



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Overcoming Cultural, Traditional and Religious Beliefs and Practices in Understanding and Combating Domestic Violence in Nigeria

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Abstract:

News of homicide as a result of domestic violence has become a regular feature in the print, broadcast, and social media in Nigeria. The prevalence of domestic violence in Nigeria has been described as “assuming epidemic proportion” and “shockingly high.” Many commentators point accusing fingers at Nigerian’s cultural, traditional, and religious beliefs and practices for the preponderance of this social malaise. Against this assertion, this paper examines the nexus between Nigeria’s three major ethnic group’s cultural, traditional, and religious beliefs and practices that have the potential to impede the understanding and willingness to combat domestic violence. The research shows that the success of the current efforts to tackle the issue is dependent on the ability of Nigerians to overcome these beliefs and practices. The paper recommends increased efforts in enlightening Nigerians to overcome these beliefs and practices with a view to stem the incidences of domestic violence in the country.

Keywords: Perception of domestic violence, domestic violence, culture, tradition, religion, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Traditionally, in Nigeria as in many other African countries, the beating of children by their parents, and wives by their husbands, are widely sanctioned as an acceptable form of discipline (Hodges, 2001). Hence, many women in Nigeria do not consider battering by their spouse as an abuse due to the acceptance of some abusive behaviour as “normal” (Aihie, 2009; Oyediran & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2005). In a study carried out by Oyediran and Isiugo-Abanihe (2005) of women’s perception of wife beating in Nigeria, 64.4 percent of married and 50.4 percent of unmarried women expressed consent for wife beating. Ogunmosunle (2012) of the features unit of the Lagos State Ministry of Information and Strategy asserts, “Every day in many homes, domestic violence is being committed with impunity without the culprits knowing that crime was being committed and the victim not knowing that his or her rights were being trampled upon” (“The odds against domestic violence laws,” para. 6). This explains, as Ogunmosunle (2012) opines, why many Nigerians do not perceive domestic violence as a crime and exhibit a nonchalant attitude towards it. Similarly, surprising, is the assertion that some women even regard some form of spousal abuse as a sign of love (Mayaki & Choji, 2011). This perception is worrying because of the high number of domestic violence homicides appearing on the news and social media in Nigeria, and many that go unreported. Hence, if the current efforts to stimulate the awareness and reduce the prevalence of domestic violence in Nigeria are to succeed, there is a need to unearth the reason(s) why people hold this perception. Consequently, probing for answers to this question becomes pertinent - what are the reasons some Nigerians indulge as well as acquiesce to acts of domestic violence?

Exploring the answer to this question is the central objective of this paper. The paper will examine some cultural, traditional, and religious beliefs and practices of the three major ethnic groups (Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa) in Nigeria that contribute, nurture, and continue to sustain this perception in the subconscious minds of many Nigerians. The core argument in this paper is that the overcoming of these cultural, traditional, and religious beliefs and practices would enable many Nigerians to comprehend acts that constitute domestic violence, and stimulate their willingness to tackle the issue. The understanding of domestic violence and appreciation of its consequences is the first step in the right direction towards the success of efforts being made to combat it.

Since the emergence of domestic violence as a national and international issue, one that ravages many households and causes untold hardship to the victims, many governments have taken steps to enlighten their citizens about the issue of domestic violence and its consequences. In addition, some have taken a step further to proscribe it in their country; thereby, making it a crime. The governments of some western countries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are constantly making efforts to enlighten their citizens regarding domestic violence. In addition, the governments of many western countries are providing various forms of assistance to the victims of domestic abuse by prosecuting offenders, as well as providing counselling to offenders and victims. For instance, the Irish government set up a dedicated parastatal within the Department of Justice, the National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual

and Gender-based Violence (COSC) in 2007 to deliver a well coordinated “whole of government” response to the issue of domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence in Ireland.

It is obvious that the government of Nigeria and many other African countries are lagging behind in the effort to stimulate the awareness of domestic violence and to tackle the issue of this hydra-headed monster, when compared to their western counterparts. This is despite the high level of spousal abuse in many African countries. For instance, more than 6,500 incidents of domestic and gender-based violence were reported in Sierra Leone in the first eight months of 2013, almost as many as in the whole of 2012 (“Fighting gender-based,” 2013). In Senegal, 25 percent of women are subjected to physical violence by their partner (“Report says domestic violence is rampant in Senegal,” 2001). While in Nigeria, Amnesty International reported that a third (and in some cases two-thirds) of women are believed to have been subjected to physical, sexual, and psychological violence carried out primarily by husbands, partners, and fathers (Amnesty International, Nigeria, 2005).

