

Gender-Based Violence and Patriarchy: Nigeria's Experience

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence, which is mostly a physical, psychological, structural and/or cultural abuse of women by the male folk, has been a social malaise militating against women across Africa, and this is largely believed to be so because of the perceived complicity of Africa's cultures which advertently or inadvertently favour patriarchy – a cultural belief and practice that places higher premiums on the male child over and above the female child. The recent upsurge in gender-based violence, particularly rape in Nigeria has raised serious concerns among scholars and concerned stakeholders as to whether the female folk have now become sub-human before the male folk. This paper, was therefore, aimed at interrogating the issue of violence against women, with a focus on exploring recent incidences of gender-based violence, particularly rape in Nigeria. Secondary sources of data (i.e. published articles, textbooks, the internet, etc.) were used. Findings revealed gender-based violence in Nigeria to be largely influenced by the age-long patriarchal practices. It was therefore, concluded that with a lack of severe punishment for the perpetrators of gender-based violence, coupled with a gross lack of cultural re-orientation to see women as having coordinate status as men, the issue of men-dominated gender-based violence will go on unabated in Nigeria. The paper equally offered germane recommendations.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, rape, culture, patriarchy, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Women are entrusted by nature and the society with raising children from infancy to adulthood and maintaining the home front, but they are frequently deprived of the chance to experience life's pleasures; this has been the fate of women throughout history (Adekunle, 2013). According to some sociologists and anthropologists, there has never been a community where women are treated more favourably than men (Haralambos, Holborn, Chapman & Moore, 2013). Women are typically perceived as communal – friendly, warm, selfless, gregarious, interdependent, emotionally expressive and relationship-oriented; while men are typically perceived as agentic – competent, aggressive, autonomous, masterful and achievement-oriented (Agbaje, 2019). Even though women have suffered discriminatory practices and different forms of abuses in the Nigerian society before now, the vigour and velocity with which a resurgence in violence, especially rape against women in Nigeria occurs of late calls for a scientific diagnosis and solution, before the society degenerates back into the state of nature that the human society was once known for.

Human beings, regardless of gender or sex status, are equal before the law and should not be treated with any disparity. For instance, the Fundamental Human Rights of persons as enshrined in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) provides equal rights for male and female alike. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria which is the grundnorm of all laws in Nigeria expressly prohibits acts of discrimination or ill-treatment of any person on any grounds, including gender or sex. And that is why the Nigerian Constitution pointedly stated the Fundamental Human Rights of Nigerians under Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), to include:

1. The Right to Life
2. The Right to Dignity of Human Person
3. Right to Personal Liberty
4. Right to Fair Hearing
5. Right to Private and Family Life
6. Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion
7. Right to Freedom of Expression and the Press
8. Right to Peaceful Assembly and Association
9. Right to Freedom of Movement
10. Right to Freedom from Discrimination
11. Right to Acquire and Own Immovable Property anywhere in Nigeria

Furthermore, Section 34 of the 1999 Constitution, according to Akeredolu (2019), protects the dignity of individuals at all times. It states as follows:

34(1) Every person has the right to be treated with respect for his or her dignity; as a result:

- (a) No one shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment;
- (b) No one shall be kept in slavery or other forms of servitude; and
- (c) No one shall be made to perform forced or compulsory labour.

Similarly, Article 3(2) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR) guarantees 'equal protection before the law' to every individual. Accordingly, the state is required by Article 18(3) of the ACHPR thereto, to ensure the elimination of any discrimination against women and also ensures the protection of the rights of the woman and the child as stipulated in international declarations and conventions (Akeredolu, 2019).

