

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

In Nigeria, many women are brutally treated by their intimate partners who in some cases lead to the death of such women. Domestic violence affects all social groups and can consist of physical, sexual and psychological abuse. The level of violence against women in Nigeria is increasing by the day with two out of every three women in certain communities experiencing violence in the family. Many women do not report the abuse as they are ashamed that their marriages are not working and for most women in Nigeria, divorce is not an option at all. So they suffer in silence. It is against this background that the researcher looks into cases of domestic violence against women in Nigeria, types, causes, effects, and management. The study recommended comprehensive and extensive premarital counselling should be given to intending couples on how to manage their marital relationship; and the government should establish and fund counselling centres at the community, and Local Government levels and employ professional counsellors to help victims and perpetrators of domestic violence.

**Keywords:** Domestic violence; Nigerian women; types; causes; effects; management.

**INTRODUCTION**

Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behaviour in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. The definition adds that domestic violence can happen to anyone regardless of race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender”, and can take many forms, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional, economic and psychological abuse (Office of Violence Against Women, 2007). Domestic violence is also known as domestic abuse, spousal abuse, battering, family violence and intimate partner violence. It is a pattern of abusive behaviours by one partner against another in an intimate relationship such as marriage, dating, family or cohabitation. Domestic violence, so defined, has many forms, including physical aggression or assault (hitting, kicking, biting, shoving, restraining, slapping, throwing objects), or threats thereof; sexual abuse; emotional abuse; controlling or domineering; intimidation; stalking; passive/covert abuse otherwise known as neglect; and economic deprivation (Seimeniuk, Krentz, Gish & Gill, 2010).

Domestic violence and abuse is not limited to obvious physical violence. It can mean endangerment, criminal coercion, kidnapping, unlawful imprisonment, trespassing, harassment and stalking (National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2011). Domestic violence occurs globally (UNICEF, 2005). Families from all social, racial economic, educational and religious backgrounds experience domestic violence in different ways. In the United States of America, each year, women experience about 4.8 million intimate partner-related physical assaults and rapes while men are victims of about 2.9 million intimate

partner related physical assaults. 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, disrespectful to in-laws, producing more girls, leaving home without informing, among others.

Reports from IRIN (2007) show that 25% of women in Dakar & Kaolack in Senegal are subjected to physical violence from their partners and that very few admit that 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 reports also reveal 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 (IRIN, 2007) In Nigeria; reports reveal “shockingly high” level of violence against women (Afol News, 2007). Amnesty international (2007) reports that a third (and in some cases two-thirds) of women are believed to have been subjected to physical, sexual and psychological violence carried out primarily by husbands, partners and fathers while girls are often forced into early marriage and are at risk of punishment if they attempt to escape from their husbands. More pathetic is the revelation of gross under reporting and non documentation of domestic violence due to cultural factors (Afolnews, 2007).

### **Domestic Violence Against Women in Nigeria**

UNICEF (2001) in its study asserted that traditionally in Nigeria, as in many other African countries, the beating of wives and children is widely sanctioned as a form of discipline. 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. Cases of domestic violence against women have been on the increase in Nigeria. There have been reports of cases of husbands killing and maiming their wives in the media. The statistics presented by This Day (2011) newspaper are daunting. About 50% of women have been battered by their husbands. Shockingly, more educated women (65%) are in this terrible situation as compared with their low income counterparts (55%). Most endure, believing they have nowhere to go and in any case, believing, for good reason, that the law will not protect them. Staggering 97.2% of them are not prepared to report to the Nigeria Police.

Project alert (2001), in a survey on violence against women conducted interviews 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. According to Amnesty International, the federal and state governments were partly responsible for these alarming figures. Neither the federal or state governments were doing anything to stem this violence and in some cases were even condoning it, thus putting at risk millions of women nationwide.