2. Domestic Violence: The Experience in Nigeria

The definition and what constitutes domestic violence have evolved over the years and continues to do so as actions that have the potential to cause harm to vulnerable persons within the confines of the household are included in the definition. The definition is supposed to be gender neutral as both male and female can be victims as well as perpetrators of domestic violence. The neutrality of the definition was captured by the task force set up by the office of the Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) in Ireland to develop a coordinated response and strategy on the problem of mental, physical and sexual violence against women - with a particular focus on domestic violence defined it as:

... [T]he uses of physical or emotional force or threat of physical force, including sexual violence in close adult relationships. This includes violence perpetrated by a spouse, partner, son, or daughter or any other person who has a close or blood relationship with the victim. The term “domestic violence” goes beyond actual physical violence. It can also involve emotional abuse, the destruction of property, isolation from friends, family and other potential sources of support, threats to others, including children, stalking, and control over access to money, personal items, food, transportation and the telephone (“Report on violence against women,” 1997, p. 27).

According to a UK based NGO, The Haven Wolverhampton, which supports women and children affected by domestic violence and homelessness, “Nigeria has one of the highest rates of domestic violence in Africa” (The Haven Wolverhampton, 2005). This assertion was corroborated by the Amnesty International report on domestic violence in Nigeria, which calls Nigeria’s rate of domestic violence as “shocking.” Mikala (2005), of Amnesty International states that “on a daily basis, Nigerian women are beaten, raped and even murdered by members of their family for supposed transgressions, which can range from not having meals on time to visiting family members without their husband’s permission” (p. 1). Surveys on gender-based violence in Nigeria indicate a high level of occurrence. Project Alert, a Nigerian based NGO that supports female victims of domestic violence, carried out a survey to determine the prevalence of intimate partner violence in Lagos State in 2001. They conducted interviews with women in all sectors of the economy, including young women in university and secondary schools. Out of the 45 working-class women interviewed at the work place, 64.4 percent admitted experiencing abuse by a partner, and 56.8 percent of 48 women interviewed in the market place admitted experiencing abuse by a partner. Similar interviews carried out in Oyo State, in the southwest geopolitical zone and other parts of Nigeria, yielded similar results (Project Alert, 2001). Tobi Asekun (2014), a lawyer working with Project Alert in decrying the spate of domestic violence among young couple’s laments:

The most alarming is the increase in the rate of domestic violence among couples aged 25-40;... For instance, out of the 10 DV cases received by Project Alert in January 2014, seven of the victims are under the age of 40, as well as the perpetrators (“Stemming domestic violence in Lagos,” para. 4).

The issue of young couples involved in domestic violence in Nigeria is disturbing, but not entirely unexpected. One would expect young couples to learn from the unfortunate experiences of their parents, but it is a very inundating task for them to accomplish without the necessary intervention, in the form of counselling, stimulating awareness, adequate legal regulation and enforcement, and transformation of perception. Research shows that children who witnessed domestic violence are more susceptible to becoming potential perpetrators and/or become receptive of abuse (Sahana, 2011).

Until the middle to late 1990s, the awareness, coverage and intervention strategies regarding domestic violence were not as ubiquitous as they are now in Nigeria. There was almost non coverage of domestic violence incidents in the print, broadcast, and news media. There were not as many NGOs as currently obtains that are championing the cause of combating domestic violence in particular and violence against women in general. The issue was not in the policy consideration of many state governments, as well as the federal government. Hence, adequate attention was not paid to the noxious incidences of domestic violence and the spate was left unabated for decades.

In addition to the indifference at the government level to tackle the issue of domestic violence before the middle to late nineties in Nigeria, the customary laws treated it with levity. At the customary legislative level, the issue of wife battering was largely viewed as a private/family issue that does not warrant outside intervention (Ozoemena, 2006). It was left, mainly, for the families to deal with it as they chose. In rare cases, the battered women will report the abuse to their families and depending on the severity of the incident or if she felt her life was in danger, may return to her parent’s or relative’s home to stay until both families settled the issue that gave rise to the incident. The prevailing norm was for the women to endure the abuse and take it as part of married life (“Domestic Violence,” 2011). Battered women then, and even currently to a certain extent, are not encouraged to leave their matrimonial home, even when their life is in danger. Traditionally, women who left their husband’s house for whatever reason, are viewed as uncultured and bring

shame to their parents and relatives. They do not command any respect in the community and their families may be subjected to ridicule for that reason, particularly if they have an issue with another family. Battered women are encouraged not to leave their matrimonial home as it may scare away potential suitors for their unmarried female siblings. This is based on the cultural belief that the family does not raise their female children to be humble and obedient wife. This belief has caused many women to endure life threatening abuses, which often result in deformity, depression, or death (Igbokwe, 2013).

The developments that heralded domestic violence paradigm change in Nigeria started in the middle 1990s in favour of millions of Nigerians who have been suffering in silence over the years. While it may be difficult, if not impossible to pinpoint exactly the incident that gave rise to the current wave of transformation of perception towards domestic violence in Nigeria, it may be easy to locate some series of events that culminate to the slow but encouraging change of the perception and attitude of the Nigerian government and citizens towards domestic violence.

