

VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS AND WOMEN IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Romance often has a dark side. As Graydon notes, the media infantilize women, portraying them as child like, innocent and vulnerable. Being vulnerable is often closely linked to being a potential victim of violence. Violence against women generally refers to any act of gender-based violence or forceful deprivation occasioned by physical and/ or psychological means leading to suffering of harm to women. Violation of right to socialize and education, traditional/customary limitations, systematic exploitation, forced marriage, sexual and physical abuse, and forced prostitution are all different forms of this heinous act.

It is no longer news that some girls and women are likely to experience different forms of sexual violence in their life time. Some experience violence at every stage of their development ranging from child sexual abuse, infanticide and neglect, to dating violence, sexual harassment at school, acquaintance rape, sexual harassment at workplace and intimate partner violence.

This paper focuses on negative experiences that girls and women can encounter in personal relationships at school and on the job. Starting with a bleak aspect of child sexual abuse and other forms of violence and concluding with an examination of geriatric abuse.

KEY WORDS:

Violence, girls, women, exploitation, sexual harassment and abuse, rape, school, workplace, physical abuse, traditional limitations, education and geriatric abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Gender based violence is a worldwide phenomenon that knows no geographical, cultural, social, economic, ethnic or other boundaries. It is a form of violence that is inflicted on the basis of gender differences. Young female children are faced with challenges of practices such as female genital mutilation, child trafficking, forced marriage, sexual abuse, child labour, bullying and other forms of deprivations.

Intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence are both forms of gender-based violence that girls and women are predisposed to. Both sexes are prone to these forms of sexual violence but at unequal and varying degrees. Girls are usually more prone to sexual abuse compared to boys and men.

Norms and traditions especially in the African setting which tend to show a preference for male children compared to females in the family setting thus fuelling gender inequality, causing a predisposition for low self-worth and high rate of violence against women. Substance abuse and alcohol intake are also recognized factors that can influence an individual's sense of reasoning and behaviour resulting in violent acts.

Violence can occur in the home, school, religious institutions and the community as a whole. Parents, siblings, foster parents, guardians, uncles, aunts, neighbours, friends as well as strangers can be responsible for violence in the home. Disadvantaged children such as orphans, children living on the streets or child refugees, children with disability tend to be more vulnerable in the community. In most cases the perpetrators are usually known to the victim and assaults are usually not reported because of ignorance or naivety, fear instilled by the assailant, threats, stigma and shame especially if the individual involved is a close family member or the fact that they are not aware of organizations to whom such cases can be reported .

Violence against girls and women is a pervasive problem that encompasses physical and sexual abuse perpetrated against women or female children by persons known or unknown to her, including but not limited to spouses, partners, boyfriends, fathers, brothers, acquaintances, or strangers. At least one woman in three globally is beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime.

Violence is a woman's health concern, a human rights issue, and a major public health problem.

Tragically both girls and women are victims of violence. This section focuses on two forms of violence that are likely to be perpetrated against girls; child sexual abuse, infanticide or neglect.

Child Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse of children is viewed by many as among the most heinous of crimes. Child sexual abuse includes both contact and non-contact sexual experiences in which the victim is below the age of consent and the abuser is significantly older or in a position of power over the child. Sexual suggestive languages or exhibitionism are examples of non contact experience, while contact abuse may range from kissing, fondling, sexual touching, oral sex, vaginal or anal intercourse. The most recent development in child sexual abuse is exploitation through the internet for sexual activities, being exposed to various forms of sexually explicit materials or experiences of online harassment.

Sexual abuse can result in devastating consequences for children, not only in the short term, but also well into their adult lives. Sexually abused children are more

likely to be depressed, anxious, angry, have behavioural and school problems, show aggression and bullying, feel ashamed, and to have low self-esteem. Many sexually abused children show symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) including fears, nightmares, sleep disturbances and flash backs of the traumatic event.

Adolescents who were sexually abused in childhood engage early in sexual activities, have more sex partners and are more likely to become pregnant. They can also develop eating disorders, be depressed, use drugs and alcohol, try to injure themselves or commit suicide.

