

Violence Against Women in Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality of Nigeria: Challenges for Gender Equity and Development

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Abstract

One of the major concerns of political leaders in the world today is peace building especially where the absence of peace affects mostly the women and children. Despite the various efforts at engendering peace at all levels of the society, gender-based violence occurs in all societies of the world; within the home or in the wider community and it affects women and girls disproportionately. This paper discusses gender-based violence in Ikwerre ethnic nationality, Rivers State, Nigeria and suggests strategies for countering cultural (patriarchal) excuses for gender based violence in Ikwerre ethnic nationality.

Key words: Violent; Women; Ikwerre; Gender equity; Development

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INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is a term collectively used to refer to violent acts that are primarily or exclusively committed against women basically because of their gender. United Nation General Assembly defines violence against women as “acts or gender based violence that result in physical suffering to women, including threat of such acts coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether accruing in public or private life” (Report of the

fourth world conference on women /A/51/322). Cutterman (1991), in his view, states that it is economical, physical, social/mental suffering imposed on women by their gender counterpart, culturally based biases and stereotyping of women” All these are violation of the fundamental human rights of women. Gender-based violence affects millions of women all over the world irrespective of their location, educational, social and economic status and this in turn affect their productivity both in the homes, communities and places of work.

There are different types of gender-based violence, which occur at different levels such as the family, community, local government and state. Domestic violence is the most prevalent form of gender-based violence and this occurs mostly within the families and inside the homes. According to Eze, Olisa and Onunwa in Adekola and Falase (2006) women facing domestic violence often suffer physical and psychological consequences which usually affect their behavior and productivity. Adekola and Falase (2006) also revealed that domestic violence negatively correlates with women participation in community development. Violence against women within the general communities in Ikwerre ethnic nationality include battery, rape, sexual assault, forced treatment and the exploitation and commercialization of women’s bodies. The social exclusion of women in some parts of the Ikwerre ethnic nationality is also a form of violence.

Violence against women is one of the twelve critical areas of concern identified in the Platform for Action (PFA) on Women at the Beijing Conference in September 1995. In a statement to the Fourth World Conference on Women in that year, the United Nations Secretary General, Boutros. Boutros Ghali, observed that violence against women is a universal problem that must be universally condemned as it would be difficult to find one woman, whom at one time or the other in her lifetime, had not been afraid merely because she is a woman. For instance,

Adekola, Oyebamiji and Ugwu (2009) noted that girls are usually the first to be withdrawn from school whenever the family suffers financial depression. This is based on nothing else except their gender. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that at least one in every five of the world's female population has been physically or sexually abused at some time (Population Reference Bureau, 2001).

Women who are particularly vulnerable to violence are those who live in extremely precarious conditions or who are discriminated against on the basis of race, language, ethnic group, culture, age, opinion, religion, socio-economic status or membership of a minority group. The World March of Women (2000), also include in the list of those that are affected by gender-based violence; women who are displaced, migrants, refugees or those living under foreign occupation.

Gender-based violence arises from the patriarchal system which since immemorial, has exerted control over women's lives (World March of Women, 2000). As in other African nations, the culture of the Ikwerre people of Rivers State, Nigeria demands that women must be controlled by men and those women must succumb to the authority of men especially those of their husbands and senior family members. Gender-based violence affects both the physical and psychological integrity of women. However subtle the violence may be, it has no less devastating effect. Gender-based violence in Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality is not different as it affects the women psychological, cognitive, and inter-personal disposition.

Violence against women in Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality is embedded in many cultures like in other parts of the world. Data from South America and China gave further evidence that wife battery is wide spread and is associated with depression and suicide (Bergman & Brismar, 1991). According to reports in Development Gateway (2008), 60% of women in Bagladesh and Srilanka, 37% in India, 80% in Pakistan and 50% in Afghanistan live with daily abuses by their intimate partners within their own homes.

Some forms of domestic violence in Ikwerre ethnic nationality include the following: intimate murder, acid bath, incest, widow abuse, child abuse, dowry death, emotional and verbal abuse, marital rape and battering among others. When a woman receives serious physical harm, she will be unable to cope with her daily activities and in the case of death, she leaves the children motherless there by exposing them to the trauma of being looked after by their aged grandmother, aunties and in some cases by their step-mothers, if their father is arrested by the long arms of the law. In addition, physical and sexual abuse by a partner is closely associated with injuries.

