

## Domestic Violence Victimization in Nigeria: The Often Ignored Perspective

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### Abstract

Domestic violence is a bidirectional global human factor. It is actually gender-neutral, albeit in Nigeria and beyond, women are erroneously considered by most as “the victims” of domestic violence, and men as “the perpetrators”. Using the doctrinal methodology, this paper explores the often ignored fact that men are also the victims of domestic violence perpetrated by women. It argues that even in a patriarchal society like Nigeria where women are considered as the “weaker sex” and men, “the head”, men still suffer domestic violence perpetrated by women. It offers possible patterns and reasons for domestic violence against men, and why violated men are usually silent, ignored or unbelieving. Lastly, it makes suggestions for tackling the menace. The paper is an alternative insight to the often ignored perspective of domestic violence, especially in Nigeria. There is no known primary data on this subject, hence, this paper rests basically on secondary data.

**Keywords:** Domestic Violence, Victimization, Often Ignored Perspective, Nigeria

### Introduction

In most jurisdictions including Nigeria, domestic violence is generally perceived (Dunkle, van der Heijden, Stern, & Chirwa, 2018) as a vice whereby women are the natural victims, and men are the natural perpetrators (Adebayo, 2014; Drijber, Reijnders, & Ceelen, 2013; Kamat, Ferreira, Motghare, Kamat, & Pinto, 2010). Anyogu and Arinze-Umobi (2011, p. 152) described it, albeit erroneously, as “a luxuriating iniquity against the Nigerian women”.

Other parochial reports claim that women resort to violence only when they try to counter or defend attacks and violations by men (Hamberger, Saunders, & Hovey, 1992; Saunders, 1986).

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This paper offers the alternative insight to these claims through the use of secondary data analysis. It posits that even in patriarchal Nigeria where women are considered inferior to men (Aloy Ojilere, 2008), and sometimes denied succession, inheritance and property rights (Aloy Ojilere, Onuoha, & Igwe, 2019), instances abound of male victims of domestic violence perpetrated by women (Adebayo, 2014). The low estimation of women in patriarchal Nigeria does not, however, depart from the fact that some Igbo communities<sup>4</sup> in Nigeria have a firmly established female chieftaincy institution dating roughly to the end of the fifteenth century (Uchendu, 2006).

The paper posits instead, that domestic violence is gender-neutral human misconduct which is not peculiar to men (Dutton & White, 2013; McNeely, Cook, & Torres, 2001). It concedes that comparatively, men can also be equal victims of domestic violence perpetrated by women (Isom Scott, 2018; Straus, 2011). Notwithstanding contrary contentions by Richardson, Feder, and Coid (2002) and Isom Scott (2018) that women are actually more domestically violated and victimized than men.

It highlights common instances and reasons for female-perpetrated domestic violence against men, even in matrimonial relationships in Nigeria. It therefore, remarkably contradict earlier writings of Scott and Marshall (2009) and Aloy Ojilere (2009) which had described domestic violence as a specifically physical or psychological male-perpetrated violence against women.

The paper significantly sets the agenda for alternative insight to victimisation in domestic violence in the quest to reverse popular misconception of gender-bias in domestic violence in Nigeria and beyond.

### **Domestic Violence and the Nigerian Men**

Domestic violence is a pattern of behaviour which involves the violation or abuse by one partner against another in an intimate relationship such as marriage, cohabitation, dating or within the family” (Adebayo, 2014, p. 14). It may variously occur as physical aggression,

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<sup>4</sup> Nigeria is populated by three major tribes: Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. The Igbos of South Eastern Nigeria are mainly Christians; the Hausas of Northern Nigeria are mainly Muslims while the Yoruba of Western Nigeria are basically a mixture of Christianity and Islam. Among these tribes, the Igbos are arguably the most patriarchal, and they attach much more importance and preference to a male child than a female or even a full grown woman. The obsession for sons among typical Igbo families, and in Africa generally, hindered the development and self-actualization of most women.

battery or assault such as hitting, kicking, biting, shoving, restraining, slapping or throwing of objects at the other, or even mere threat to do any of these.

Sometimes, domestic violence takes the form of intimidation, unhealthy controlling and domineering, sexual or emotional abuse, stalking, or passive/covert abuse. It may also occur as omission, and akin to mental torture, for instance, by deprivation or refusal of sexual intercourse, personal household services/benefits, as well as financial or other forms of maintenance incidental to marriage, intimacy or cohabitation.