RAPE: is forced, unwanted sexual intercourse. Rape has no borders as it affects females in every country of the world. Rape has even been perpetrated on girls as young as a few months old and against women as old as 90. It is especially prevalent in the contexts of war and conflict. Rape is never the victim's fault no matter where or how it happens.

SEXUAL ASSAULT: is unwanted sexual contact, which is very close to rape or attempted rape but may not end in actual intercourse. An example is when a man touches a woman without her consent. Sexual assault takes many forms and is very common in the workplace and should never be treated as anything less than a serious offense.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: the most common form of violence against women refers to physical and sexual attacks in the home within a family or an intimate relationship. It includes intimate partner violence, marital rape, assault, battery and sexual abuse in the household. Worldwide, an intimate partner kills 40–70 percent of all female murder victims. This type of violence is a menace that must be constantly condemned, and perpetrators brought to book.

FORCED MARRIAGE: Early marriage refers to a forced marriage of a girl under the age of 18; girls as young as six or seven have been victims. Such girls are extremely vulnerable to sexual violence. Early or forced marriage jeopardises a girl's physical, mental, emotional, sexual and spiritual well-being.

FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION: Another extreme case of violence against women is female genital mutilation/cutting. Between 100 and 140 million women and girls in the world are estimated to have undergone female genital cutting. This harmful practice has declined by 24 percent since around 2000. Nevertheless, prevalence remains high in some countries of the world including Nigeria. The practice is deeply rooted in traditional understandings of purity and chastity, yet it can cause

irreparable pain, sexual and other health problems. Religious leaders can help in this regard by condemning this cruel act, which is often based on misconstrued religious principles and beliefs.

PHYSICAL ABUSE: This is any unnecessary/unwanted physical contact, which is usually violent or hurtful and usually results in bodily harm, discomfort and/or injury. This includes slapping, kicking, pushing, shoving, punching, choking and strangling.

PSYCHOLOGICAL/EMOTIONAL ABUSE: This refers to any act that provokes fear, diminishes the individual's self worth, dignity or self-esteem, inflicts psychological trauma on another person. In the family, acts of intimidation, silent treatment, yelling, talking down, playing on emotions, degradation, blackmailing, threatening, coming home drunk or stoned, refusing to provide support or help out with the children amounts to emotional abuse. My abuser used to tell me I could never live without him because I am useless and unintelligent. He said it to me repeatedly that it completely eroded my self-esteem and it took me a long time to get it back.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE: This is any unwelcomed or forced sexual activity. Examples of this could include unwanted sexual contact, forcing her to have sex even if you are the husband, forcing her to have sex with others, uttering threats to obtain sex, forcing sex when she is sick, after childbirth or surgery, treating her as a sex object, refusing to allow or forcing her to use contraception. Sexual violence is a possible occurrence even in a marriage.

VERBAL ABUSE: This is the use of negative comments that are embarrassing, offensive, threatening/or degrading. Examples of verbal abuse include name-calling, slut shaming, body shaming, labeling, false accusations, lying, insults, curses, etc.

FINANCIAL ABUSE: Any behavior that reduces, eliminates or deprives a woman of her financial independence. Examples are refusing her to work, run her own business or engage in any financial activity, taking her money, forging her signature or name, withholding money, spending money on addiction, gambling, irresponsibility, keeping her in the dark concerning the family finances and assets.

SOCIAL ABUSE: This is isolating or alienating a woman from friends or family. That is, controlling who her friends are, where she goes, what she does, whom she sees and talks to, making her incommunicado by seizing her phone, barring her from attending public functions and other social activities. My abuser would never

let me visit even my parent's house. If I must, he has to accompany me. Today I still can't pick up myself to visit people. It is part of the damage of the social abuse I suffered.

RELIGIOUS ABUSE: Any tactics used to exert power and control over a woman's spirituality and religious orientation. That is, choosing where she can or cannot worship, dictating how she should and should not worship. It also involves using religion to justify abuse or dominance, using church position to pressure for sex or favours and to cover up domestic violence.

USING PRIVILEGES/SOCIAL STATUS: Any comments or actions that suggest she is inferior because she comes from a different socio-economic background. An abuser who was a Pilot used to say to his victim: "You daughter of a cook, do you have any pilot in your family? Have you seen a pilot before in your life?" He also used his social status and influence to hide and deny his abusive behaviour so that the victim would not get help. At the end, he tried to use his position to engage the victim in expensive legal proceedings and he did everything possible to manipulate and prolong legal proceedings. These are the various ways some men abuse women using their social statuses.

