

DRINKING, VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND THE REPRODUCTION OF MASCULINITY IN ORON, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Violence against women is recognized as a violation of human rights and a threat to the achievement of gender equality and development globally. Following suggested link between alcohol use and violence in previous studies, this study investigates the role of alcohol use and violence in the reproduction of masculinity. Qualitative data from in-depth individual and group interviews with 413 men in 6 villages in Oron, Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria was used. The data reveals that men use violence in various ways towards their spouses to curb attempts to spurn traditional gender roles. Underlying most of the incidences of male violence is heavy use of alcohol, which is a potent cultural symbol of masculinity. Heavy drinking is common in these communities and its role in the incidence of violence against women is established by the accounts of participants. The rationalization of male violence with reference to the use of alcohol makes it clear that both practices are mutually implicated in the reproduction of local images of masculinity. Policy on alcohol problems and gender-based violence needs to recognize the metonymic significance of drinking and violence in the definition of manhood.

Key Words: Alcohol; Masculinity; Violence against Women; Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women (VAW) is the most pervasive form of human right abuse globally (Ellsberg, 2006). It is both subtle and blatant, but its effects on women's health and societal development are multi-faceted. VAW is condoned

and accepted in many societies (Shane & Ellsberg, 2002). It is defined as "any act of verbal or physical force, coercion or life-threatening deprivation, directed at an individual woman or girl that causes physical or psychological harm, humiliation or arbitrary deprivation of liberty that perpetuates female subordination"

(Heise, Ellsberg & Gottemoeller, 1999). VAW also refer to “any act that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats such as coercion, arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life” (Phorano, Nthomang & Ntseane, 2005). Acts of VAW include physical abuse, rape, female genital mutilation, honour killing and emotional violation through the use of abusive language.

Studies (Golding, 1996; Ellsberg, 2006; Schuler, Hashemi & Badal, 1998) show the negative effects of violence on women. These include injuries, gynaecological disorders, mental health problems, adverse pregnancy outcomes and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Violence also increases women’s risk of future health problems. The effects of violence transcend women’s sexual and reproductive health; it includes their general well-being, children’s welfare, household livelihood and societal development (Heise, Ellsberg & Goettomoeller, 1999). VAW saps their energy, erodes their self-confidence, undermines their productive capacity, and prevents them from contributing to the development of their communities.

VAW is gendered because it reflects unequal power relations between men and women. It perpetuates women’s subordinate position in society, and legitimates male dominance and control. At the community level, the strict and rigid enforcement of gender roles, the association of manliness with toughness, dominance and control as well as cultural acceptance of the abuse of women have been noted as key predictors of VAW (Jewkes, 2002). Women’s behaviour that trigger male violence are those that transgress

gender norms (Schuller, Hashemi, Riley & Akhter, 1996; Jejeebhoy 1998), and they are violently resisted by men because they suggest women’s attempt to spurn male control.

Studies suggests a relationship between substance abuse and violence (Bennett, 1995; Bennett et. al., 1994; Blount et. al., 1994). At the individual level, experimental studies reveal a consistent relationship between alcohol use and aggressive behaviour, especially in the presence of social cues that would normally elicit an aggressive response. The use of alcohol increases the aggressiveness of this response (Gantner & Taylor, 1992; Pihl et. al., 1993). Most of these studies statistically investigates causal relationships between alcohol, drugs and violence. But they do not provide information on the cultural meanings of alcohol use in relation to gender and violence, which can enrich policy and action to address VAW. This study is a narrative exploration of the interface between alcohol use, VAW and masculinity.

Alcohol and (Domestic) Violence: Existing Findings

The link between alcohol and violent crime has been established by research. Alcohol is implicated in one-half to two-thirds of homicides, in one-fourth to nearly one half of cases of serious assaults, and in more than one-fourth of rape cases (Gondolf, 2005). It contributes to one-half of everyday incidence of violence (Pernanen, 1991). At the individual level, reviews (Collins, 1981; Roizen, 1993) and experimental studies (Taylor et. al, 1983; Gantner & Taylor, 1992) show an association between alcohol and violence. Alcohol is associated with homicide (Abel, 1987; Yarvis, 1994; Goldstein et. al.,

1992), and VAW (Bennett, 1995; Bennett et al., 1994; Roberts, 1987). It is involved in 20 percent of VAW in representative samples, and over 80 percent in clinical samples (Leonard & Jacob, 1988).