Violence against women in Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality of Rivers State has shown to have serious effects on women health and social lives. However, due to cultural beliefs, many women do not report such cases of abuse. The reasons for this vary from clan to clan and from one

ethnic nationality to another. For instance, in most customs, it is believed that a woman is the husband's property and as such, must be submissive to the point of not reporting her husband on any act of violence directed against her to anybody or she will be blamed for it (Nwagbara, 2010). Again, most Ikwerre women due to illiteracy associated with ignorance are unaware that domestic violence against them should not be accepted as a norm. Also, those who may wish to report such cases of violence against them are ignorant of organizations they can report to or where they can seek assistance. In the view of Antai and Antai (2008) Nigerian rural women are conservative and are described as the bed rock of the traditional societies. However, in Ikwerreland, gender-based violence is on the increase and it is affecting the productivity level of women, their perception and participation in political and developmental programmes. This paper therefore examines institutional mechanisms that can be used to sensitize women on the danger of gender-based violence and how to evolve modalities for preventing it.

1. THE IKWERRE ETHNIC NATIONALITY

The Ikwerre ethnic nationality is one of the major tribes in Rivers State of Nigeria. Other ethnic nationalities in the state are the Ogonis, the Etches, the Kalabaris and the Okrikas. The Ikwerre people are the majority in terms of population and they control four out of the twenty-three local governments in Rivers State. Specifically, the Ikwerre ethnic nationality owns Port Harcourt City, Obio/Akpor, Ikwerre and Emohua local government areas.

Rivers State can be broadly divided into two areas: The Riverine and the upland. The Ikwerre people occupy majority of the space in upland and this gives them opportunity to be urbanized. The Ikwerres are predominantly farmers and because of their urbanized nature they also engage in trading and artisan works. Also, the Ikwerre communities are relatively developed with educational institutions including two universities located in Obio/Akpor local government.

However, urbanization had gotten little effects on the culture of the Ikwerre people especially those that have to do with the status of women in the society. The culture of the Ikwerres is patriarchal in nature and believed that women should succumb to the authority of men. They also believed that married women are part of the properties of the husband and can be used anyhow or be disposed off when they are becoming uncooperative. The culture negatively discriminates against women; women in Ikwerreland cannot take chieftaincy title and cannot be palace chief. In family and community matters, women can only be seen but not heard. There are even aspects of the traditional festival where women cannot participate. This patriarchal nature of the culture of the Ikwerre people has promoted gender imbalance and made the women to see themselves as inferior to the men. On the side of the men,

the patriarchal nature of the culture of the Ikwerre people has made them to develop a master-servant relationship with the womenfolk and promote gender based violence with women at the receiving end.

2. CAUSES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In Ikwerreland, the causes of domestic violence are many and vary from one Local Government to another and from one clan or Kingdom to another. However, the causes can be summarised as:

(i) Traditional Practices:

The traditional attitudes of Ikwerremen toward women help to perpetuate violence. Stereotype roles in which women are seen as subordinate to men constrains women's abilities to exercise their choices that would enable them to end the abuses.

(ii) Financial Insecurity:

Financial insecurity among Ikwerremen is another contributing factor to gender-based violence Njenga (1999, p.6) commented that:

If a man cannot establish his authority intellectually or economically, he would tend to do so physically. Another cause is the image created by the society which portrays a man as being strong, educated, creative and clever while a woman is the opposite of all these traits. The way parents bring up their children, which create disparity between boys and girls, also is a source of gender-based violence in later life. When a boy grows up, knowing that he is not supposed to wash his own clothes, cook or help in the house, if he grows up and gets married to a woman who comes from a home where duties are shared equally between girls and boys this can create tension that often lead to violence.

(iii) Childlessness:

Some men are not at peace with their wives because they are barren or childless. They beat them at the slightest provocation. Sometimes, they verbal abuses on them calling them childless and threatening to return them to their parents. Closely related to childlessness is the issue of women with only female children. Ikwerremen and indeed Rivers State people in general attach much importance to male children, viewed against this backdrop; the women who find themselves in this condition do not often enjoy peace in their matrimonial homes. The cause of the frequent births of female children are not theirs, but most men, literate and illiterate live negatively with their spouses as if the latter are responsible for those happenings (Mendie, 2009; Okon, 2009; In Akpan, 2011).