GERIATRIC ABUSE

Geriatric abuse is a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person. This type of violence constitutes a violation of human rights and includes physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional abuse; financial and material abuse; abandonment; neglect; and serious loss of dignity and respect.

Efforts to respond to and prevent further geriatric abuse include interventions such as:

- mandatory reporting of abuse to authorities
- self-help groups
- safe-houses and emergency shelters
- rehabilitation programmes for abusers
- helplines to provide information and referrals
- caregiver support interventions.

Sexual harassment in the workplace

It is estimated that up to half of employed women will experience sexual harassment. Sexist remarks and jokes are common forms of harassments; sexual coercion is common especially during appraisals.

Women in blue collar occupations and the military are more likely to be targets of harassments than other women.

According to sex-role spillover theory, sexual harassment occurs because men respond to female in the workplace as women rather than workers.

Sexual harassment in educational setting

Sexual harassment in educational environment is unwelcomed behavior of a sexual nature that interferes with a student's ability to learn, study, work or participate in school activities. Definition of sexual harassment includes harassment by both peers and individuals in a position of power relative to the person being harassed. In schools, though sexual harassment initiated by students is most common, it can also be perpetrated by lecturers or other school employees, and the victim can be a student, a teacher, or other school employees.

Basis for sexual harassment in a learning environment

1. Coercion and bribery. This form of harassment is linked to the granting or denial of some benefit or privilege. Legally it is called **quid pro quo** harassment, meaning that something is gained from something else. Characteristically it takes the form of an individual who has or is perceived to have more power using sex as form of coercion or bribery. An example might be a professor suggesting to a student that complying or not complying with his or her sexual overtures will affect the student's grades.
2. Hostile environment. If a person's school or work environment is made uncomfortable because of sexual innuendos, suggestive remarks, pictures or uninvited advances. It is considered a form of sexual harassment.
3. Aggressive acts. Among the more overt forms of sexual harassment are actual physical behaviours, such as unwanted embraces, kissing, touching, fondling, or other inappropriate gestures.

As teachers hold positions of trust, they may be involved in close working relationships with their students due to the nature of their work. For impressionable young students, the boundaries between intellectual development and personal life

may become blurred. In this situation, some academics easily move from intellectual to personal to sexual relationships.

HOW TO TELL WHEN BEHAVIOUR BECOMES SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Some people are confused as to what behaviours constitute sexual harassment. The following questions may be especially helpful in assessing one's own behaviour:

- Would I mind if someone treats my wife, partner, girlfriend, mother, sister, or daughter this way?
- Would I mind if this person tells my wife, partner, girlfriend, mother, sister, or daughter about what I was saying or doing?
- Would I do this if my wife, partner, girlfriend, mother, sister, or daughter were present?
- Would I mind if a reporter writes about what I was doing?
- If someone asks me to stop a particular behaviour, will I get angry and do more of the same instead of apologizing and stopping?
- Do I tell jokes or make "funny" remarks involving women and/or sexuality?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, the chances of the behaviour being considered sexual harassment are very high. It is better not to do it.

SKILLS NEEDED TO REDUCE ALL FORMS AND TYPES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS AND WOMEN OF ALL AGES

There are certain skills needed to reduce all forms of violence against girls and women of all ages. They are human relationship etiquettes, values, decision making, communication, assertiveness, negotiation, alertness, boldness, discipline, determination and emotional intelligence.

Human Relationship Etiquettes

The guidelines of some cultures are rigid and strict while others are more flexible and accepting. There are certain universal values that may enable individuals to function and interact respectfully with other people. It is also designed to help

people avoid and prevent certain behaviours that would hurt, disrespect, alienate, abuse, violate or otherwise take away the rights of human beings to celebrate themselves.

