

**THE SPIRALLING INCIDENTS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA DURING
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ERA: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
(2000-2020)**

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria adversely influenced the rising incidents of gender-based violence in the country. Several cases of violence perpetrated against the females by their male partners. Obviously, these left the females in terrible physical and emotional traumas, plus severe physical, psychological and mental injuries. Affected victims suffered emotional stress disorders and torturous mental agonies caused by rape, sexual assault, forceful trafficking, physical assault, kidnap for ransom, subjection to slavish conditions, denial of legitimate rights and child labour. These reports placed Nigeria on the dark pages of history and spoke volumes about the need to protect the rights of females. Thus, this paper examines the key negative impact which gender-based violence made on the development of Nigeria. In doing this, the qualitative method was adopted.

Keywords: Covid-19, Development, Era, Female, Gender-based, Implications, Violence

Introduction

Within the last two decades, incidents of gender-based violence have been recorded in Nigeria. During the period, damning reports of violence against the females emerged from different states. Without respect for the dignity of the female person, perpetrators operated with impunity, violated the rights of the females, inflicted severe bodily and psychological injuries, and exposed the lives of victims to risks of agonizing deaths. Affected victims were exposed to complicated health challenges, with the effect that chances of survival and ability to live independently became challenging. Consequently, victims' opportunities of maturing into economically relevant citizens who possess the capacity to contribute to national development become truncated (Okeke, 1989).

Violence against female citizens of Nigeria damages the good image of Nigeria. It has grown so viral that the dignity of womanhood in the country seems dangerously threatened. The situation has become so bad that female children in some families are denied the proper care, attention and love they deserve. The intention is to demean their relevance at family and community levels. Unfortunately, these inhuman activities perpetrated by the males amount to acts of savagery and exploitation intended to undermine the relevance and irreplaceability of the females. This leads Ojo and Ayesoro (2014) to argue that there is no humanly justifiable rationale for the perpetration of acts of violence against women and girls in Nigeria and elsewhere.

Incidentally, cases of rape, murder, sexual exploitation, battering of females, human trafficking, forced prostitution and female genital mutilation were recorded in large numbers in Nigeria during the Covid-19 pandemic era. Cases of discrimination and abuse in work places, sexual harassment in schools, discrimination in medical care delivery services in some healthcare facilities, denial of educational

rights, forced labour against girl-children, deployment of hunger and starvation against widows, maltreatment of widows, denial of property rights, cultural prejudice against female children, cultures of gender preference, and the abortion of female foetuses often made headline news. These impede the educational development of the females in Nigeria and weaken their economic relevance (Okeke, 1989; Stromquist, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Omolewa, 2001; FRN, 2014).

Gender-based violence is not new in Nigeria. It has been here since the days of Adam and Eve. Culturally endowed with power and authority, the males exert excessive patriarchal powers over the females. In order to place the females under their control, forms of violence are meted out. Literally armed with the powers of “life and death,” the females are placed at the receiving ends of the male chauvinistic authoritarianism and become reluctant victims. Abandoned at such miserable positions, the females become marginalized, maltreated, denied equal rights, abused with impunity, subjected to states of powerlessness, and forced to remain voiceless (Okeke, 1989; Stromquist, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000).

Regrettably, the perpetrators of violence lack remorse and compassion. They are inhuman. For them, the females are weak and inferior. The males are people of power and authority. The females are powerless and voiceless and should only be seen. Their opinions on family and community matters are of no consequence. The females should remain silent and let the males represent their opinions. Based on these misconceptions, the males wrongfully violate and disrespect the females. In their own thinking, male supremacy over the females must never be maintained at all costs (Okeke, 1989; UNICEF, 1990; UNICEF, 1992; Thompson, 2012).

There is urgent need for change of attitudes among the males in Nigeria. They should begin to accommodate, respect and sincerely appreciate their female partners and relations. Females’ legitimate rights and welfare in the society must be protected and sincerely respected. The males should begin to appreciate the huge natural endowments God built into the females, respect their dignity, support them with lucrative skills and provide them wider opportunities to acquire quality education (Osokoya, 2015; Dimonye, Iwunna, Okoro, & Ezeh, 2021).

