

Working Women and Spousal Violence in Nigeria: Emerging Patterns and Strategies for Change

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Abstract

Despite efforts by the Nigerian government towards achieving the Millennium Development Goal of gender equality and women empowerment, the yet patriarchal and traditional nature of the Nigerian society has made it an uphill task for the vulnerability of Nigerian women to social injustice and violatory practices to be ended, or at least minimized. Removing barriers created by women's susceptibility to these social conditions will thus be a major stride towards achieving this particular Millennium Development Goal. In view of the pressing need to identify and provide a roadmap to tackling the challenges of women, this study set out to examine the extent which Nigerian women in the formal employment sector are challenged by spousal violence, a major violatory practice facing women both in Nigeria and around the globe. Using a well-structured set of survey questionnaires, incidences of three forms of spousal violence namely; physical, economic and emotional/psychological abuses were probed among 504 working women in the study area. Results revealed that an overwhelming 91.2% of subjects faced one form of spousal violence or the other. The study further revealed that of the three forms of spousal violence investigated, the emotional /psychological form of spousal violence ranked highest in the number of subjects who are faced with it, being that as much as 68.2% of subjects suffered it. Be that as it may, the educational and occupational status of subjects, and by extension, that of their spouses was identified as possible factors responsible for the observed trend. The study concludes that the above finding is a major deviation from the popularly held notion even by some scholars that spousal violence is inflicted on women mainly by physical attack. Recommendations were then made for possible change.

Introduction

According to Todaro and Smith (2009), for the impact of women to be felt in any society, such a society must invest in its women. The need for adequate investment in women is indeed crucial, hence the enlistment of gender equality and women empowerment among the eight Millennium Development Goals (M.D.Gs). This goal of gender equality and women empowerment has since 2000 provided stimulus for women-directed development programmes for many member countries of the United Nations. Some of these countries, including Nigeria, have become fully committed to identifying and addressing social and cultural issues that form a cog-in-the-wheel of women's participation in development. One phenomenon that has been identified as constituting a barrier to women's wellbeing and participation in development is spousal violence.

This form of violence alongside other violatory practices women face have been a preoccupation of gender studies in recent times. Unlike other forms of violence, spousal violence is inflicted on women by their intimate male partners like husbands, who ironically should be the ones to more than anyone else love and protect them. However, for many women, these intimate male partners have turned out to be their worst nightmare.

Unless spousal violence in all its forms, as well as the dangers it poses to the health and dignity of women are addressed, achieving gender equality and women empowerment will be a mirage. This study is an attempt to x-ray the problem of spousal violence, with emphasis being on how it affects working women. The study also provides a blue-print for alleviating the conditions of those trapped in the dilemma.

Overview of Literature and Theoretical Framework

It is not uncommon for intimate partners (male and female) to experience occasions of strong disagreement. However, if mismanaged, such strong disagreement may degenerate and give impetus for the infliction of harm or threat of same, on one of the partners by the other. This is the phenomenon known as spousal violence. It describes the variety of actions or omissions that occur in relationships (between men and women) and covers all incidents of physical attack when it may take the form of violations in forms like punching, choking, stabbing, scalding with hot water or acid, setting on fire, the result of which can range from bruising to killing (Davis, 1994). Men can be as much the victims of spousal violence as women. However, Davis (1994) stressed that women are the usual victims while men are the perpetrators. This agrees with the view of Ganny, (1996) that one in three marriages experiences physical violence at some point, with women being the usual victims. Similarly, Barnette and Laviolette (1993) reported that of spousal violent crimes in the United States, 91% are attacks on women by their husbands or ex-husbands.

Statistically, the true extent of spousal violence is an elusive research pursuit (Roberts, 1996). The reason is not far-fetched. Most incidents of spousal violence may never come to the attention of relevant authorities (Barnette and Laviolette, 1993). This situation is even more pathetic in developing societies like Nigeria where serious relevance is yet to be attached to research and record keeping on the phenomenon.

In United States, existing statistics show that women are about six times more likely than men to experience violence committed by an intimate partner, and that husbands and boyfriends assault as many as four million women every year (Brown, Dubau and Mckeon, 1997). Still in United States, surveys on spousal violence reveal that women make about 1, 453,437 visits every year to treat injuries resulting from assaults by spouse (Barnette and Laviolette, 1993). In a more detailed report, the United States Crime Survey Data estimated that the number of visits by women for medical care resulting from spousal violence stands at 28,700 visits to a hospital emergency room; 39,000 visits to physicians' offices, 21,000 in-patient hospitalization and 99,800 days of hospitalization (Roberts, 1996).