Guidelines for Sexual Etiquette

The following guideline will help identify some of the behaviours and attitudes that may contribute to more cultural and individual sexual health and wellbeing:

- We are sexual beings. We each have a right to choose how to express our sexuality. Some people choose to be celibate, or only to kiss and hug, while others choose to have intercourse. We each must choose for ourselves what is right for us.
- Every individual has value and deserve to be treated with respect regardless of sex, gender, age, culture, weight, race, physical ability, religion, and other traits.
- Relationships should be consensual. Consent is when everyone involved agrees with what is happening. Consent includes respecting and honoring people's right to change their minds or say "no" at any time. If everyone is in agreement with the behaviour, feel free to have fun and enjoy one another's company.
- Physical or psychological abuse, violence or coercion are never acceptable in any relationship.

Values

Values are deeply held beliefs that guide our behaviours and decisions. Values that can assist you in handling sexual related matters include:

- (1) **Respect:** Treating everyone including yourself with dignity. As respect is reciprocal, people are more likely to give respect when they are receiving it.
- (2) **Self-control:** Being able to control your own actions. You do not have to act when you are aroused or respond to your sexual feelings and fantasies. You can choose to exercise control.
- (3) **Social Justice:** When you use sexual relations as a yardstick for school admissions and grades, it simply signifies that your personal values do not include social justice, which is to treat all people fairly.

Emotional intelligence

In managing your emotions these are the questions to ask yourself.

- (1) Do I listen to my feelings before I make a decision?
- (2) Am I able to manage my feelings?
- (3) Do I take into account the feelings of others?
- (4) Are my actions always in tune with my values?
- (5) Am I prepared to ask for the necessary support if I need guidance?

What is emotional intelligence?

Emotional intelligence is your ability to manage your feelings and thoughts. Developing emotional intelligence can enhance your decision-making and help you communicate more honestly, think more clearly, and act more authentically. Be aware that your feelings are the gateway to creativity, intuition, and inspiration. If you can manage your feelings, you will manage yourself and others better. Emotional intelligence helps you to express your own wisdom and develop understanding and trust in your relationships.

Negotiation

Negotiation is based on the idea of exchange. However, it should not be based on the idea of “getting the best of the deal.” Negotiation implies that both parties are willing to trade-off in order to find a solution that is acceptable. Remember:

- Successful negotiation should not result in a winner or loser.
- It must result in both sides feeling good about the outcomes.
- The interactions must form the foundation for an open, honest relationship.
- Each party should understand that they may reach a point of diminishing return.
- Negotiation skills are very important in handling violence of any sort.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness means standing up for what one wants or believes in. It involves communicating one’s feelings and needs without violating the right of other people. One can be assertive and do what he/she really wants by clearly stating the

decision or action one has chosen, without hurting another person. Assertiveness is communicating feelings, and needs, while respecting the rights of others.

Communication

Communication is a skill that can be learned. It includes many aspects such as listening, saying how you feel, asking for what you want and saying “NO” to what you don’t want. Communication includes sharing information feelings, and attitudes with one another.

Alertness

Being aware of what is taking place around in order to respond with the right responses.

Boldness

Confidence to say or do what is true, right and just.

Responsibility

Knowing and doing what is expected.

Discipline:

Self-Discipline is the ability to put yourself under control when you have so many options. Self-discipline is ability to take the right decision at the right time.

Mitigating domestic violence against women in Nigeria – The way forward

- To mitigate violence against women, there is need for continuous public education with the aim of raising awareness among Nigerian populace. The use of television, radio and newspaper media can go a long way in improving the masses knowledge on gender based violence. It is also important to put more efforts into empowering women through equal educational and employment opportunities. Promulgating laws that will protect women and children against violence and abuse would stem the magnitude of the problem, but punitive approach without adequate education and counselling of perpetrators and victims of domestic violence may not yield the desired results.

- Challenge and speak out about violence in the home.
- Engage respected community elders in the fight against violence.
- Mobilize youth to fight harmful practices such as child marriage.
- Child marriage denies girls their right to make vital decisions about their bodies, well-being and future. It forces them out of education into a life of poor prospects, with an increased risk of violence, abuse and ill-health.
- Engage boys and young men to become agents of change.

Conclusion

Clearly, violence against women is the most visible sign of pervasive patriarchy and chauvinism and directly impacts women's physical, sexual, mental and psychological health.

Violence against girls and women can be reduced drastically if we follow some of the above stated views. Let us take steps to stop every form of violence against women and girls today!

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