(iv) Frustration on the Part of the Spouse

The loss of employment by men and consequent

inability to cope with the harsh social and economic changes of tends to push many men into alcoholism and drug addiction. When drunk, they tend to lose self-control, hence to aggression (Mendie, 2009).

(v) Crowded Residence:

Njenga (1999) posited that one of the causes of gender-based violence is the space people live. To him, the more crowded people are the more domestic violence there is likely to be. Njenga concluded that poverty, which also determines where and how a person lives is a contributing factor in violence against women.

Other causes of domestic violence include dwindled love relationship, nagging on the part of the woman, infidelity, impotency of the man, etc..

3. LEVELS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

There are three levels of gender-based violence. These are the home or family level, the community level and the state level.

3.1 Violence Within the Home

Domestic violence is the most prevalent form of gender-based violence. It typically occurs when a man beats/bullies his female partner. Psychological abuse always accompanies physical abuse and majority of women abused by their partners are abused many times. Physical, sexual and psychological violence against women within a couple and in the family consists of battery, sexual abuse, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women and girls, marital rape, dowry-related violence, incest, non spousal violence like a son's violence against his mother and violence related to exploitation and deprivation of freedom. Population Reference Bureau (2000) reports Murray and Richards finding of 1986 that in the United States, more than a million and half women are beaten by their partners each year. It also reported that in 1995, Egypt Democratic and Health Survey, 35 Percent of women was reported being beaten by their husbands during marriage. However, there is no accurate information on gender based violence in Ikwerre Ethnic nationality. A culture of silence surrounds cases of violence against women in most kingdoms in Rivers State, making it difficult to get a true picture of its extent. One of the reasons for difficulty in getting accurate account is that most gender based violence occur in the private sphere.

3.2 Violence Against Women Within the General Community

Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community include battery, rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment and intimidation at school or

work, widowhood practice, forced treatments and abusive medication, the exploitation and commercialization of women's bodies which is related to increased poverty that is mainly a result of unbridled economic liberalism. These types of violence occurring within the general community also include contraception imposed on women by constraints or force, forced sterilization or abortions, selective abortion of female foetus and female infanticide (World March of Women, 2000).

3.3 Violence Against Women Perpetrated by the State

Physical, sexual and psychological violence are too often perpetrated or tolerated by states that prioritize custom over respect for fundamental freedom. In some countries, the rise of religious fundamentalism is extremely disturbing as regards women's right to their economic autonomy and their freedom of choice. The social exclusion of women is so great that it constitutes a new form of apartheid. Women are considered second class beings, or lesser value, deprived of their fundamental rights. Violence against women is also exercised as a weapon of war in situations of armed conflict. It has many forms including murder, rape, sexual slavery, hostage taking and forced pregnancy (World March of Women, 2000).

Coomeraswamy cited in Salami (2000), identified some additional violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms such as the trafficking in women and girls for sex trade, forced prostitutions, rape, sexual abuse and sex tourism that have become the focus of internationally organized crimes.

4. EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN IKWERRE ETHNIC NATIONALITY

Most often, discussions on violence against women are centred on domestic violence. This is because of the serious negative effects it has on the recipients and the society at large. Domestic violence in Ikwerre land like elsewhere in the world demeans the humanity of womanhood makes wife or spouse lose self-confidence and self worth in the community. Besides, battering women by husbands usually leave behind bruises either temporary or permanent on them, and that keeps reminding them of the ugly ordeal thus giving them some psychological trauma. The affected women usually live the rest of their lives in fear, depressed and inclined to the children. Those without children in the marital home are always afraid and lonely. They tend to suffer from inferiority complex. This mental depression usually leads to low life expectancy.