Alcohol use is not only linked to violent behaviour; it may even be part of the dynamics of sexual control (van der Straten et al., 1995). The disinhibiting effects of alcohol is linked with sexual risk behaviour, including inconsistent condom use, multiple sexual partnering and extra-marital sexual relationships (Windle, 1997; Plant, 1990; Stall & Leigh, 1994). Studies show that alcohol use, VAW and sexual coercion, though under-reported, are prevalent in many cultures (Mamman et al., 2000; Gracia-Moreno & Watts, 2000; Krug et al., 2002). Recent studies show that alcohol use is an important catalyst for physical VAW and sexual coercion (Cunradi et al., 2002; Weinsheimer et al., 2005), and may significantly increase the likelihood of HIV transmission (Zablotska et al., 2006). This is so because it disinhibit sexual risk-taking and is associated with unprotected sex (Zablotska et al., 2006; Kalichman et al., 2007).

The link between alcohol and violence is a deceptively complex one. Alcohol may be involved in violence either directly or indirectly. Studies indicate that alcohol is linked to VAW because of its psycho-physiological effects, which impairs the abusers' sense of judgment and predisposes him/her to violence (Cervantes, 1992; Hamilton & Collins, 1981; Parker, 1993; Pernanen, 1991; WAD, 1999). Conversely, alcohol is used ideologically to justify VAW. Gelles & Straus (1979) observes that, "some men get drunk to give them an excuse to hit their spouses and children". Phorano, Nthomang & Ntseane (2005) also argues that alcohol use is

indirectly related to VAW because drunkenness provides an acceptable condition for expressing anger and frustration. Alcohol use is just one contributing factor acting in concert with others such as stress arising from socio-economic problems.

The relationship between alcohol and violence has been captured in three theoretical models (Gondolf, 2005). The disinhibition model focuses on the pharmacological effects of alcohol on the nervous system in acts of violence. Heavy alcohol in-take is said to impair cognitive and physiological responses that would moderate aggression under conditions of sobriety. In the second model, alcohol serves as a socially-acceptable rationalization for violence. Aggressive behaviours are justified by attributing them to the effects of alcohol. In the third model, alcohol interacts with other factors, such as frustration and personality disorder, to cause violence. Studies support the view that alcohol abuse and VAW stems from men's desire for power and control. Both are strategies for asserting masculine control and/ or negotiating insecurities of manhood (Gondolf, 2005). But alcohol and violence are not just 'a semblance of power for fragile masculinity'; they are mutually-constitutive in the reproduction of masculinity.

Masculinity: Conceptual Setting

The way the concept 'masculinity' has often been used implies a 'simplified and static notion of identity, or rest on a simplified and unrealistic notion of difference between men and women' (Connell, 2002). Theorists have questioned the usefulness of the concept, arguing against the diverse and incompatible, positions adopted in theorizing about men (Hearn, 1996). Others have found

existing definitions of masculinity to be vague, circular, inconsistent and unsatisfactory (Clatterbaugh, 1998). This has led some to jettison the concept. But as Connell (2002) observes, studying men presupposes a distinction from and relation with another group, women. Masculinity names 'conduct which is oriented to or shaped by that domain (gender), as distinct from conduct related to other patterns in social life' (Ibid).

Masculinity studies originated from social changes that presumably undermined men's ability to live up to their 'sex roles' (Campbell & Bell, 2000). Men and women were said to think and act in the ways they do, not because of their role identities or psychological traits, but because of concepts of femininity and masculinity adopted from culture (Pleck et. al., 1994; Courtenay, 2000). Earlier studies used the concept of 'male sex role' to explain this process of learning of norms for conduct. But the sex role theory proved to be inadequate for understanding diversity in masculinity (Connell, 1987). Recent studies transcend the sex role concept, and focuses on how gender patterns are constructed and practiced (Connell, 2002).