Domestic violence is gender-neutral (Flitcraft, 1997), hence, it is also known as domestic abuse, spousal abuse, battering, family violence, dating abuse, common couple violence (Johnson, 1995), or intimate partner violence (IPV) (Hines & Douglas, 2009). Ishola (2016) defines it as the abusive treatment of one's family member, that is, the intentional and persistent abuse of anyone in the home in a manner that causes pain, distress or injury. Unfortunately though, the concept is oftentimes misunderstood and misinterpreted, especially based on the parochially premise that only women can be victims of domestic violence.

A study on domestic violence against men in Nigeria revealed that 84% of men have been violated or victimized at least once by women, out of which 59% suffered sexual violence, 61% suffered psychological violence, and 76% suffered verbal violence (Fayankinnu, 2007).

Domestic violence against men therefore describes violence or abuse meted on a man by his wife or intimate partner (Sugg, Thompson, Thompson, Majuro, & Rivara, 1999). It is a common phenomenon in both developed and undeveloped countries (Kelly, 2002) including Nigeria. It may also assume any of the forms or omissions aforementioned, but with men as the victims and women as the perpetrators, notwithstanding the inherent notions of patriarchy and primogeniture which promote the belief that men are naturally superior to women in the country.

This is without prejudice to the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW), 1993, which also suggest that men are the perpetrators of domestic violence while women are the victims. Part of the Preamble to the DEVAW restate the parochial "recognition" that "violence against women represent the historical reality of inequality in power relations of women and men, which encourage the domination of women by men and forcing women into subordination."

Nonetheless, consequent upon the traditional notions of patriarchy whereby men would rather remain silent and endure the pain of domestic violence or abuse in the hands of a woman just  
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to protect his masculinity and ego, and avoid social ridicule (Lawrence, 2003). Under this pretext, some men have experienced serious injuries and fatalities in the hands of their wives and intimate partners (Dauda & Ajao, 2017).

The fact that domestic violence also occur between same-sex couples/partners (Elliot, 1996; McClennen, 2005; Renzetti & Miley, 2014) as well as between transgender and bisexuals (Ard & Makadon, 2011) confirm the conclusion of this paper that domestic violence is gender-neutral and men are not always the perpetrators.

### **Legal Framework for Domestic Violence against Men in Nigeria**

Aside few state's laws, there is currently no specific Federal law on domestic violence against men in Nigeria (Aloy Ojilere & Gan, 2015; A. N. Ojilere, 2015). This is without prejudice to general fundamental rights provisions contained in Chapter IV of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended). These include, section 31 which guarantees the right to life; section 34 (1) which prohibits torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, and provides that "every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person", and section 42 (1) which prohibits discrimination and provides that "a citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion" shall not suffer any manner of discrimination by reason only that he is such a person.

More specifically, the Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 offer a definition of violence which is protective of both men and women in equal terms even though the issue of violation and abuse of human rights of women remain prominent in global discourse (Anyogu & Okpalaobi, 2017).

Section 20 of the Act equally contemplates violence perpetrated by men or women against themselves, both in public and private domain and whether stemming from culture or not.

The offences of physical violence, psychological violence, harmful traditional practices, socio-economic violence and sexual violence contained in sections 2, 14, 20 of the Act are also gender-neutral.

Although rape is not limited to domestic violence, the Act innovatively offers a balanced, realistic and gender-neutral definition of rape which is even wider in scope than the rape provisions in section 357 of the Nigerian Criminal Code Act. Part one, section 1 of the Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 states thus: 'A Person commits rape, if he or

she penetrates the vagina, anus or mouth of another person with any part of his or her body or anything else, and without the consent of the other person'. (Underline for emphasis).

The novel provisions of this Act further justify the contention of this paper that women are not always the victims of domestic violence, and that men are also victims of domestic violence perpetrated by women.

These provisions invariably and rightly too, queries that United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW), 1993 which contemplates only domestic violence against women by men, and not by women against men. They also query the contention of Loseke and Kurz (2005) that domestic violence against women is “the serious social problem.”

On the contrary, domestic violence is a gender-neutral global menace, and in both global south and global north jurisdictions, including Nigeria, women are also the perpetrators while men are, indeed, the silent and unrecognized victims (Watts & Zimmerman, 2002).