Adekola and Falase (2006) observed that women that suffer domestic violence have low participation in

community development due to poor health and very low self esteem. They also claimed that other consequences of violence against women may include unemployment, stress, fear, anxiety, depression, injury, physical disability, poverty due to low productivity and at times death. There are many women who are permanently disabled as a result of battering, female genital mutilation, gun shoot and torture by agents of Nigerian State caused by cultural and political struggles. This group, at one time, must have contributed to the development and growth of Ikwerre ethnic nationality, Rivers State and Nigerian economy. Indeed, the traumatic experience suffered by these women has a long lasting impact on the spiritual side of their lives. The spirit gives life to the physical; hence the disturbance on the physical realm affects their spirit. Since the spirit gives life, and when threatened or badly conditioned, it tends to abandon the physical and shortens life expectancy.

5. COUNTERING CULTURAL EXCUSES FOR GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN IKWERRE ETHNIC NATIONALITY

Goal 3 of the Millennium Development is to achieve gender equality and empowerment. Efforts to achieve this goal have always emphasized equity and justice especially on issues that affect women. One major constraint to attaining equity and high involvement of women in developmental matters is domestic violence. Developing strategies to counter the menace of domestic violence is now a major concern to sociologists and development practitioners especially in the third world countries like Nigeria. In this direction this discourse made the following observations and submissions.

The United Nations Rapporteur on Violence Against Women Observed that:

Today, Culture is used as a tool of new forms of oppression of women, whether in its orientalist or occidentalist guise. Such approaches present culture as static, homogeneous and apolitical, overlooking its diverse and ever-changing character. It emphasized that compromising women's rights is not an option; the challenge before the United Nations is to respect our diverse cultures while developing strategies to resist oppressive practices in the name of culture and to uphold universal human rights standards while rejecting ethnocentric rulings (A/HRC/7/6, 29 January 2008).

Based on the above statement, this paper explores some strategies for countering "Cultural" excuses to justify violence against women in Ikwerre land. Such strategies are particularly relevant at this moment that the focus of development is on the women folk.

5.1 Argumentation Within the Cultural Framework

Those who use "culture" to excuse gender based violence against women usually claimed that their usage represents

the only true interpretation, while denying the validity of other more gender equitable interpretations. This strategy challenges the singularity of the patriarchal version by making visible more gender-equitable alternatives and questioning cultural discourses and frameworks. While some cultural norms and practices empower women and promote women's human rights; customs, traditions and religious values are also often used to justify gender-based violence against women. In this context, while it is important to launch arguments in support of women's rights within existing cultural frameworks, it should be noted that most, if not all, cultures are currently shaped by dominant patriarchal interests. Therefore, those using this strategy need to be aware that certain cultural frameworks may not afford the space to establish women's freedom from violence as right to which they are entitled as opposed to a privilege grantee, which is thereby inherently challengeable.

5.2 Argumentation on the Basis of Women's Rights as Human Rights

The strength of this strategy is its reference to the universal human rights framework and international conventions agreed upon by member states of the United Nations. This indeed is the strategy embodied in the General Assembly's Resolution A/RES/61/143, which urges member states to:

a. Consider ratifying or acceding to all human rights treaties. Limit the extent of any reservations that they lodge and regularly review such reservations with a view to withdrawing them so as to ensure that no reservation is incompatible with the object and purpose of the relevant treaty.

b. Review and where appropriate, revise, amend or abolish all laws, regulations, policies, practices and customs that discriminate against women or have a discriminatory impact on women and ensure that provisions of multiple legal systems, where they exist, comply with international human rights obligations, commitments and practices, including the principle of non-discrimination.

One constraint of this strategy is that it may be labeled by "cultural gatekeepers" as being externally derived and, furthermore, driven by the metropolitan North's agenda of global dominion. Such accusations deny the universality of the human rights framework, instead particularizing it as a product solely of the metropolitan North. These accusations become even more serious when it is bolstered by cultural relativists, who collude in the attempts of state and non-state actors to exempt themselves from complying with the universal human rights framework (WEMC) 2010.

It is strategically necessary to combine strategies 'a' and 'b', thereby locating the principle of rights within specific cultures. Women's assertion of their right to enforce their fundamental human rights is partially important at

micro and meso levels, where there is an opportunity to advance indigenous concepts of justice and rights from within local communities. At the same time, efforts should be made to bridge indigenous concepts of justice and right with the international rights discourse, to ensure that women's right are ultimately integrated with the universal framework of human rights.

c. Refuting Cultural Relativist Condoning of Violence Against Women as Cultural Practice.