Social constructionism provides a range of methodologies for exploring situationally formed gender identities, practices and representations of men and boys. Masculinity, a set of subjective ideas and practices that enable men to achieve and project a hegemonic position, is not a static, essentialist and monolithic category, but a set of socially constructed relationships which are produced and reproduced through people's actions. It is constructed in different societal and historical spaces. To understand masculinity, one has to understand how masculinity is variably constructed as a social

phenomenon (Campbell & Bell, 2000). Scholars prefer the plural version, 'masculinities', because of its variability across contexts.

Furthermore, masculinity is constructed in dynamic, dialectic relationships (Connell, 1995). Like gender of which it is a constitutive part, masculinity is 'something one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others' (West & Zimmerman, 1987). It does not exist prior to social behaviour, either as bodily states or fixed personalities. It comes into existence as people act. It is accomplished in everyday conduct or organizational life, as patterns of practice (Connell, 2002). Since it is both achieved and demonstrated, it is best understood as a *noun* (Kaschak, 1992). It is not settled or given, but involves a complex and sustained effort at constructing identity and relationships. It is not a simple, homogenous pattern. Its construction is fraught with contradictions, and reveals contradictory desires and logic, involving multiple possibilities and complexities capable of generating tensions and changes in gender patterns.

The concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' captures the reality of hierarchy and dominance in the construction of masculinity. Hegemony signifies a position of cultural leadership and authority, not total dominance, since other masculinities persist and may even be more common (Connell, 2002). Hegemonic masculinity is highly visible, and dominant even in relation to the entire gender order, expressing 'the privilege men collectively have over women' (Ibid). It is not 'a fixed character type everywhere the same... (but) the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations' (Ibid). It is the version that is legitimate, 'natural', or unquestionable in a

particular set of gender relations (Campbell & Bell, 2000).

The Research Context

Oron is located between latitudes 50° North and longitude 90° East, at the right bank of the lower estuary of the Cross River. It shares a common boundary with Mbo Local Government Area (LGA) to the South and South-East; Okobo LGA to the North and North-East; Esit Eket and Ibeno LGAs to the South-West and Cross River State in the North-East. The area is the flood plain of Southeastern Nigeria with the land mainly intersected by numerous streams and tributaries flowing into the Cross River. The coastline stretches from *Uya Oro* to *Udun Uko*. The ancestry of the Oron people is disputed. Places such as Igbo-land and Palestine have been named as their ancestral home. It is however, very likely that Oron are Ibibio people, who migrated from the central Ibibio area to their present settlement in the hinterland of the Ibibio country (Udo, 1982). They speak *Oro*, a dialectical variation of the Ibibio language.

Oron people practiced traditional religion, but converted to Christian through the activities of foreign missionaries. A precolonial fishing economy, the area quickly developed into a major trading centre as imported European goods were traded for Palm Produce and other items. Drinking is a practice of historical and cultural significance. Heavy drinking pattern is the norm, and local production of alcoholic beverages has a long history. Drinking intensified with the arrival of western-type alcoholic drinks, beginning from the early days of contact with European traders. The topographical realities of the area is unique, with its estuarine rivers spiralling along the extreme Gulf of Guinea,

variously described by western missionaries and traders as the 'Liverpool' or 'Galilee' of Nigeria. The well-shaped promontories and glittering waters forms the basis of a fishing economy, which has also encouraged heavy drinking. Oron fishermen drink local gin, spirits and imported western liquor to keep warm in this cold habitat. Alcohol is also an integral part of the fishing economy and the local culture.

A patrilineal society, descent is traced from the male line to an epic male ancestor. The community is organized based on segmentary lineages, and there are no hierarchical or centralized socio-political structures (Beattie, 1964). The segments include minimal lineage (*idip ete*), either monogamous or polygamous; minor lineage (*ufok*), and maximal lineage (*ekpuk*). The minimal lineage (nuclear family), includes the man, his wife and children. The only social distinctions known in Oron are those based on age and sex, the latter being the most rigidly defined. The family is the basic unit of social organization. The father figure is primarily a disciplinarian and the culturally acknowledged head of the family (Charles, 2005). Women and children live under the de facto control of the man.