### **Patterns of Domestic Violence against Men**

The patterns of domestic violence against men are not different from those against women. Usually, these violations may therefore be verbal, physical or emotional psychological (Dauda & Ajao, 2017). In one study on domestic violence against men in Nigeria, Fayankinnu (2007) found that 84% of them have suffered at least one act of domestic violence perpetrated by women, and that out of this number, 76% suffered verbal violence, 61% suffered psychological violence while 59% suffered sexual violence

Common forms of domestic violence against Nigerian men include slapping, kicking, nail scratching, biting, punching, especially when the woman is physically stronger than the man. Other violations include sex deprivation, food starvation and abandonment on sickbed. Recent findings also reveal that in extreme cases, some men have been severely assaulted, poisoned, bathed with acid or even stabbed or hacked to death by their wives or intimate partners (Dauda & Ajao, 2017; Watts & Zimmerman, 2002)

Men in the global north countries are not spared of these forms of domestic violence or murder.

Hughes (2004) cited a 7<sup>th</sup> January 1999 Dispatches programme, broadcast in the UK which reported the experiences of 100 male victims of domestic violence committed by women, and found that 30% had been attacked while asleep; 25% had been kicked in the genitals; 25% of

the male victims had themselves been arrested after seeking police help, and 89% felt that the police had not taken their complaints seriously. Only 7% of the female assailants had been arrested and none was subsequently charged.

Additionally, MALE (2011) found that they also experienced unique forms of domestic violence often compounded by media, administrative and legal institutions. For instance, within the criminal justice or social justice systems, false restraining orders may be taken against them or they may be denied access to their children. Ironically, some women suffer the same fate in similar circumstances.

As earlier stated, most male victims hardly report violations, in order to protect their social prestige and macho ego (Nagesh, 2016), and like in the case of domestic violence against women, the few Nigerian men who dare to report domestic abuse and violations are sometimes hindered by poverty, or discouraged by police attitude of extortion (Ayodele, 2017). Most violated and abused men however choose to remain silent for fear of damaging their masculine ego (Brysk, 2018) in man's world (Aloy Ojilere & Chukwumaeze, 2010).

It is remarkable too, that, as with domestic violence against women, domestic violence against men occur irrespective of the age, academic or intellectual background, or political or socio-economic standing of the man.

### **Reasons Why Women Violate Men in Nigeria**

Despite controvertible claims that women usually violate men in self-defence (Miller & Meloy, 2006), and that women are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of domestic violence (Swan, Gambone, Caldwell, Sullivan, & Snow, 2008). Nonetheless, women violate men for a number of reasons in domestic relationships (Nagesh, 2016). These include:

1. **Jealousy:** Studies in psychology reveal that when people are deeply in love, jealousy may ensue (Strauss, 1974). As such, a woman may be so intimate, possessive and protective of her husband or partner that she "suspects" every other social relationship he keeps (even with family members), without bothering with the true nature or essence thereof. The jealousy is more intense if those relationships are with other women. Sometimes it is simply because the man is spending time or hanging out with friends or family members whom she dislikes or do not approve; or the man refused to let her control his finances or let her take major financial decisions; when a man "steps aside" to take his phone calls or refuses to disclose his social media passwords to her.

No doubt, some of the woman's suspicion may actually be founded, but one wonders if it is enough good reason to necessitate or justify grave assault, severe harm or even the killing of the man by the woman in a culture-sensitive patriarchal society like Nigeria where polygamous is an acceptable practice. For instance, writing under the caption: *Girl cuts off fiancé's manhood in Jigawa*, a Nigerian newspaper, *The Punch*, of 12 August, 2018 reported the story of a 17-year-old girl, Ramatu Tafida, who killed her 25-year-old fiancé, Mr. Abdullahi Sabo, by cutting off his manhood "when she learnt that the victim planned to dump her for another girl since he had already had sexual intercourse with her" ("Girl cuts off fiance's manhood in Jigawa," 2018).