Cultural relativists usually accepted, out of supposed political correctness, the version presented by dominant groups claiming ownership of a particular culture ignoring the internal diversities (Shaheed, Farida, 2007). They thus collude, wittingly or unwittingly, in dissenting members, who try to dispute with or disengage from the imposition of the dominant group.

This strategy takes issue with cultural relativists who see only the "group," rather than individual members as having the right to difference (Farida, 2007). Cultural relativist interpretations of violence inflicted on women as "group" members generally accept such violence as dictated by cultural norms of the "group" that must be respected. Women's rights are seriously threatened when cultural relativist positions become the basis of policies or laws.

At the same time, patriarchal forces find cultural relativism a useful tool for justifying their oppressive practices. As noted in the Secretary-General's in depth study (UN, 2007) Cultural relativist arguments have been advanced in national context and in international debates when laws and practices that curtail women's human rights have been challenged. The politicization of culture in the form of religion "fundamentalisms" in diverse geographic and religious contexts has become a serious challenge to efforts to secure women's human rights. Tension between cultural relativism and the recognition of women's human rights, including the right to be free from violence, has been intensified as a result of the current heightened attention to state security issues. The resort to cultural relativism has been made worse by the policies adopted since 11 September, 2001 by many groups and societies that feel threatened and under siege. This tension poses a notable challenge in ensuring that violence against women is kept firmly on the international and national agendas with the priority it requires (UN, 2007).

To refute cultural relativists who accept patriarchal oppressions as cultural practices, this strategy requires constant emphasis of internal diversity and power contestations within "groups", challenging those who claim to speak on behalf of supposedly homogenous entities.

5.3 Strengthening Women's Voices in the Face of Attempts to Silence Them

Attempts to silence women and women's rights advocates are occurring at multiple levels. At the micro level, individual are being silenced, including victims of

violence. At the meson level, women's rights advocates are being silenced, individually and collectively. Women's assertion of their rights, either on their own behalf or on behalf of other women, is being suppressed by threats or acts of violence, ostracism and accusations of betrayal of family, community and nation. At the macro level, even multilateral agencies working for women's rights may be silenced by claims from certain states that they should not be focusing on donor-driven issue that is "culturally" irrelevant.

Such attempts at silencing often become acute among ethnic minorities, such as Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality and bounded communities that claim the right to non-interference from the outside. In such cases, women asserting their rights and those who support them are offering silenced by perpetrators of violence who castigate all dissenting voices as betrayals of culture and the community. It is important to ensure that women and women's rights advocates in Ikwerre ethnic nationality are not silenced, and that the international community does not acquiesce in this silencing process. Any such acquiescence only emboldens those wish to suppress women's rights. A potential consequence of this strategy may be that women and women's right advocates who reprisals, which may take various forms ranging from murder to ostracism. Protective measures should be explores including the building of alliances with mainstream institutions and finding safety in numbers.

5.4 Exposing Media Manipulations

This strategy makes visible unreported and under-reported realities that support women's rights, thereby articulating silenced voices. One constraint is that the reportage of realities and voices that support women's rights may be relegated to alternative media, rather than mainstream media, given the commoditization of news as information that sells. The policies should be more sympathetic towards women who go to the police to make reports of domestic violence cases. They should listen to them attentively, take good records and get all the necessary details that will assist in the prosecution of whoever is involved in violence against women. The authorities concerned should advice the victim of domestic violence on the appropriate steps to take. Domestic violence is not just a family matter as often referred to by some unwilling police and government agencies officials.

CONCLUSION

Preventing domestic violence against women requires sustained and systematic efforts at the levels of families and relationships, communities, institutions, and societies. Men must be engaged in this work: as participants in education programme, as community leaders, as professionals and providers and as advocates and activists working in alliance with women. Our society can only

make progress in preventing violence against women if we can change the attitudes, identities, and relations that sustain violence. To stop the physical and sexual assault of women and girls, the Ikwerre society must build on the fact that most men do not use violence and that most men, if only privately, believe that such violence is unthinkable. We must erode the cultural and collective supports for violence found among many men and boys in Ikwerre land and replace such with norms of consent, sexual respect and gender equality. While some men are part of the problem, all men must be part of the solution.

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