METHOD

The study was carried out in *Akan Obio*, Oron LGA, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. It was designed as a qualitative survey of the socio-cultural factors influencing VAW in the area. The ethnographic nature of the study explains its focus on a locality (cf. Schmidt & Room, 2010). A multi-stage sampling method was used to select participants. This involved purposive sampling of 6 villages from the community,

and clustering of households in the selected villages. Fishbowl sampling was used to identify and enumerate the specific compounds in each of the community from which participants would be drawn. Field workers, specially trained to collect data, visited the enumerated compounds and conducted in-depth, personal interviews with residents who were within the specified age range (25-45 years). The ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity applied (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Rubin & Babbie, 1997). The total number of participants was 413 (220 men and 193 women). Interviews relied on semi-structured in-depth interview guide, which yielded rich, qualitative data. The data was analyzed descriptively, while patterns were identified in simple percentages. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted with a sub-set of the survey participants (46). Separate FGD sessions were held for men and women (7 participants per session). An audio recorder was used to record the discussions, while a field assistant took notes. FGDs provided space for elaborate discussion on the issues identified by the community survey. Tape records of the discussion were thereafter played and transcribed by the research assistants. The data was analyzed thematically following the data reduction, display and verification procedure (Miles & Huberman, 1994), involving thorough examination of the narratives fitted into analysis matrixes. Themes and patterns emerging from content analysis were noted. The themes were refined by the development of sub-themes, properties and their categories. This process continued until the point of analytic saturation was reached. Key comments are quoted verbatim.

RESULTS

The Participants: Key Demographic Information

Participants were between the ages of 31 – 45 years. The average years of formal education was 9 years, which means that most of them did not complete secondary school education. There was no stark illiterate among them, since all had some level of formal education. Most of them were married; only a few of them were divorced or separated (7.6%). Two participants whose marriage ended in divorce or separation stated that VAW was a contributor. Most participants were engaged in various occupations, from white collar jobs to commercial activities. Only a few (10.2%) were unemployed. They were all Christians, mostly of the Methodist church.

Cultural Geography of Male Drinking

Drinking is a common practice in the area. It is most common among men, although women are also known to drink. The normative pattern is heavy episodic drinking. Some participants said they drink six to eight bottles of beer in an instance. A group of four men were said to consume a litre of local gin (*ufo-fob*) in a single episode. Heavy drinking is attributed to the socio-cultural and geographical realities of the area, especially its coastal nature and the fishing economy. Participants agreed that drinking is a cultural reality. We were told:

We drink a lot of wine in this community because we are fishermen, and we live in a coastal area. The weather is very cold and we take hot drinks to keep ourselves warm, especially those of us who are into fishing.

Drinking is part of the practicalities of surviving the drudgery of fishing and the temperature of the area. Use of beverages such as liquor, spirits, and local gin (locally known as *ufofob* or *kai-kai*) keeps their body warm, enabling them to cope. Alcohol constitutes an important part of the fishing economy. It is usually presented as payment for apprenticeship in fishing, and also used in traditional rites meant to ensure success during fishing expeditions. Ceremonies, including funeral, child naming, marriage and chieftaincy coronation, also contribute to the high level of alcohol use in the area. The salience of alcohol in the cultural geography of the people is seen in this comment:

You have to drink to survive in this area. It is part of our history and culture. Our people are fishermen. We work and live in the river and because of the weather, we have to find a way to keep warm. This is why our people drink spirits and wine. We do so to keep warm. Even non fishermen drink too.

Participants use different kinds of beverages, including beer, stouts, liquor, spirits, imported western wine, palm wine and local gin. Only a small proportion (10%) did not drink. Majority of those who drink do so heavily, especially when drinking in the company of friends. This point was corroborated by observations at beer parlours, motels, ceremonies and newly emerging public drinking centres (popularly known as 'joints').

Alcohol, Health and Images of Masculinity

An essential part of the local drinking culture are rules regarding what kinds of

drinks should be used and who should drink. In the past, consumption of locally brewed beverages were circumscribed by rules specifying appropriate age and gender of user. Adult men were permitted to drink, while its use was considered inappropriate for women and young people. These rules, however, represented the normative position; in reality, both young people and women drank freely with little proscription. But this did not undermine the veracity of the normative order as they were expressed in local proverbs and songs deriding women for drinking.