Unfortunately, incidents of gender-based violence went higher rampant during the Covid-19 pandemic era in Nigeria. There were shocking reports of dangerous acts of violence and abuse against the females. Within the period, several under-aged children were violently raped. Children as young as a few months were never spared. Elderly women too suffered rape. Primary school girls, university undergraduates and even mentally challenged women were raped too. The sad incident of the kidnap of 276 young girls in Chibok, Borno State since 2017 presents a clear testament. Worst scenario was that some men stabbed their wives to death during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic era. Also, there were cases of men who violently raped their own daughters, sisters, cousins, and nephews (Okeke, 1989; WHO, 2008; Akintunde, 2009; Thompson, 2012; Makinde, Odimegwu, Abdulmalik, Babalola, Fawole, 2016; Ani, 2017).

The bottom line is that the world never remained the same again since the Covid-19 pandemic era. Normal human activities all over the globe got disrupted. Business activities got truncated. Air travels were banned globally, while restriction orders were imposed on local travels. Normal economic activities ceased. Companies, factories, employment agencies, public departments and the private sector closed shops as “stay at homes orders” were introduced. People were ordered to avoid all public gatherings. Consequently, a number of “new normals” which impacted hygienic healthcare were introduced globally (Achebe, 1958; Nkwocha, Iwunna, Njoku, & Ujah, 2021).

Without doubt, the increased gender-based violence in Nigeria could be as a consequence of the prolonged stay-at-home order. Consequently, vindictive daddies, brothers, uncles, and nephews went violent against defenceless females. Forced to stay indoors indefinitely, barred from going to work, restricted from visiting friends and relations unnecessarily, disallowed from attending public functions,

and compelled to adapt to the “new normals,” shot the incidents of gender-based violence upwards. Sadly, as at March, 2020, about 346 cases of gender-based violence were recorded already. The 1st part of April, 2020, records 794 cases of abuse of the females, representing 56% of the population within the 1st two weeks of the lockdown in Nigeria (Data on gender-based violence cases in Nigeria, 2021). It is against this background that the blame falls on the males for most acts of violence against the females. The fact is that the males constitute the major perpetrators of these acts of violence against the females. Guilty of these crimes too are churchmen who pirate themselves as spiritual shepherds, but molest their flock shamelessly. Without doubt, violence against the females literally kills the ego and dignity of affected victims, and weaken their economic relevance.

Gender-based Violence as Global Phenomenon

Violence against the females is a global phenomenon, which took a catastrophic dimension since the Covid-19 era when all normal human activities were forced to adapt to some “new normals.” The intention was to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 virus, most especially as the virus needed an infected and available patient to spread around (Afolabi, 2020; Nkwocha, et al, 2021).

Globally, the culture of male dominance is seems prominent most especially among developing nations. Among such nations, the use of excessive patriarchal powers, suppression female voices, rights, feelings, and concerns are predominant. Using the tool of religion, cultures and societal opinions, the males suppress their female counterparts. Largely, the males perpetrate violence against the females in an attempt to subject them into submission to the powers of patriarchy and authoritarianism. During the Covid-19 pandemic period, there was hardly any nation in the world where there were no gory cases of rape, kidnapping of females, wife battering, physical assault, drug abuse, trafficking of female victims, denial of rights, ritual killings, child labour, and unlawful exposure to life-threatening bodily injuries against the females (Onuoha, 2010; Asishana, 2020; Adeoluwa, 2020).

In Nigeria, the Boko Haram terrorist group kidnapped countless numbers of victims, majority of who were females. The atrocious activities of this dangerous group led to the untimely death, maiming, and decapitation of victims under their captivity within and outside Nigeria. Through their nefarious trans-border activities communities, most especially the northern areas of the country were internally displaced and exposed to life-threatening risks. Innocent residents were kidnapped for ransom, recklessly raped, killed in their farms, chased away from their homes and forced to abandon their properties. Sadly, “Boko Haram has unleashed violence on people through guerrilla warfare, suicide bombings, assassinations and kidnappings.” Sadly too, between 2009 and 2014, the group conducted 1301 attacks, killed 10,794 persons, wounded 3575 others, and displaced millions of persons from their homes (Azom, & Okoli, 2016).