In Nigeria, as is the case with most developing and traditional societies, statistics on spousal violence is scanty. This in the view of Bradley (1994) is due to the fact that traditional and transitional cultures have a blind spot about it. Notwithstanding, the problem is widespread as Izugbara, Duru and Dania (2008) revealed. In these societies, the attitudes of law enforcement agents and even women themselves make the problem even more hidden and largely invisible. In the case of women, though victims, many of them in Nigeria for instance conceal their experiences of spousal violence for fear of being blamed or stigmatized as having problematic relationships (Okolo, 2004, Izugbara et al, 2008). Besides, for some of them, disclosing their experiences of abuse might lead to further acts of violence by their partners. As for law enforcement agents and other society members, most of them hardly take women who report incidences of spousal violence serious, rather, they dismiss them as 'domestic or family problem' (Ferraro, 1993).

According to Brown et al (1997), spousal violence unleashed on women usually takes one or more of the following forms; psychological/ emotional violence, physical violence, economic violence as well as sexual violence. Psychological /emotional violence involves intimidation, threats, harassment, undermining her sense of self worth, rejecting her food, name calling, ignoring her, use of abusive or derogatory words on her, belittling and refusing her affection. Economic violence involves maintaining control over either her income or both parties' income, preventing her from acquiring education or taking up employment, as well as requiring her to give a detailed account of all money spent.

Sexual violence observed Brown et al (1997) takes the form of coerced sexual contact, forced prostitution and bestiality, unprotected sex and unfounded accusations of infidelity; while physical violence is inflicted on women by way of physical injury and pain through grabbing, slapping, hitting or beating with either hands or objects, kicking, punching, stabbing or even shooting with gun. This form of abuse can also extend to forcing drugs and alcohol use on the woman as well as preventing her from accessing medical care, food or shelter.

Several theoretical postulations as to why women face spousal violence and other forms of oppression in society have been advanced by scholars. Jewkes, et al (2005) in Izugbara, et al (2008) asserts that in Africa for instance, there exist strong patriarchal values that encourage males to become sexually, physically and psychologically abusive their female partners. In line with this, Radical Feminists argue that patriarchy is responsible for all forms of oppression women face, including spousal violence. Feminists of this school of thought are of the view that the patriarchal structure of society provides room for male dominance, and consequently social inequality (Ritzer, 1996). By placing men in the dominant position, Radical Feminists according to Ritzer, argue that patriarchy provides room for social injustice and the abuse of women who the system places in subordination to men in the society.

On the other hand, Liberal Feminists blame sexism and gender socialization for all forms of violence women face. They argue that sexism limits women from childhood since it creates room for prejudice and discrimination, while gender socialization forces women to adopt roles that place them in subordination to men whose gender-specified roles give room to be dominant (Ritzer, 1996). As a consequence, in their relationships with women, the tendency is often to express this dominance by whatever means 'necessary' including the adoption of violence. These Feministic views depict the scenario in Nigeria being a largely traditional and patriarchal society, where socialization still follows the paths of gender. Heise, (1998); Jewkes et al, (2005); and Swart et al, (2002) in Izugbara et al, (2008) further magnified these views by pointing out that in Africa such sociocultural issues as pervasive male control of wealth, power and decision making; women isolation and lack of support; male peer group norms that condone and legitimize violence; rigid gender role; concepts of masculinity linked to toughness; cultural tolerance of the physical punishment of women and children; gender norms that encourage physical toughness among others, are primarily responsible for women's vulnerability to male partner violence.

Methodology

This study utilized the survey type of design. Women employed in the formal sector in Cross River State, South-South Nigeria formed the subjects. 85 subjects were selected by accidental sampling in two Local Government Areas in each of the three Senatorial Districts in this Niger Delta State. Of note is the fact that each of the two Local Government Areas was purposively selected, i.e. purposive sampling technique. They are; Ogoja and Obudu (Northern Senatorial District), Ikom and Ugep (Central Senatorial District), and Calabar South and Calabar Municipality (Southern Senatorial District). The purposive selection of these Local Government Areas is predicated upon the fact that compared other Local Government Areas in Cross River State, the ones selected are more urban and have a recognizable proportion of women in formal employment.

Data on demographic variables of subjects and their level/extent of exposure to spousal violence were subsequently obtained using a well-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire items on spousal violence were directed at three aspects of spousal violence; physical, economic and emotional /psychological violence. Sexual violence was deliberately excluded because the pilot study revealed high level reluctance on the part of women in this part of Nigeria to freely disclose or discuss issues bothering on their sex life.