Socio-cultural changes have exacerbated alcohol use in the area to the point where it is a major social and public health problem affecting all groups, most especially male youths. Drinking has been further problematized by recent sentinel surveys which indicate that the area has one of the highest rate of HIV prevalence in Nigeria. Men have also been identified as key contributors to the spread of the disease. They are the major users of alcohol in the area, which promotes sexual risk behaviours such as unprotected sex and multiple sexual partnership.

Drinking is as a symbol of masculinity in the local culture. Participants observed that drinking make them feel like 'real men', which is to say that it validates their masculinity. A participant stated, 'a real man is one who drinks and drinks well (i.e., drinks heavily)'. Others pointed out that a man should consume 'strong drinks' (i.e., beverages with a huge alcohol content). They also stated that a man who does not drink is effeminate, and lacks the quality of manhood. A participant stated:

A man has to drink. Any man who does not drink is not a real man. Men are known for drinking. That is why

men organize ceremonies where lots of drinks are served to the people in attendance. It is a way of inviting your friends to come and drink and celebrate with you as you mark an important event in your life.

The only harm of drinking which participants recognized was accident due to drunk-driving. Drinking is seen as a socially-acceptable life-style for men. On the other hand, women who drink are derided, especially those who drink heavily. They are regarded as ‘perverse women’, and as prostitutes, because the latter are notorious for heavy drinking and smoking of tobacco. Participants stated that they do not permit their spouses to drink because those who drink are loose women.

Drinking, Violence and Masculinity

Majority of the participants (32.7%) stated that they have physically abused their spouses in the past, while 21% admitted abusing their spouse within the past week. A few (17.9%) reported using verbal threats on their spouses, and some did so frequently. Others (12.8%) had denied their spouses feeding money in the past. An abusive participant confesses:

I have hit my wife many times in the past. I am not proud of what I did, but sometimes you are provoked to do it. Women can be very stubborn such that you are left with no choice than physical force to assert your authority as a man.

Insubordination was the major reason participants physically abused their spouses. They argued that if a woman submits to her husband, there will be no violence. Instead the man will love his wife. But lack

of submission will make the man resort to violence. Forced submission is an acceptable way of proving ones manliness. A man who does not make his wife submit to him is called a ‘woman wrapper’, which means that he is controlled by the wife. We were told:

The husband is the head of the wife and the wife should submit to her husband. There is a saying that two captains cannot stir the same ship. When a man and a woman seek to rule in the family, there will be problem. The man will tell the wife, “I am the head of this house so stay in your role”.

The immediate triggers of violence varied. Some participants said they used violence because their spouse questioned them about where they’ve been and why they came home late. Others were violent because their spouse did perform domestic work, including cooking, washing and taking care of the children. Still others said they became violent because their spouse accused them of having extra-marital affair. What may be observed from these accounts is that the specific reasons for VAW are conducts that transgress gender norms.

Alcohol was an important predictor of participants’ violent responses. They stated that they were drunk during most of the incidences of VAW. The majority (62%) stated that they were more likely to be infuriated by their spouses’ behaviour when they are drunk than when they are sober. They expressed their displeasure by physical violence. A participant warned: *when a man is drunk, a woman should not go looking for trouble then. But most women will still act childishly and push the man to use his fists.*

DISCUSSION

This study investigated drinking, VAW and masculinity in Oron. As a descriptive ethnography, it entailed gaining “sufficient access to the study population to observe and record life as it occurs naturally, as opposed to merely interviewing people in artificial settings constructed or adopted for the purpose of research” (Merrill, Loomis & Clatts, 1999). It followed ‘the tradition of a realist ethnography in which fieldwork as lived experience is indispensable for the production of anthropological knowledge’ (Englund & Leach, 2000). The lack of control to allow for a focus on a narrow range of variables of interests, a major limitation of ethnography, was compensated by the latitude the design allows for exploration and discovery of patterns and relationships beyond the awareness of, and hence not self-reported by, the participants. The self-reported nature of the data means that both exaggeration and under-reporting of particular events are possible. But efforts to build rapport through a long period of stay with the participants greatly enhanced trust and openness in the course of interviews. Furthermore, descriptive details and comprehensiveness of the findings makes up for the problem of clarity and coherence fostered by the narrative nature of the data. Thus, the limitations notwithstanding, the study makes a meaningful contribution to the understanding of alcohol problems.