Thus, from the foregoing Fundamental Human Rights of Nigerian citizens in Chapter IV, Section 34(1) (a), (b), (c) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended); Articles 3(2) and 18(3) of the (ACHPR) highlighted above, one would see that none of the rights places higher premiums on man/boy over the woman/girl hence, must be treated equally by the men and societal norms in all respects.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to examine gender-based violence and patriarchy: Nigeria's experience. The specific objectives of the study included:

1. To determine the prevalence of gender-based violence, particularly rape in Nigeria.
2. To identify the factor of patriarchy as a potential influencer of gender-based violence in Nigeria.
3. To suggest measures that can be adopted to mitigate gender-based violence, particularly rape in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilised qualitative and descriptive methods in approach while sourcing data through secondary sources (i.e. published articles, textbooks, the internet, etc.). Data from the secondary sources were content-analysed and deductions drawn.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that was adopted in line with the subject of this paper and upon which the paper is anchored is the

radical feminism theory – a subset of gender inequality perspective. The radical feminism which subsumes under the gender inequality perspective is championed by Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). Other scholars associated with the radical feminists' theory include Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Valerie Solanas and Alice Walker. As analysed by Haralambos, Holborn, Chapman & Moore (2013), radical feminism holds men responsible for the exploitation of women. According to the radical feminists, men have gained more than women from women's subjugation. Radical feminists' view, according to Bryson (1999), conceives women as an oppressed group that has to struggle for their own liberation against their oppressors – the men. Therefore, female or feminine nature needs to be liberated and revalued; one that has been concealed and/or distorted throughout history (Haralambos, et al., 2013).

From the above analysis, therefore, radical feminists' theory conceives society, especially that of Africa as patriarchal – one that is dominated and ruled by men. Men are the ruling class, and women the subject class. And in this connection are culture, family and religion which the feminists see as the key instruments being used by the male-dominated society to oppress women in modern societies. Radical feminists contend that the family and religion, through socialisation processes that instill in the male child a sense of superiority over the female child in all human endeavours, intentionally or unintentionally legitimise tyranny against women. In light of this, some radical feminist theorists contend that men have acquired and preserved their power through the use of rape and other forms of violence against women. Therefore, rape and other forms of gender-based violence are employed as forceful tools with the goal of dehumanising, intimidating, and subduing their target – women.

The radical feminism theory seems to be particularly relevant to the subject of this paper due to its ability to juxtapose gender-based violence with societal cultural cum religious practices which advertently or inadvertently arrogate unparalleled relevance to the male folk than the female folk, while unfortunately fostering the culture of power inequalities and overarching dominance and subjugation by the male folk of the female folk in Africa, and Nigeria in particular.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Violence is regarded as any behaviour that centres on disagreement or differences in aims, values, status, interests, preferences or ideas with the intent to cause harm to the other party. It is a conflict in which opposing parties seek to neutralise, harm or destroy adversaries (Cosser, 1956; as cited in Aigbovbioisa, 2021). Similarly, Galtung (1996) summarises violence as characterising behaviours, statements, attitudes, institutions or systems that harm people physically, psychologically, socially or environmentally and impede them from realising their full potential (Aigbovbioisa, 2021). Therefore, gender-based violence (violence against women) is the physical, structural, psychological and/or cultural abuse of women by the male folk. Gender-based violence is described by the Reproductive Health Response in Conflict (RHRC) Consortium (2003) as a catch-all phrase for any injury inflicted against an individual's will that stems from gender-based power disparities (Inokoba, 2019). According to Bastick, Grimm & Kunz (2007) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Force on Gender and Humanitarian Assistance (2005), gender-based violence is any harmful act committed against an individual's will that is motivated by socially constructed differences between genders (male and female) (Inokoba, 2019).

Gender-based violence in Nigeria include rape, assault and battery of women by the men, defilement of female minors by the men, intimidation, harassment and molestation of women sexually by teachers, lecturers and office bosses, abduction of women as sex slaves by terrorists and bandits during violent conflicts/community invasions, killing of women by male ritualists, forced [early] marriage, harmful cultural practices such as forcing a widow into widow inheritance (levirate marriage) against her wish, etc.