Similar interviews carried out in Oyo state and other parts of Nigeria, yielded similar results. The incidence of domestic violence is high. 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%). It is however disturbing to note that many women do not know if they had been abused or not (AfrolNews, 2007). This could be due to the acceptance of some abusive behaviour as 'normal'. 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. Many victims do not report 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'

Agbo & Choji (2014) in the study carried out in Abuja, Nigeria, a mother of one narrated her ordeal in the hands of her husband who constantly was hitting and beating her whenever he was drunk, and she lost two pregnancies as a result of his brutality. Also, in July 2014 Agbo & Choji reported a case of 34 years old housewife, Mrs Fatima Bankole, who had her face stitched 26 times, after she got battered by her husband, Alhaji Kamoru Bankole for taking a piece of fish from the pot to break her fast. The CLEEN Foundation National Crime Victimization Survey, 2013, reported that 1 in every 3 respondents admitted to being a victim of domestic violence. The survey also found a nationwide increase in domestic violence in the past three years from 21 percent in 2011 to 30 percent in 2013.

## **Types of Domestic Violence**

Different forms of abuse a woman may be subjected to in the home include:

### **1. Physical abuse**

This is the use of physical force in a way that injures the victim or puts him/her at risk of being injured. It includes beating, kicking, knocking, punching, choking, and confinement. Female genital mutilation is physical abuse. Physical abuse is one of the commonest forms of abuse. Obi & Ozumba (2007) found that 83% of respondents in their study reported 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, and 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 Ozunba (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.

### Causes of Domestic Violence against Women

There are many different theories as to the causes of domestic violence. These include psychological theories that consider personality traits and mental characteristics of the perpetrators, as well as social theories which consider external factors in the perpetrator's environment, such as family structure stress and social learning. As with many phenomena regarding human experience, no single approach appears to cover all cases.

i. Psychological: Psychological theories focus on personality traits and mental characteristics of the offender. Personal traits include sudden bursts of anger, poor impulse control, and poor self-esteem. Various theories suggest that psychopathology and other personality disorders are factors, and that abuse observed or experienced as a child lead some people to be more violent in adulthood (Kalra, 1996). Dutton & Golant (1995) suggested a psychological profile of men who abuse their wives, arguing that they have borderline personalities that are developed early in life. However, these psychological theories are disputed by Steel (1974) and Strains (1980) who suggest that psychological theories are limited. They argue that social factors are important, while personality traits, mental illness or psychopath are fewer factors.

ii. Jealousy: Many cases of domestic violence against women occur due to jealousy when the spouse is either suspected of being unfaithful or is planning to leave the relationship. An evolutionary psychology explanation of such cases of domestic violence against women is that they represent to male attempts to control female reproduction and ensure sexual exclusivity for himself through violence or the threat of violence (Goetz, 2010).

iii. Social Stress: Stress may be increased when a person is living in a family situation, with increased pressures. Violence is not always caused by stress, but may be one way that some people respond to stress (Seltzer & Kalmuss, 1988). Couples in poverty may be more likely to experience domestic violence, due to increased stress and conflicts about finances and other aspects (Jewkes, 2002).

iv. Social Learning: If one observes violent behaviour, one is more likely to imitate it. If there are no negative consequences and the victim also accepts the violence with submission; then the behaviour will likely continue. Often, violence is transmitted from generation to generation in a cyclical manner (Crowell & Sugarman, 1996).

v. Power and Control: Abusers abuse in order to establish and maintain control over the partner. Abusers' effort to dominate have been attributed to low self-esteem or feelings of inadequacy, unresolved childhood conflicts, the stress of poverty, hostility and resentment toward women (misogyny), personality disorders, genetic tendencies and social cultural influences (Wikipedia, 2012). Most authorities seem to agree that abusive personalities result from a combination of several factors, to varying degrees.

## Effects of Domestic Violence against Women

i. **Effect on Children:** There has been an increase in acknowledgement that a child who is exposed to domestic abuse during his upbringing will suffer in his development and psychological welfare (Dodd, 2009). Some emotional and behavioural problems that can result due to domestic violence include increased aggressiveness, anxiety, and changes in how a child socializes with friends, family and authorities. Problems with attitude and cognition in schools can start developing, along with a lack of skills such as problem-solving. Correlation has been found between the experience of abuse and neglect in childhood and perpetrating domestic violence and sexual abuse in adulthood (Sadeler, 1994). Additionally, in some cases, the abuser will purposely abuse the mother in front of the child to cause a ripple effect, hurting two victims simultaneously. It has been found that children who witness mother-assault are more likely to exhibit symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Lehmann, 1995).

