

# Violence Against Women

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## BACKGROUND

Violence against women is a scourge that has been since time immemorial. It is a menace that has destroyed many lives-perpetrators and victims alike-and families. It is a cancer that has eaten its way into the core of the society so much so that it has become in many places a norm. Sadly, this violation of human rights was not formally recognised until recently, and many countries still do not pay serious attention to this problem. The World Health Organisation in 1997 initiated the Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women. The initiative was conducted in the following countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, Japan, Namibia, Peru, Samoa, Serbia and Montenegro, Thailand, and the United Republic of Tanzania to study violence against women.<sup>1</sup>The diverse cultures of these countries allowed for a broad, more objective view into the subject matter. It is safe to say the results can be inferred to Nigeria, given that three of the countries-Ethiopia, Namibia and Tanzania are in sub-Saharan Africa. In the study, it was found that:

- Between 15% of women in Japan and 70% of

women in Ethiopia and Peru reported physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner;

- Between 0.3–11.5% of women reported experiencing sexual violence by a non-partner;
- The first sexual experience for many women was reported as forced – 24% in rural Peru, 28% in Tanzania, 30% in rural Bangladesh, and 40% in South Africa.<sup>1,2</sup>

The study however did not include a form of violence against the girl-child which is especially rife in Southern Nigeria: female genital mutilation which is the cutting of the external female genitalia (either partial or total) for non-medical and cultural reasons. Prior to studies such as this, violence against women was considered to be a minor social problem. The impact of studies such as this has changed the view on violence against women: it is now considered to be a grave violation of human rights and a public health problem which concerns us all. In our own complex society Nigeria, not much attention is being paid to this grave phenomenon; the little attention is from media houses, not relevant government bodies. There is a dearth of material documenting the prevalence,

predisposing factors and consequences of this phenomenon. The insensitivity in our governance is evidenced in the Criminal Code Act of Southern Nigeria where the penalty for indecent assault against a woman is less than for violence against a man.<sup>3,4</sup>

## DEFINITIONS

The United Nations General Assembly defines "violence against women" as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."<sup>2</sup> The 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women noted that this violence could be perpetrated by assailants of either gender, family members and even the "State" itself.<sup>5</sup>

Engendering healthcare involves a gender focused approach by healthcare professionals to providing healthcare. It involves paying special attention to the individual's sexual and reproductive rights.

## TYPES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against women is varied in the nature of its manifestation and includes the following:

- Intimate partner violence (domestic violence): refers to behaviour in an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours.<sup>2</sup>
- Sexual violence: is any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting.<sup>2</sup> This includes rape.
- Female genital mutilation: Female genital mutilation is the removal of part or all of the external female genitalia.<sup>6</sup>

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is involved in most of the international programmes aimed at eliminating gender-based violence, such as:

- The International Conference of Population and Development (Cairo, 1994)
- The Beijing Declaration made at the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995)
- The African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (Banjul Charter) in 1986<sup>7</sup>

Despite these, all available crude indicators point to

the fact that violence against women is pervasive. As earlier said, there is a dearth of material documenting the nature and effects of this phenomenon in Nigeria. This is the foremost of issues that hinders attempts at eradicating violence against women. There is insufficient data as to how pervasive the phenomenon is, the factors that predispose women to suffering gender-based violence, and the effects of these acts. Therefore we do not know the extent to which this phenomenon has affected our society.

Ours is a patriarchal society which has been unfair to the rights of the woman. However, the fourth chapter of our constitution states that men and women have the same fundamental human rights. There are certain things that undermine that declaration. Things such as our peculiar situation in which in the Criminal Code Act (CCA) of Southern Nigeria, the penalty for indecent assault against a man is higher than that for a woman:

"Any person who unlawfully and indecently assaults any male person is guilty of a felony, and is liable to imprisonment for three years." (Section 353)

"Any person who unlawfully and indecently assaults a woman or girl is guilty of a misdemeanour, and is liable to imprisonment for two years." (Section 360)<sup>4</sup>

The Section 55 of the Northern Nigeria Penal Code (PC) allows for chastisement of the wife by her husband. Also, the Criminal Justice System is not protective of women victims of sexual offences.<sup>4</sup> This has given rise to low reporting and prosecution of sexual offences. Issues like this are accepted as normal, or a lot of noise made and no action is taken. They are shoved under the carpet and rarely become serious issues demanding immediate attention. So the many women affected suffer in silence.

Given the prevailing conditions, non-governmental organisations have become responsible for most of the little that has been done to stem the tide of this phenomenon.

## FACTORS PREDISPOSING WOMEN TO VIOLENCE

Factors have been identified which increase the risk of menperpetrating violent acts against women, and the risk of women suffering violence at the hands of men:

- Lower levels of education
- Exposure to child maltreatment
- Witnessing parental violence
- Harmful use of alcohol
- Attitudes that are accepting of violence.
- The unequal position of women relative to men and the normative use of violence to resolve conflicts are strongly associated with both

intimate partner violence and sexual violence by any perpetrator.<sup>1,2,8,9</sup>

These risk factors are replete in Nigeria; making it all the more certain that a good amount of Nigerian women have suffered and are still suffering gender-targeted violence at the hands of other people.

### EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The effects of violence against women are severe and diverse; there are direct effects on the victims such as physical and mental problems, and indirect consequences on children who grow up in such homes.

There exist various forms of immediate injury (wounds, fractures), headaches, back pain, abdominal pain, fibromyalgia, gastrointestinal disorders, limited mobility and poor overall health. The mental effects are significant, and include: depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders and suicide attempts.<sup>1,2,10</sup> UNICEF reports that a close correlation has been established between domestic violence and suicide based on studies in the United States, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Peru, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Suicide is 12 times as likely to have been attempted by a woman who has been abused than by one who has not.<sup>8</sup> The woman is also more likely to be involved in substance abuse.

Children who grow up in homes where gender-targeted violence occurs are predisposed to substance abuse in later life, and are likely to be perpetrators or victims later on.

### ROLE OF HEALTH WORKERS IN MANAGING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Healthcare providers have a big part to play in the management of violence against women. Though many have not received special training on measures involved in handling violence against women, there are certain basics that health workers should be able to do:

- First, “do no harm”. Unsympathetic or victim-blaming attitudes can reinforce isolation and self-blame, undermine women's self-confidence, and make it less likely that women will reach out for help.
- Be attentive to possible symptoms and signs of abuse and follow up on them
- Where feasible, routinely ask all clients about their experiences of abuse as part of normal history taking.
- Provide appropriate medical care and document in the client's medical records instances of abuse, including details of the perpetrator.
- Refer patients to available community

resources.

- Maintain the privacy and confidentiality of client information and records.<sup>11</sup>

### RECOMMENDATION

While there are efforts aimed at helping suffering women and eradicating violence against women, more can be done:

- A study with a nation-wide scope should be conducted so we can know the magnitude of the problem.
- Public education on the negativity of violence against women. Also, special attention should be paid to the education of the girl-child, and economic empowerment of the woman.
- Availability and accessibility of help services for women who have been abused.
- Laws should be enacted to protect women against violence, and punish perpetrators.

All these are achievable only if there is political will on the part of policy makers in the government. Violence against women should not be the norm, but should become an abomination.

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