Elsewhere, similar incidents occurred too. Gory news of violence, marginalization, sexual abuse, and denial of the legitimate rights of females were observed. In some Islamic nations, the females are denied their legitimate rights to attain education. Rather, they are given out in early marriage and forced to marry older men. Among such nations, which include Afghanistan, for instance, female children are often sexually harassed, exploited, drugged and forcefully trafficked out of their own communities (Okeke, 1989; Ojo, & Ayesoro, 2014).

Similarly too, there are constant report of violence against females, rampant sexual abuse, forceful withdrawal of from schools, restriction of the movement and subjection the females to forced labour. These acts of violence have been reported in countries such as Afghanistan which is currently under the government of the Taliban, Pakistan, Chad, Niger, Cameroun, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and Syria, among others, where terrorist groups such as Al-Qa’ida, Ansaru, Al-Shabaab, Ansar Al-Dine and ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) are in charge. Under the intoxication of adulterated religious doctrines and faith

practices, perpetrators create enough reasons to remain violent in order to undermine the natural relevance of females. Consequently, these radicalized agents of mayhem exacerbate aggressive violence against the females in order to make them feel unwanted, rejected, powerless, and marginalized (Onuoha, 2016).

With these, it is remarkable that violence against the females is heinous, demeaning, and inexcusable. Affected victims are unfairly treated, marginalized, maltreated, molested, and unduly suppressed. These cannot be allowed to go endlessly. It is appropriate that there should be a change of attitude towards the females who deserve our protection, respect, and genuine appreciation as irreplaceable partners in the development of our world.

Impact on Nigeria's Development

This segment shall be harmonized as follows:

Increased Female Illiteracy

Withdrawn from school and denied access to education amount to severe marginalization against the females in Nigeria. Usually, these deplorable attitudes against the females by their families and communities impede their chances of attaining quality education in the country's educational establishments. Kept out of schools, disallowed from enrolling into schools like their male counterparts, pushes the illiteracy levels among the females higher. As illiterates, they lack access to lucrative skills, unable to read and write and incapable of securing lucrative employment opportunities. These negatively impact their chances of living fulfilled and self-reliant lives.

Regrettably, latest statistics claim that 38% of illiterates in Nigeria are girls. This development affects their chances of emerging strongly as economic giants. Under such despicable conditions, they become un-empowered, disadvantaged, and disenfranchised from contributing effectively to national development. Based on these stereotypes, Nigeria's figures of female unemployment indexes climb higher by the day (Okeke, 1989; UNICEF, 1992; Onuoha, 2010; Iwunna, Dimonye, Okoro, & Njoku, 2020; Nigeria Television Authority, 2021).

Premature Deaths of Females

The pains and injuries suffered by females as a consequence of male-orchestrated violence often resulted to untimely and unfortunate deaths of victims. Owing to the gravity of such injuries, female victims suffer premature deaths. Countless female victims have been maimed and permanently handicapped. Owing to these unjustifiable atrocities affected female victims suffered permanent mental injuries, virginal perforations and severe damage to their private parts. For instance, incidents of gang rape were reported in some communities recently. The physical assault on female persons by their husbands, brothers, uncles, and cousins and the undue subjection of female persons to some inhuman conditions on the deaths of their spouses speak volumes (Okeke, 1989; Asishana, 2020; Iwunna, Dimonye, Okoro, & Njoku, 2020).

These explain the deep pains and psychological traumas female victims of gender-based violence pass through in life. The fact remains that there are no justifiable reasons for the perpetration of violent acts. No one can imagine the amount of pains suffered by a little baby who is wickedly raped by an adult male. What of the excruciating virginal injuries suffered by a female whose sensitive organs is forcefully perforated with some sharp objects by faceless rapists? The truth is that rape is an unimaginable crime. Rapists are criminals whose activities send several women to their early graves. They deserve full punishment under the laws of the land (Okeke, 1989; UNICEF, 1992).