ii. **Physical Effect:** Bruises, broken bones, head injuries, lacerations and internal bleeding are some of the acute effects of a domestic violence incident that require medical attention and hospitalization (Jones, 1997). Some chronic health conditions that have been linked to victims of domestic violence are arthritis, irritable bowel syndrome (Berrios, 1991). Victims who are pregnant during a domestic violence relationship experience greater risk of miscarriage, pre-term labour, and injury to or death of the fetus (Jones, 1997).

iii. **Psychological Effect:** Among victims who are still living with their perpetrators, high amounts of stress, fear and anxiety are commonly reported. Depression is also common, as victims are made to feel guilty for 'provoking' the abuse and are frequently subjected to intense criticism. It is reported that 60% of victims meet the diagnostic criteria for depression, either during or after termination of the relationship, and have a greatly increased risk of suicidality (Barnett, 2001). The most commonly referenced psychological effect of domestic violence is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to Vitanza, Vogel and Marshall (1995), PTSD (as experienced by victims) is characterized by flashbacks, intrusive images, exaggerated startle response, nightmares, and avoidance of triggers that are associated with the abuse. These symptoms are generally experienced for a long span of time after the victim has left the dangerous situation. Many researchers state that PTSD is possibly the best diagnosis for those suffering from psychological effect of domestic violence, as it accounts for the variety of symptoms commonly experienced by victims of trauma.

iv. **Financial Effect:** Once victims leave their perpetrator, they can be stunned with the reality of the extent to which the abuse has taken away their autonomy. Due to economic abuse and isolation, the victims usually have very little money of their own and few people on whom they can rely when seeking help. This has been shown to be one of the greatest obstacles facing victims of domestic violence, and the strongest fact that can discourage them from leaving their perpetrators (Stop Violence against Women, 2010). In addition to lacking financial resources, victims of domestic violence often lack specialized skills, education, and training that are necessary to find gainful employment, and also may have several children to support.

v. **Long-term Effect:** Domestic violence can trigger many different responses in victims, all of which are very relevant for a professional working with a victim. Major consequences of domestic violence victimization include psychological/mental health issues and chronic

physical health problems. A victim's overwhelming lack of resources can lead to homelessness and poverty.

## Management

The response to domestic violence is typically a combined effort between law enforcement, counselling services and health care.

i. Medical Response: Medical professionals do not see themselves as being able to play a major role in helping women in regards to domestic violence. Injuries are often just treated and diagnosed, without regard for the causes (Sugg & Inu, 1992). Many doctors prefer not to get involved in people's "private" lives. Health professionals have an ethical responsibility to recognize and address exposure to abuse in the patients, in the health care setting. For example, the American Medical Association's code of medical ethics states that "Due to the prevalence and medical consequences of family violence, physicians should routinely inquire about physical, sexual and psychological abuse as part of the medical history."

ii. Law Enforcement: A study was conducted by Lawrence Sherman in 1982, The Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment, to evaluate the effectiveness of various police responses to domestic violence calls in Minneapolis, Minnesota; including sending the abuser away for eight hours, giving advice and mediation for disputes, and making an arrest. Arrest was found to be the most effective police response. The study found that arrest reduced the rate by half of re-offending against the same victim within the following six months (Maxwell, Garner & Fagan, 2001). In the replication studies which were broader and methodologically sound in both size and scope, arrest seemed to help in the short run in certain cases, but those arrested experienced double the rate of violence over the course of one year (Schmidt and Lawrence, 1993). Generally, it has been accepted that if the understood victim has visible (and recent) marks of abuse, the suspect is arrested and charged with the appropriate crime.