The "Fourth World Conference on Women," which took place in Beijing, China from 4 - 25 September 1995, was themed "Action for Equality, Development and Peace." The conference, in terms of impact on the creation of the awareness of the women's equality struggle and the need for reform, was one of the most successful conferences organized by the United Nations on women's issues. Soon after the conference, many governments around the world, including the Nigerian government, started to establish a dedicated ministry and/or parastatal to oversee women's empowerment and gender equality in the country. Many states in Nigeria also established ministry of women's affairs. Many NGOs dedicated to the championing of women's equality struggle and combating of domestic violence against women started to spring up in Nigeria (Project Alert was established 1999 and Cheld in 2010).

Other events that gave rise to the current wave of change towards domestic violence in Nigeria include the signing of many international and regional human rights conventions by the Nigerian government (Egede, 2007). Additionally, pressure from NGOs, human rights activists, and academics from various disciplines who are involved in research and reporting on the issue contributed to draw the government's attention to the prevalence and devastating consequences of domestic violence. The state governments in Nigeria started to respond gradually by enacting legislation against domestic violence. There are more than four states in the country that have enacted domestic violence laws – Imo, Lagos, Ekiti, Akwa Ibom States, Jigawa, Cross River, amongst others (Cheld, 2015).

Recently, Nigeria joined the League of Nations that have federal law against domestic violence. The passage by the Senate and signing into law of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 (VAPP) by President Goodluck Jonathan received an overwhelming commendation, both nationally and internationally. However, the applicability of the VAPP throughout the country is shrouded in doubt (Anarado, 2015). It is still unclear whether VAPP can be enforced or relied upon outside the FCT, as it is clearly stated in part VI (47- application) of the act that, "This Act applies to the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja." Notwithstanding the ambiguity that hangs over the VAPP regarding its nationwide applicability, it is pertinent to raise the issue of how dawdling the Nigeria federal legislators treated the Violence against the Persons (Prohibition) Bill, when compared to the haste they treated the anti-terrorism bill. Regarding the swiftness, the federal legislators accorded the anti-terrorism bill, Ekundayo (2012) wrote:

On 10 December 2010, the Executive-sponsored the Anti-Terrorism Bill was read in the Senate. On 17 February 2011, it was overwhelmingly passed by the upper chamber before the lower chamber did the same thing on 22 February 2011, leading to it becoming law on 2 June 2011, following the President's assent ("Nigeria terrorism act: a right step forward," para. 4).

Acts of terrorism receive more attention worldwide than incidences of domestic violence (Hoeffler and Fearon, 2014). While that assertion may be true, it may not be the only reason for the delay in passing the domestic violence bill as opposed to the swift way the anti-terrorism bill was passed. The most persuasive reason for the delay is the issue that borders on cultural, religious, and traditional practices in the country. It was alleged that some members of the national assembly opposed the passing of the bill on grounds of religious and cultural beliefs (Manuh, 2007). They demanded that some sections be removed before it could receive their support. As Manuh (2007) clarifies, "The provision on marital rape, which some view as "western" and "against the culture of Nigeria" has been invoked to explain the slow progress of the bill; settling it would, allow the bill to be passed into law" ("Four countries, four experiences," para. 1). Although, the bill has finally been enacted into law, its implementation and effective enforcement remain a serious challenge. The cultural, religious, and traditional beliefs and practices of the ethnic groups will pose a challenge in the understanding and willingness of the victims to avail themselves of the law. Foreseeing the challenges that await the implementation and embracing of VAPP, Anarado (2015) opines:

The VAPP Act cannot be a piece of paper. This legislation will need to translate into having real meaning for the lives of Nigerians. We need to move towards a Nigeria where Uzoma, Iniobong and Tunde not only get justice, but also where cultural and traditional lifestyles and practices will undergo such a fundamental change that violence becomes the exception, not the rule (Next steps, para. 3).

3. Domestic Violence: Awareness Campaign

The domestic violence awareness drive is gaining momentum in Nigeria, mostly championed by various interest groups and some state governments. Also, the Nigerian news (print, broadcast, and social) media, which paid less attention to the issue of domestic violence, are currently taking the lead in reporting and condemning such incidences. The emergence of social media has enhanced the rate of spreading the awareness and the reporting of incidences of domestic violence in the country. The Nigerian law enforcement institutions are not left out in the current wave of combating the issue of domestic violence. The police that has previously treated issues of domestic violence as a "private/family matter" and were always reluctant to investigate or press charges when such issues were brought to their attention are now receiving training organized by various NGOs and the government on the appropriate response to such violence (Project Alert, 2012; Police Service Commission (PSC), Nigeria, 2012). While the police have not reached the level of response and compliance expected of them in dealing with domestic violence matters reported to them, they are, nonetheless, far

better than they were some years ago. For instance, there was a story of a young woman, Blessing, who lived in Enugu, the capital of Enugu State in the Southeast geopolitical zone in Nigeria. The late Blessing was a PhD holder and an appointee of the then newly established Anti-corruption Commission. She reported to the police that her husband and his two sisters threatened to kill her. The police told her to go home and come back in two days if the situation did not improve. She did not live to keep the appointment as she was murdered by her husband and his two sisters on the eve of the appointment (Project Alert, 2003).