From the foregoing, one wonders why these debasing acts by men against the women have tended to remain with the society despite condemnations. Perhaps, this is where cultural perspective is required for further elucidation. Sociologists and anthropologists view culture as the entirety of human existence. Every society's shared and acquired behavioural patterns are referred to as its culture. Since culture is essentially about the shared rules, values and belief systems of members of a community, it promotes a sense of unity among its members. In light of this, culture influences how people think and behave, as well as their worldview.

Africa, and indeed, Nigerian cultures are largely patriarchal – a cultural practice that encourages male overarching dominance over female in human affairs and relationships. Patriarchy is a cultural belief and practice that places higher premiums on the male child over and above the female child as head and leader in human society, while socialising the female child to maintain the culture of subservience, docility and unequal status with the male on the other hand. Gender-based violence in Africa and Nigerian societies is therefore, a product of an age-long and persistent cultural manipulation, exploitation and subjugation of the woman into an inferior being who is believed to hold no significant value in the society and therefore, should live at the mercy of the man. From this cultural philosophy of who a woman should be, woman began to lose her human dignity before the man till the society got to this sorry and barbaric state where unbridled violence is being unleashed on the women folk virtually everywhere in Nigeria today.

It is appalling to note that in some cultures in Nigeria, women are still being denied inheritance of their deceased fathers' and husbands' property, especially where the wife has no child or male child for the deceased husband. Rather, the family of the father or husband would dispossess the woman of the property and even throw her and [children] out of their brother's house; thus, rendering the woman homeless, helpless, agonised and traumatised for the rest of her life. Such a situation is even worse off for the woman if not economically viable and productive; consequently, she becomes a beggar in order to eke out a living.

Incidences of Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria

Gender-based violence is a human rights violation against women and is perceived as a male instrument of power over women (Airaoje, Obada & Msughter, 2023). For instance, according to reports, 35% of women worldwide had suffered from non-partner sexual assault or intimate relationship violence that involved both physical and/or sexual abuse (World Health Organisation, 2013, p. 32). However, while the Western countries are taking stern legal measures against the scourge of gender-based violence, vis-à-vis promoting equality and equity in their scheme of things – socio-cultural, economic, political and legal spheres; same cannot really be said with a degree of exactitude of Nigeria. A study by Ezeilo & Ohia (2006), for example, sampled 2000 respondents, of whom 1,052 were female and 948 were male. The study found that various forms of torture, such as beatings, salary withholding, need denial, suppression, sexual harassment, rape, forced widowhood practices, abusive speech, property destruction, deprivation, threats and child abuse were inflicted on females in Nigeria (Mshelia, 2021).

As a corollary, Nigerians, in April 2022, received with rude shock, the sad news of the popular gospel artiste, Osinachi Nwanchukwu dying from the injury sustained from her husband's brutal beaten. Revelation from Mrs. Osinachi Nwanchukwu's children to the then Honourable Minister of Women Affairs, Dame Pauline Tallen, upon her condolence visit to the bereaved family in Abuja, revealed that the deceased's husband, Mr. Peter Uwachukwu had continually been beating and maltreating his wife – Osinachi before her eventual death arising from the injuries sustained from one of the beatings. Mr. Peter Nwachukwu even ensured his late wife – Osinachi had no bank account of her own with all the proceeds from her gospel venture been paid into her husband's account (*Vanguard*, 2022). This is believed to be one of the many unheard and/or unreported cases of gender-based violence in Nigeria.