iii. Counselling for Person Affected: Since marital violence is major risk factor for serious injury and even death, and women in violent marriages are at much greater risk of being seriously injured or killed; counselling intervention is much needed. Initial assessment of the potential for violence in a marriage can be supplemented by standardized interviews and questionnaire which have been reliable and valid aids in exploring marital violence more systematically. Counsellors and therapists should also make the distinction between situations where battering may be a single, isolated incident or an ongoing pattern of control. If it becomes apparent to the therapist that domestic violence is taking place in a client's relationship, the therapist must explore options with the client; and also refrain from blaming the partner or telling the client what to do. It is unreasonable for the therapist to expect that a victim will leave her abusive spouse solely because she disclosed the abuse. The therapist should respect the victim's autonomy and allow her to make her own decisions (Lawson, 2003). Therapists must be aware that supporting assertiveness by a battered wife may lead to more beatings or even death. Even in few cases, when the wife leaves because of life threatening situation, therapists should not relax their vigilance after a battered wife leaves her husband. Some data suggest that the period immediately following a marital separation is the period of greater risk for the women. Many men will stalk and batter their wives in an effort to get them to return or punish them for leaving.

iv. Counselling for Offenders: The main goal of counselling for offenders of domestic violence is to minimize the offender's risk of future domestic violence, whether within the same relationship or a new one. Treatment for offenders should emphasize minimizing risk to the victim, and should be modified depending on the offender's history, risk of re-offending and criminogenic needs. The majority of offenders' treatment are conducted in a group setting with groups not exceeding 12 participants. Groups are also standardized to be gender specific

(Colorado Domestic Violence Offender Management Board, 2010). According to Roberts (2002), anger management alone has not been shown to be effective in treating domestic violence offenders, as domestic violence is based on power and control and not on problems with regulating anger responses. Anger management is recommended as a part of an offender treatment curriculum that is based on accountability, along with topics such as recognizing abusive patterns of behaviour; it also requires a great deal of personal change and the construction of a self-image that is separate from former abusive while still being held accountable for it. Any corresponding problem should also be addressed as part of domestic violence offender treatment, such as problems with substance abuse or mental illness.

### **Counselling Implications**

To remedy the domestic violence situation in Nigeria, All stakeholders must be involved - the communities, religious groups, institutions, government at all levels.

- Seminars and workshops, where trained counsellors would assist in propagating the anti-domestic violence campaign, should be organized. There is the need to create awareness at these forums, to underscore the fact that violence in the home serves as a breeding ground for violence in the society. The need to regard domestic violence from a psychological rather than a socio-cultural perspective should be emphasized.
- People should be made to understand that adults can change the social norms that justify domestic violence by being role models and working together to end violence in the home; modelling non-violent relationship; and disseminating information which condemns domestic violence.
- In schools, during Parents' Teachers' Association meetings, the school counsellor could give enlightenment talks, encouraging parents to use disciplinary measures, which are non-violent on their children and avoid exposing children to domestic violence of any form.
- Prize-giving day programmes could include short talks on the issue of domestic violence, emphasizing its evil consequences and the need for families to avoid it for a better society.
- The school counsellor could organize group counselling sessions for the different age groups and classes, on the advantages of a violence free society. The boys, in particular should be counselled on how to grow up into 'healthy' men. There are influences within the home, outside the home, from friends, the internet, music and movies – messages that show that a man must be tough and in control in a relationship. The children should be taught how to be assertive without being aggressive. They should be taught how to express anger and

frustration without violence. In counselling individual students with anger problem, the various anger management techniques should be taught. .

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Comprehensive and extensive premarital counselling should be given to intending couples on how to manage their marital relationship.
- There should be public enlightenment through the mass media on the negative effects of domestic violence against women, especially wife battery.
- Religious leaders too should vigorously teach against marital violence in their places of worship. Youths should be encouraged and taught to detest and not imitate brutish treatment of wives around them.
- Medical professionals are in position to help abused women; after physical treatment, they should refer them to counsellors and psychotherapists. Punishment given to grievously offending husbands should be publicized, so that it can serve as deterrence to others.
- Churches and mosques should organize seminars and outreach programmes where professional counsellors are invited to enlighten the people on the need for a violence free society with the home as the cradle.
- Young couples planning to get married should be guided on the ways to avoid violence in the intimate relationship of marriage.
- The government should establish and fund counselling centres at the community, and Local Government levels and employ professional counsellors to help victims and perpetrators of domestic violence.

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