Results and Discussion

Of the 510 questionnaires administered a total of 504 were retrieved. An in-depth analysis of data provided by the questionnaires as seen Table 1, reveals that of the three forms of spousal violence investigated, the highest proportion of subjects (68.2%) admitted to being subjected to spousal abuses which fall under emotional / psychological violence. Surprisingly only 14.3% of subjects admitted to being faced with physical spousal violence. This result is a deviation from the widely held impression, even as seen in Brown et al, (1997) that spousal violence occurs mainly by direct physical attack or abuse. As for economic violence, only an insignificant proportion (2.7%) indicated being subjected to such, while 6% of respondents admitted to being faced with all the three forms of spousal violence investigated.

The implication of this in summary is that only 8.8% of the subjects have not faced any form of spousal violence. The remaining 91.2% have been exposed to one form of spousal violence or the other, thus, confirming Ganny's (1996) observation that one in every three marriages experiences physical violence at some point, with women being the usual victims.

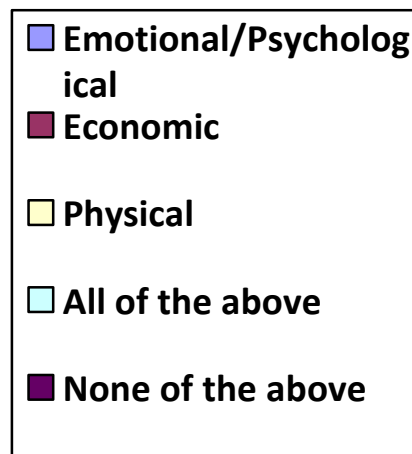
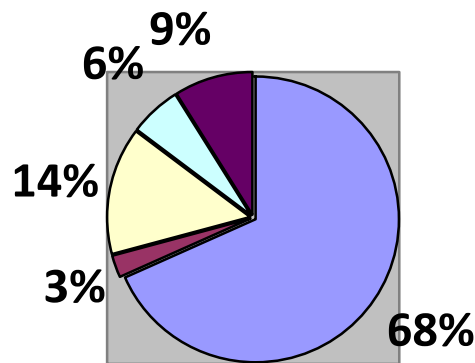
Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Subjects in Terms of Exposure to Various Forms of Spousal Violence

S/N	FORMS OF SPOUSAL VIOLENCE	NO OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENTAGE
1.	Emotional / Psychological violence	344	68.2%
2.	Economic violence	14	2.7%
3.	Physical violence	72	14.3%
4.	All of the above	30	6%
5.	None of the above	44	8.8%
	Total	504	100.0

(Source: Researchers' fieldwork)

The data in Table 1 is further presented in Pie Chart in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Pie Chart Showing Forms of Spousal Violence and the Percentage of Respondents Exposed to Them



The findings of this study posed some crucial questions. First, why is economic violence so low among these women? The probable explanation is buried in the view of Marxists that female employment would largely free women from economic dependence on men (Haralambos and Heald, 1980), as well as the assertion of Porter (1982) that working and earning money gives women economic independence. That is to say, if women are employed or of the working class, the likelihood is that they will have a degree of financial empowerment and autonomy. As such, the chances are that financial deprivation or related abuse (s) will be at the bottom in the list of forms of violence that their spouses could consider adopting, should they want to assert their dominance and superiority. It is not surprising therefore that economic abuse ranked lowest among the forms of violence subjects faced. In a similar study by Izugbara et al, (2008), a significant proportion of their subjects who were university undergraduates, reported that their abusers were their main sources of financial and material support, thus giving room for their continuous abuse by these partners. For this study however, the difference in findings lies in the fact that subjects are economically autonomous as evidenced in their employment statuses as Tables 2 and 3 indicate.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Subjects by Place of Employment

Place of Employment	Frequency	Percentage
Federal civil service	88	17.5
State civil service	144	28.6
Local government service	120	23.8
Banking sector	74	14.7
Others	78	15.5
Total	504	100.0

(Source: Researchers' fieldwork)

Table 3: Percentage Distribution of Subjects by Employment Status

Occupational Position	Frequency	Percentage
Senior cadre	70	13.9
Middle cadre	292	57.9
Lower cadre	142	28.2
Total	504	100.0

(Source: Researchers' fieldwork)

The second question arising from the findings of this study is; why did physical abuse rank so low in the percentage of subjects who are faced with it? It becomes necessary to provide an explanation for this question because apart from the general impression that physical abuse is the most frequently employed form of violence, scholars like Izugbara et al, (2008) and Brown et al, (1997) also share in this view, based on the findings of their studies. On the contrary, in this study, only small a proportion of 14.3% of subjects are faced with the physical form of spousal violence. Instead, an overwhelming majority 68.2% of subjects are faced with emotional/psychological forms of abuse. An examination of the educational attainment of subjects as presented in Table 4 provides an insight into the possible explanation for the observed trend.

