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Domestic Violence in Nigeria

Domestic violence in Nigeria is a problem in many parts of Africa. There is a deep cultural belief in Nigeria that it is socially acceptable to hit a woman to discipline a spouse. Domestic violence is widespread and shows no signs of lessening in Nigeria. The CLEEN foundation reports 1 in every three respondents admitting to being a victim of domestic violence. The survey also found a nationwide increase in domestic violence in the past three years from 21% in 2011 to 30% in 2013. The CLEEN foundation’s 2012 National crime and safety survey demonstrated that 31% of national sample confessed to being victims of domestic violence.

Although most domestic violence is carried out by men against women, men also suffer abuse by women and domestic violence is equally common in same-sex relationships. Domestic abuse also includes forced marriage, female genital mutilation, so-called ‘honor’ based abuse and abuse of elderly family members. The vast majority of domestic violence defendants are first time offenders who have never been arrested before and are facing their first blush with criminal justice system. Although it may seem very confusing frustrating and stressful to go through the process most cases end with dismissal of all charges.

Domestic violence takes many forms including: physical, sexual, emotional and mental. Traditionally, domestic violence is committed against females. Common forms of violence against women in Nigeria are; rape. Acid attacks, molestation, wife beating and corporal punishment. The Nigerian government has taken legal proceedings to prosecute men who abuse women in several states. There is currently a push in Nigeria for federal laws concerning domestic violence and for a stronger national response and support for domestic violence issues.

Women often face physical violence at the hands off their family members. The most common forms of physical violence include; slap, rape, murder and kicking. Some of the reasons that were given for physical abuse include their husbands being drunk, financial issues, and rejection of a partner’s sexual advances. Relationship inequality is also a strong indicator of physical violence. High levels of wife beating occur when the woman is making money than her husband or partner is. This has been attributed to the lack of control the male partner feels within the relationship. Women also often link the perpetration of physical violence with husbands who are very controlling. Women who justify wife beating are more likely to be victims of physical violence. Another form of violence which has received a lot of recent attention in Nigeria is acid baths. Acid baths are actions of violence where the perpetrator throws acid onto his or her victim’s body, resulting in disfigurement and possible loss of eyesight. Acid baths are a large issue for women that need to be addressed. In 1990, a former beauty queen rejected her boyfriend’s attempts to rekindle their relationship. In retaliation, he threw acid on her face.

Sexual violence in Nigeria largely goes unreported because of the burden of proof necessary for conviction as well as the social stigma it brings. The Nigerian police have not been seen to arrest for sexual assault resulting in less reporting of facts. About 25% of women reported forced sex at hands of either their current partner or a former partner or some random stranger. The 2008 demographic and health survey showed that over 30.5% of married women have experienced at least one or more forms of physical, emotional or sexual violence in their marriage.

The social context of violence in Nigeria based largely on its patriarchal society. Violence against a wife is seen as a tool that husband uses to chastise his wife and to improve her. The common loss of women’s rights upon marriage in sub-sahara Africa and the implicit obedience and deference towards men is socially encouraged within their society.

Factors linked with domestic violence are; lower socioeconomic classes, substance abuse, couple age disparity and unemployment. Another cause is infertility. When looking at the study taken by infertile women visiting a fertility clinic, many women reported some form of domestic violence, whether physical, mental or emotional.

The perceptions of domestic violence vary based on religion, and class. For example, the Tiv view beating as a sign of love that should be encouraged as evidence with the statement, ”if you are not beaten by your husband then you do not know the joy of marriage and that means you are not yet married. All the ethnic groups in Nigeria have strong patriarchal societal structure that lead to the justification of domestic violence. However, the Hausa are more supportive of domestic violence and viewing it as an inherent right of a husband. There are differences in the perceptions of domestic violence varying across reasons. There are higher numbers, for instance, neglecting the child or going out without the husband permission and less the refusal of sex or a mere argument. Many of the reasons that are viewed as acceptable for domestic violence are largely subjective to a husband’s interpretation. For example, common acceptable beatings among men are lack of respect for husband, stubbornness, imposition of will on husband and failure of wifely duties.

Women experiencing domestic violence have varying responses and difference in who they report their abuse to. In a study done in Illorin, Nigeria, a large number of women reported their abuse to family and friends, while not many decided to go to the police to file a report. The rationale behind not going to the police is various such as the fear of victim-blaming, acceptance of violence as proper reaction and the lack of police action. One major issue facing the domestic violence issues in Nigeria are the tendency for low reported rates. A study looking at domestic violence in southwest Nigeria found that only 18.6% reported experienced or acted violence between themselves and their spouse. However, the same study shows that 60% of respondents claimed to have witnessed violence between separate couple. These statistics show that there may be tendency for underreporting which can occur for various reasons.

While domestic violence is a violation of fundamental human right, which the Nigerian constitution is against, there are still provisions that make it legal to engage in domestic violence against women. The provision of the penal code applicable in northern Nigeria specifically encourages violence against women. Underneath its provisions, the beating of a wife for correction is legal by use of (section 55(1)(D) of the penal code). In May 2013, Nigerian’s National Assembly passed a bill to reduce gender-based violence, which is awaiting senate approval before it becomes a law. The violence against persons bill gave harsher punishments for sexual violence and also provided support and measures such as restraining order to prevent the continuation of abuse.

In conclusion, domestic violence, can be defined as all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic abuse, that may be committed by a family member or intimate partner. Therefore, this act must be stopped and those found guilty should be punished according to the law.

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