Some inadequacies of the Nigeria's customary laws and societal norms have advertently or inadvertently contributed to the plights of the womenfolk in Nigeria. Adekunle (2013, p. 65) captured succinctly, some of the agonising experiences of some women in some cultures in Nigeria thus:

Many a woman is made to undergo a series of ill-treatment when their husbands die. They may be accused of killing their husbands and as such made to undergo some test so as to determine whether they, indeed, kill their husbands. They may be made to drink some concoction made from some traditional ingredients while they have their heads shaved. At times, they are made to drink the water with which the dead body of the husband is bathed and instructed to sleep by the husband for seven days. In contrast, the customary law is sympathetic to the course of the widower; hence, in some cultures, the belief is that the spirit of the dead wife will return, and in order to prevent that, another woman will be sought for the husband to keep him company on the night of the day he loses his wife. That woman will eventually become the wife of the man. Invariably, the consent of the woman is not sought for the marriage. Such early marriages often disrupt the education of the girls in

question and eventually deny them of the ability to contribute their own quota to nation-building.

Following an upsurge in gender-based violence, particularly rape and brutal killings of women in Nigeria, there has been nationwide women outcry and condemnations of the heinous crime while calling on the authorities at all levels to step up efforts at arresting the menace. Specifically, these renewed outcries, condemnations and protests were witnessed from 2020, following the brutal rape cases reported in May and June of 2020 respectively (*Vanguard*, 2020).

Timeline of gender-based violence, particularly rape and brutal killings of women in Nigeria are chronicled in the table below for better insights:

S/N	Year	Activity	Perspective/Remark
1	2014	An 8-year-old girl named Evidence was raped in Enugu State.	The victim eventually died from severe injuries sustained from the rape.
2	2018	A 17-year-old salesgirl was gang-raped in Edo State	The victim died from the incidence.
3	2019	A 13-year-old girl, Ochanya Ogbaje, was serially raped by her uncle and his son in Benue State.	The victim eventually died from severe injuries sustained from the serial rape.
4	2020	An 18 year-old Miss Barakat Bello was raped in her home in Ibadan, Oyo State.	The victim died in the process.
5	2020	A 22 year-old Miss Vera Uwaila Omozuwa, an undergraduate student of the University of Benin was gang-raped while reading in her church in Benin City, Edo State.	The victim died in the process.
6	2020	The police went on a manhunt after 12 rapists, including a 57-year-old man in Jigawa State.	A 12-year-old girl was serially abused sexually by a 57-year-old man in Jigawa State.
7	2020	A 3-month-old baby was subjected to the ultimate betrayal of defilement and torture in Nasarawa State.	Relatives were involved in the dastard act.
8	2020	The Katsina Police Command announced that 40 suspected rapists were taken into custody during the April and June of 2020 Covid-19 lockdown.	Violence, leading to victims sustaining severe cuts and injuries was employed by the rapists to secure compliance.
9	2020	The Akwa-Ibom Police Command detained 11 suspects and a Pastor for rape and defilement in less than seven days.	Minors were involved in the rape incidences.
10	2020	Two fathers who had an incestuous relationship with their daughters were also taken into custody by the Akwa-Ibom Police Command.	Violence was employed by the rapists to secure compliance.
11	2023	A 41-year old father sexually abused his 16 years old biological daughter for 3 years in Kogi State.	The abuse was on for three years, 2020-2023 before the culprit's eventual arrest.

Sources: Adapted from Daily Post (2020); Ezeilo: Rape and the law: Blaming, stigmatising and silencing victims in search of justice (This Day live, 2020); Premium Times (2023); Vanguard (2020).

What is however, shocking in the foregoing cases is that these calibrated abuses of the girl-child usually take place in familiar environments; as a result, the majority of abusers are known to the children before the abuse begins or occurs, and less than 5 out of every 100 female children who report violence receive any kind of support (Ng'ondi, 2015). In all these, it appears the closeness of abusers to their victims' families sometimes

make prosecution difficult as cases are not often allowed to be reported to the appropriate quarters for legal action and justice; even where such cases are reported, families of abusers sometimes beg to settle out-of-court and eventually, that would be the end of it with the perpetrators going scot-free. Consequently, since culture seems to prioritise preserving family honour and reputation over individuals seeking justice for such crime(s) committed against them, the inability to secure justice for victims deters other survivors of gender-based violence from coming forward (Chime, Nduagubam & Orji, 2022).

