntombizozuko (2007) argues that homes that have economic constraints are harshly affected by violence than homes that are economically satisfied. When a woman raises the issue of money in the home, this is likely to lead to a beating. Men do not want to be asked about personal matters within their homes. This controlling nature, leads to stress in homes, as well as instances, where the women are depressed. Women in these positions have, however, developed measures to cope with the violence in the homes.

Coping Strategies

According to the "Human Rights Watch" (2003) some of the coping strategies practiced by women involve sharing their stories with each other. In these cases, the women get social, physiological, and financial support. This process usually involves weekly meetings where the women meet, share stories, encourage each other, and start economic ventures to help them leave their marriages. In extreme cases of violence, the women hide their children from their father, or tell their children not to talk to their fathers if they seem angry. This is usually a cause of psychological and emotional trauma for the children. Indeed, many children develop fear and some children develop a poor image of marriage.

In some cases, the women give in to their husbands' demands to reduce the cause of violence in the home.

Some also seek work to reduce their presence in the homes. Lawoko (2008) argues that some men tell their women to take sick leaves off work or stop them from leaving the house. In these instances, the women hide until the scars of the violence are no longer visible. Some women also enroll their children in boarding schools to stop them from seeing the suffering, which is taking place in their homes. This strategy helps to reduce the stress incurred in homes. Hanson, Cadsky, Harris, & Lalonde (2004), note some of the strategies used by women do not help the women. For instance, when the women report the cases to the police stations, some officers mock them, insult them, or fail to act. This is because; they do not think the cases are as serious. Some officers also ignore the cases and argue that marital problems should be handled within the home. For this reason, some women approach relatives for advice and help. In these cases, the families of the couple will unite and discuss a way forward for the problem. Indeed, it is essential for the government, law enforcement agencies, and communities to develop intervention measures that will help reduce the prevalence of violence in the communities.

Intervention Strategies

Kekana & JewKess (2002) argues that, in low income nations where violence appear to be extremely prevalent, policy makers should formulate and educate young girls and boys about the pernicious effects of domestic violence against women. Through this intervention, children will grow up knowing that domestic violence is not a common phenomenon, and it must be eliminated from the society. Girls should also be educated on the pertinence of protecting themselves from men that seek to ruin their lives. Verbal and physical abuse tends to destroy the self-esteem and pride of many young women. Consequently, they grow up, allowing men to mistreat them. In addition, cultural practices that diminish the role of women, in the society should be abolished.

These include practices such as female circumcision, and polygamy. Appiah & Cusack (2010) argue that polygamy has resulted in societies where women have no value. This forces them to stay with men that abuse them emotionally, physically, and cause them to have psychological distress. Nevertheless, the study should also examine other underlying factors that promote violence against women. In the case of congress officials that abuse women, policy makers should campaign on the social, health, and psychological effects of these actions. In addition, police officers should be educated on the interventions of helping women that experience domestic violence. This will make it easier for women experiencing violence to seek help.

CONCLUSION

Extensive analysis of violence against women has shown numerous sources and effects of the violence. Male superiority in the community, for instance, accounts for many cases of violence within the community. Traditional practices, such as female circumcision has forced women to develop a complacent attitude when it comes to violence. The women further aggravate this issue by siding with men that beat up women. Some women blame other women for the violence the experience in their homes. Christianity and Islam also promote violence by forcing women to retain a subservient role when it comes to their marriage. Despite the many coping strategies developed in the community, there is still a need for better intervention programs than the existing ones. These new programs should focus on educating young boys and girls on the effects of violence against women. From the study, violence affected communities and countries in different strides. For this reason, geographically differentiated interventions, which suit the needs of the different people, will be mandatory.

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