Lack of Access to Skills

Generally, violence against the females militates against their chances of acquiring skills. Unduly subdued and denied access to basic education, their chances of acquiring lucrative skills get reduced. Faced with such despicable situations, chances of earning good incomes elude them and often into lives of economic dependence on the generosity of relatives for survival. At that, ability to enjoy a healthy and independent life becomes illusive. Ability to navigate the challenges of life becomes highly herculean. With no skills at hand, affected female victims eventually succumb to the pressures of becoming an economic nuisance to the family, and a heavy burden to the family and community. In such a miserable situation affected female victims suffer severe injustice in the hands of their family and relations. As a caution however, the UNICEF (1992) strongly advises that “educating girls is one of the wisest investments for a society.” Among others, it empowers them with skills and improves their economic relevance in the community.

Forced Enslavement and Trafficking

Violence against the females is also replicated in the forms of forced enslavement and trafficking of victims against their will. Forced to work in slave labour camps, operate as sex workers, or forcefully trafficked amount to horrible injustice and violence. They are condemnable acts of denial of rights. Such atrocities demean the dignity of the females, undermine their huge potentials as pillars of community development, and dampen their abilities to influence national development. Trafficked out of the country and forced to work under some inhuman conditions, their chances of making routine remittances to Nigeria are lost. Same time, contributing to the infrastructural development of their local communities become unrealistic (Irobi, 2015).

The indication is that their traffickers syphon and withhold their earnings permanently, deny them of their legitimate rights to work with dignity, and consequently make life unbearable for them. Thus, the miserable conditions Nigerian girls who are victims of trafficking syndicates endure in foreign lands in the present times have become issues of great concern to the Nigerian government in her efforts to eliminate human trafficking among Nigerians, some of who have been convicted of this offence in some overseas nations (Thompson, 2012).

Increased Criminality among Females

Increased criminality among the female populations of Nigeria constitutes another major constraint created as a consequence of violence against the females. Consequent upon being subjected to the harsh realities of male-orchestrated violence in the hands of persons who are supposed to offer them protection, solace, comfort, and security, the females feel betrayed, let down, abandoned, and feel unwanted. Owing to their inaccessibility to brighter opportunities of acquiring lucrative skills, they feel rejected and unrecognized.

In an attempt to escape hunger, unemployment and poverty and be able to take care of their basic needs, affected females engage in criminal activities, such as prostitution, human trafficking and stealing. Others engage in drug abuse, kidnapping for ransom, cultism and other related crimes. Some operate illegal “baby factories” where young pregnant girls are impregnated and cared for, after which the babies are harvested and sold to waiting buyers at some huge prices. Because of the pains of the violence meted out to them, affected female victims easily enrol themselves into criminal gangs with the offer of cash, gifts, and other incentives which their families, communities and government never provided. It is important then that the government wakes up to her responsibilities of providing useful welfare packages, lucrative skills opportunities and training programmes for unemployed Nigerians in order to pull them away from the life of criminality and violence (Okeke, 1989; Onuoha, 2010).

Denial of Fundamental Human Rights

Violence against the females denies them of their legitimate rights. Whenever any female in this country is debarred from enjoying school education as approved by Nigeria's Constitution, her fundamental human rights are violated. Rights as a citizen have been denied. Similarly, whenever a female person is dangerously maltreated and subjected to inhuman conditions, such an activity amounts to an infringement of fundamental human rights.

Thus, whenever a female suffers premature marriage, recklessly abused, raped, trafficked without her consent, forced into prostitution, or enslaved under any guises, cases of human rights infringement are obvious. Thus, those gender blind traditional practices which ignore the feelings of the females, trample on their rights to healthy life, and subject them to the excessive powers of the males amount to human rights infringements. These include female virginal mutilations, harsh widowhood rites, denial of property rights, as well as the culture of male-preference perpetrated in some families (Nzeadibe, 2015; Aikipitanyi, Luqman, Oliha, & Adesiyan, 2019).

Summary

This paper has attempted to underpin the fact that there were severe incidents of violence against the females in Nigeria during the Covid-19 pandemic era. Perpetrated along gender lines, the violent activities attempted to undermine the dignity and relevance of Nigeria's female. Such dangerous activities caused severe psychological, physical, and mental injuries and even resulted to death in some cases. Violence against any human person is a huge crime against humanity, and punishable under the law. Therefore, any acts of gender-based violence against Nigeria's *female populations anywhere in the country should be investigated thoroughly, while* perpetrators should be held accountable. Thus, all forms of violence against women and girls should be discouraged with impunity.

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