One of the findings of the study is that drinking and VAW are common in the area. This resonates with extant data on high levels of alcohol use in developing societies, such as Africa and South America (UNODC World Drug Report, 2013; Rehm, Rehn, Room et. al., 2003). Widespread use

of alcohol validates the view that drinking is ‘ubiquitous in the modern world’ (Rehm, Rehn, Room et. al., 2003). In Nigeria, Obot (2000) has observed increase in alcohol use, particularly among young people, due to phenomenal growth in local production of beer since the 1970s. Poor communities, like Oron, are prone to drink to intoxication on any given drinking occasion, and tend to suffer more health and social effects from drinking (Schmidt & Room, 2010). Alcohol use is linked to a considerable burden of disease (WHO, 2003) and aggressive behaviour, such as VAW. High levels of VAW has also been reported in many developing countries, including Nigeria.

The study also suggests a relationship between alcohol use and VAW. Most participants who abused their spouses said this took place under the influence of alcohol. Studies have revealed a consistent relationship between alcohol use and violence, especially in the presence of social cues that normally elicit aggressive response (Gantner & Taylor, 1992; Pihl, 1993). Alcohol use increases the aggressiveness of this response. This trajectory has been termed ‘alcohol myopia’, a ‘drunken excess’ that predisposes an individual towards social cues that favour the use of violence (Steele & Joseph, 1990). Under conditions of sobriety the individual would not act that way because ‘re-moter cues and thoughts would pressure him to inhibit’ (ibid). Heavy alcohol intake only compounds the problem, since the level of drinking is often causally related to the rates of serious violence against others (Lenke, 1990; Cooke & Moore, 1993).

A major finding of this study is that drinking and VAW are mutually-constitutive practices which reproduce

masculinity. 'Alcoholic beverages', writes Schmidt & Room (2010), 'are cultural artefacts and their use is highly charged with symbolism'. This symbolism is related to the construction of gender identities, especially that of masculinity. For example, Brown, Sorrell & Raffaelli (2005) argues that alcohol use is central to the performance of masculinity in a changing South African context. Ibanga, Adetula & Dagona (2009) contends that, 'drinking (is) viewed as a masculine behaviour, and further serves as a criterion for measuring maleness'... (and) not only is drinking considered a masculine thing to do, but that the ability to drink and do so heavily establishes "true masculinity". On the other hand, violence is a culturally acceptable male response to perceived women's 'insubordination' (Jejeeboy, 1998). Its instrumentality in the assertion of gendered position as family head, and in the validation of masculinity has also been established.

The study unravels the contextual values and gendered categories associated with drinking in local cultures, which is important for understanding and responding to alcohol problems. The instrumentality of alcohol in male violence against women is key to understanding the reproduction of masculinity. As a practice of historical and cultural significance, alcohol is appropriated as a symbol of masculinity. The justification of violence through attribution to alcohol hints at their mutual implication in the constitution of what it means to be a man. These processes deserve further investigation in different socio-cultural contexts in order to deepen understanding of the metonymic significance of drinking and violence in the cultural definition of manhood.

Conclusion

This study sought to contribute to present understanding of drinking and VAW as cultural practices which reproduce masculinity. Both drinking and violence are part of the socio-cultural construction of gender. Drinking is a socially-approved male behaviour; women's drinking is a contravention of traditional gender roles. VAW is an expression of masculinity; violence by women, where they occur, interrupts established gender categories. Drinking and violence then are mutually-reinforcing practices which are shaped by patriarchal ideologies which perpetuates male dominance and the devaluation of women. In order to address the problem of alcohol use and VAW, as enjoined by the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform of Action inter alia, there is need to give attention to the dynamic construction of gender differences in local cultures, the role of drinking and domestic violence, and their impact on the lives of women.

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