2. **Sexual Weakness, Timidity or Inactivity:** A woman may become violent and abusive in a domestic relationship because the man is sexually weak, inactive or explorative, or in the case of a promiscuous woman, if the man refuses to concede to her special or inordinate demands for sex, or because he refused to be coerced into performing certain erotic acts of her pleasing (Nagesh, 2016).
3. **Infidelity:** This has been identified as one of the commonest reasons for domestic violence against Nigerian men, a reason which is attributed to "the increasingly popular fad of female chauvinism, poverty, declining value of the extended family system and reluctance of the male victims to speak out due to associated stigma" (Newspaper, 2018).
4. **Excessive Financial Pressure:** This may come from some women, especially those who try to support their maiden families "secretly". They try to achieve this by mismanaging resources or making all manner of financial demands from the man. If the man remains insensitive, some women resort to violence. For instance, Dienye and Gbeneol (2009) reported the case of a 51-year-old Nigerian trader who had frequent disagreements with his wife and later sustained injuries during a fight with her because she was making excessive financial demands which he could not satisfy.
5. **Laxity, Poverty, Role-Switch and Status-Boomerang:** In traditional and patriarchal African societies like Nigeria, men are the presumed "head of the family" as well as the perceived "breadwinners". Thus, where the man is lazy, unemployed (worse still, if he is unemployable), and he certainly cannot provide for his family, the "burden" possibly falls on his wife (Aihie, 2009). Consequently, there is a role-switch, in which case the man becomes a "wife" while the woman becomes "the breadwinner" and de

facto “head of the family.” The man is therefore expected to endure the pain of this status-boomerang or pay dearly for it. He will be expected to take instructions from the woman and perform “wifely” household chores.

## **Suggestions**

Certain pertinent suggestions are necessary for effectively and reasonably separating the fiction from the fact of domestic violence against men in Nigeria.

Male victims of domestic violence in Nigeria may appropriately find protection under the relevant provisions of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015, especially if some of its ambiguous and misleading provisions are eliminated through legislative amendment. (Nwazuo, 2016).

The parochial definition of domestic violence in international legal instruments such as the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW) should be amended by protocol to appropriately reflect gender-neutrality, namely, Intimate Partner Violence. The nomenclature of the DEVAW may thereafter be changed to United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Domestic Violence (DEDV) or Declaration on the Elimination of Intimate Partner Violence (DEIPV).

This balancing act will globally redefine the concept of domestic violence against women which is currently enjoying popular advocacy in Nigeria and beyond (Onyemelukwe, 2018; Veen, Verkade, Ukwagu, & Muthoni, 2018). It will also create a balance in the provision of public facilities for temporary shelter and/or safety for men who are fleeing from domestic violence. For instance, one study found that in the United Kingdom, there are over 445 camps where “battered” women in England and Wales can flee with their children, whereas only two such camps exist for men (Hughes, 2004).

With such balancing approach, women in Nigeria and beyond would rather equally use allegations of domestic violence as a shield rather than a sword against their male partners (Hines & Douglas, 2009).

General academic discussions on gender, feminism and domestic violence should also emphasise gender-neutrality of the vice by making consistent use of terms such as “intimate partner violence” or “common couple violence” (Johnson, 1995). This will gradually eliminate the gender-bias against men in matters of domestic violence. The Media, civil society groups, traditional rulers, religious leaders and human rights NGOs should also adopt



and promote this development as a way of gradually reversing existing misconception on domestic violence against men (Hines & Douglas, 2009).

Most of all, Nigerian men should be less egocentric and make bold to report domestic violence by their wives or intimate partners. Law enforcement agencies who receive such complaints should also treat them with seriousness rather than considering them “unbelievable” or treating them as mere private or family matters (Wolf, Ly, Hobart, & Kernic, 2003), especially by reason of patriarchy and existing social misconception prevalent in Nigeria.

Pride, poverty, fear, timidity, family intervention and police attitude (Hoyle & Sanders, 2000) are obvious recurrent factors capable of preventing or discouraging victims from reporting or decisively prosecuting domestic violence by either partner. Government should therefore initiate and promote policies for the teaching of Civic education in Nigerian schools and among Nigerian families. This way, according to Ayodele (2017), children are taught early values and courage for dealing with and reporting domestic violence and abuse in future, if they occur.

## **Conclusion**

This paper does not deny the menacing phenomenon of domestic violence against women. Rather, it argues that domestic violence is a human factor and that in some cases; men are the victims while women are the aggressors or perpetrators. It also posits that as a result of egocentrism prevalent in patriarchal Nigeria, most men would rather remain silent and not report domestic violence by their wives or partners in order not to be socially ridiculed as “weaklings” because: *I was beaten by my wife* is a derogatory misnomer.

The paper equally cited patterns of domestic violence against men as well as common reasons why men are sometimes violated and victimized women in domestic relationships in Nigeria. Lastly, it offered reasonable and effective law, policy and socio-traditional suggestions for properly redefining domestic violence and construing it more appropriately as “intimate partner violence” or “common couple violence”.

The paper significantly deepens existing scholarship on domestic violence against men in Nigeria and beyond.

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