ANALYSES AND FINDINGS

The study investigated gender-based violence and patriarchy in Nigeria. To this end, critical interactions with literatures on the incidences of gender-based violence in Nigeria showed a nexus between gender-based violence and patriarchy in the country. This is attributable to the unfounded cultural overarching belief by the male folk that the female folk has no equal rights with them and therefore, can be subjected to all manner of despicable treatments. This finding aligns with the submission of Adekunle (2013) that some inadequacies of the Nigeria's customary laws and societal norms have advertently or inadvertently contributed to the plights of the womenfolk in Nigeria. The finding is further given credence to, by the radical feminists' theory which conceives society, especially that of Africa as patriarchal – one that is dominated and ruled by men. To this end, according to the radical feminists, rape and other forms of gender-based violence are employed by the male folk as forceful tools with the goal of dehumanising, intimidating, and subduing their target – women.

The findings of the study equally revealed that investigation and prosecution of perpetrators of gender-based violence are not often followed through by relevant authorities to see to it that perpetrators are duly punished for their crimes due to interventions by families of the abusers pleading for cases not to be reported to authorities or where reported, plead to settle out-of-court, which eventually make the perpetrators going scot-free. To this end, survivors of gender-based violence most times, refuse to speak up but would rather contain the ugly trauma. This finding is further given credence to, by Chime, Nduagubam & Orji (2022) that culture seems to prioritise preserving family honour and reputation over individuals seeking justice for such crime(s) committed against them. This finding is further supported by the radical feminists' theory that culture, family and religion form the key instruments being used by the male-dominated society to oppress women in modern societies.

CONCLUSION

The paper has been able to unravel some expository facts on why and how various degrees of violence is being unleashed on women by the men folk in the Nigerian society. In this connection, the sheer conspiracies of culture, family, as well as religion in legitimising the culture of suppression of the women have been x-rayed. In summation, there seem to be no safe place for women and girls in Nigerian society, given the horrible trend of gender-based violence, particularly rape that the country is currently experiencing, unless the society acts quickly to nip it in the bud on all fronts. Achieving this would therefore, require severe punishments for offenders, coupled with vigorous cultural re-orientations of the men folk that the women have no less status as them and accordingly, be treated with dignity in all spheres of life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Just like the Palace of the revered Oba of Benin Kingdom during the reign of Oba Erediauwa II invoked the Spirits of the Ancestors and those of the gods of the Beninland to curb criminality in Benin City, the Edo State capital in 2010; other communities in Nigeria can take a cue from it by invoking the Spirits of their Ancestors against women abusers. After all, from an ontological perspective, African society is described by Busia (1951) as being composed of the living and the dead in a continuum relationship; the living are influenced by the dead even though they are invisible (Ashiru, 2010).

Also, communities in Nigeria can take a step further by naming, shaming and ostracising perpetrators of gender-based violence such as rape, assault, battery and killings of women by the men for whatever reason. This way, those with similar intentions would refrain from indulging in these dehumanising, dastard and callous acts against the women.

Equally important is a vigorous cultural re-orientation of members of the society. Traditional rulers and community leaders must, as a matter of necessity and exigency, embark on aggressive cultural re-orientation of the male members of their communities that women are not sub-human who can be subjected to agonising and dehumanising conditions by the men under whatever guise. As a matter of fact, women have no less of rights as the men.

The Child Rights Convention of 1989 now (Acts of the Parliament) in Nigeria owing to the country's signature to the Convention, ratification and domestication in (2003), must be fully domesticated and activated by all the federating states in Nigeria. It is uncomplimentary that 21 years after the Child Rights Law was domesticated by the Nigerian government, it is yet to be domesticated by some of the federating states. Even where it is domesticated, activation remains a huge challenge.

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