Table 4: Percentage Distribution of Respondents by Level of Education

Level of education	No of respondents	Percentage
No formal education	8	1.6
Incomplete primary education	12	2.4
Complete primary education	16	3.2
Incomplete secondary education	42	8.3
Complete secondary education	204	40.5
Tertiary education	222	44.0
Total	504	100.0

(Source: Researchers' fieldwork)

Table 4 shows that a larger percentage of subjects have attained some level of education. The table also indicates that the higher the level of education, the larger the percentage of subjects in that particular level.

Since majority of subjects have attained at least complete secondary education, with as much as 44% attaining tertiary education, the likelihood is that their spouses have attained the same or a higher levels of education. Besides, in Nigeria, the percentage of educated men is higher than the percentage of educated women. For individuals with these levels of education, the possibility is that they are more likely than uneducated persons to be civil in the way and manner they will handle their marital squabbles, due to the influence of education. Moreover, because men with these levels of education would be labeled within their social environment as 'uncivilized' 'illiterates' or as 'barbaric, should they go physical with their spouses the event of any disagreement, they would therefore avoid being portrayed in any of these ways. Instead, they would consider other options like verbal abuse, use of derogatory language, intimidation, threats, belittling, undermining the woman's sense of self worth, rejection of food and communication breakdown, all of which constitute psychological / emotional abuse as better ways of 'dealing' with them.

Besides, these forms of abuse would still give the men room to maintain their 'positive' social identity since they can be unleashed without outsiders noticing. Furthermore, because most of the women in question are both educated and economically empowered by way of employment, as their educational, and employment/occupational statuses show in Tables 2, 3, and 4, the likelihood is that if physically attacked, by their spouses, they would use their financial wherewithal to challenge the men or even seek redress. Thus, in their study on dating violence among undergraduates, Izugbara et al, (2008) found out that only female students from upper class and a few in middle class either ended their relationships as a result of abuse or took up the matter. Izugbara et al concluded that having economic wherewithal at their disposal puts a check on the extent to which women can be subjected to physical violence/abuse. For subjects in this study, it not surprising therefore that psychological/emotional forms of abuse became the preferable strategy for adoption by men to unleash violence on these women, since they are seemingly non-violent.

Strategies for Change

The major data obtained from this study, which shows that as much as 91.2% of the subjects investigated had faced or are facing one or more forms of spousal violence, while only 8.8% had not, raises this fear; what is the guarantee that this 8.8% will not in future find themselves in the same predicament as the other 91.2%? Another major cause for worry is; if the picture of spousal violence in this study is a reflection of the wider Nigerian situation, or even the global state of things, what hope is there for women in terms of maximum participation in the advancement of the Nigerian society? How can the goal of development be achieved globally if an overwhelming majority of women, who themselves constitute up to half of the world's population, and whose roles are central to development, are caught in the web of violence?

Mention needs be made of the fact that the various spousal violence studied are associated with divers health challenges, ranging from chronic physical conditions, injuries, severe insomnia, alcohol and drug dependence, to physiological and emotional health problems like loss of self-esteem and confidence, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and even suicide and death. The million-dollar question will then be; how much can women really achieve in terms of contribution to development in the face of health conditions like the ones outlined above?

There is no doubt that spousal violence is a dicey social problem to handle, considering its domestic nature. Nevertheless, enlightenment programmes and supportive legislations can build confidence in women to step forward and freely discuss or report their experiences if confronted with spousal violence. For a traditional society like Nigeria, the government can help by tightening and ensuring strict enforcement of legislations on marital and spousal issues. This will provide a legal ground for defaulting men to be seriously sanctioned, rather than being handed few months in jail with options of fine as the case has been, particularly in Nigeria. In addition, provisions should be made by government and non-governmental agencies to shelter women who suffer spousal violence, especially the physical form. Providing counseling centres and services will also go a long way to assist those faced with emotional or mental health problems. This is even more crucial considering that emotional / psychological abuse happens to be the most popular of the spousal forms of violence.

Expanding opportunities for women in the area of employment will also go a long way in checking the menace of spousal violence. This is because employment will provide a platform for economic and financial empowerment, with which women can fight back or seek redress should they face spousal violence.

Supporting women surmount the cankerworm called spousal violence is a task that developing societies like Nigeria must accord adequate attention if the Millennium development goal of gender quality and women empowerment must be achieved.

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