Such stories were common and emblematic of how the police used to treat reported cases of domestic abuse. Ito-ro-Eze Anaba (2005) of the Legal Defence and Assistance Project of Amnesty International in Nigeria condemned how the Nigerian law enforcement agents treat reported cases of domestic violence, noting, “dismissive attitudes within the police and a justice system that is difficult to access compound the failures of the state to protect Women's rights” (p.1). The justice system is now tilting towards dealing with the issue of domestic violence with the seriousness it deserves. The sentencing to death of the husband of Titilayo Omozode Arowolo who was murdered by her husband in their home in Lagos State by stabbing her 76 times made headline news all over the country (Ojelu and Nwaro, 2014). Also, the paramount ruler of Akure Kingdom, the Deji of Akure, Oluwadare Adesina Adepoju (Osupa111), was deposed by the Ondo State Government on 10 June 2010, for beating up his estranged wife, Bolanle (Johnson, 2013). The action taken by the State government in deposing the king was praised by many Nigerians who saw it as a wake-up call to all and sundry that no position of authority will shield anyone from prosecution if he/she perpetuates any act of intimate abuse in the country.

While the efforts to tackle the spate of domestic violence in Nigeria are gathering momentum on all fronts, it appears that many Nigerians are not acquainted with the acts that constitute domestic violence. Similarly, their awareness of domestic violence is commonly limited to physical violence. Even in the case of physical abuse, as mentioned earlier, research shows that many women do not perceive it as a crime or an infringement on their human rights (Oyediran & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2005). Hence, due to a limited understanding of what constitutes domestic violence, many Nigerians either perpetuate the act or become victims without realising it.

In order to enlighten the public on the issues of domestic violence and the state law against it, the Lagos State Gender Advocacy Team (LASGAT) embarked on a state-wide campaign from October 13 to 17, 2014 to raise the awareness of domestic violence and enlighten Lagosians on the existence of the Lagos State Domestic Violence Law with a long title, “A Law to Protection Against Domestic Violence and Connected Purposes.” The law was enacted in 2007 and cited as “Protection Against Domestic Violence Law, 2007.” The Grassroots People and Gender Development Centre (GPGDC), which is a member of LASGAT, also participated in the awareness campaign, and helped to bring it to the grassroots in the four corners of Lagos State including, market places, schools, and places of worship. When the team visited the Toluwani Montessori School, Egan Igando in Lagos State, the proprietor of the school, Mrs. Akanji Mobolaji, appreciated the GPGDC team for taking the campaign message to the grassroots and to the pupils of the school. She expressed her joy over the campaign, saying, “I am so happy to see things happening in Nigeria since after the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in Beijing” (Nweje, 2014, “Taking campaign against domestic violence to the grassroots,” para. 8). A participant at one of the enlightenment campaigns, Mr. Chidi enunciated that:

Women are usually beaten due to their nagging behaviour or for disobeying the husband or when she refuses to stay where her husband wants her to stay. There is a deep cultural belief in Nigeria that it is socially acceptable to hit a woman to discipline her, even as religious beliefs also tend to suggest that women must obey their husband whether the issues are in her interest or not (Nweje, 2014, cited above, para. 9).

4. The Influence of Culture, Tradition and Religion

What have culture, tradition, and religion got to do with domestic violence in Nigeria and other African countries? Often, as Mederos (2005), observes, “Africans use adherence to culture as an excuse for their violent behaviour towards their partner,” and that perpetrators and government officials sometimes try to justify their violent behaviour with sayings such as, “where I come from everybody does it” or “it is normal” (p. 1).

According to Sokoloff and Dupoint (2005), “Many domestic violence scholars are struggling to comprehend the role that culture may play in perpetuating domestic violence and how to talk about the two” (pp. 38-64). In the case of Africa, there has been an ongoing debate regarding the role culture and tradition plays on the issue of domestic violence and its prevalence in Africa. Many commentators on domestic violence in Africa seem to lay the blame for high incidences of its occurrence in Africa on the doorsteps of African culture and tradition (Randall, 2008). To what extent this assertion is true is very contentious. Chingandu (2006), the Executive Director of Southern Africa HIV and AIDS Information Dissemination Service (SAFAIDS), in lamenting about the shockingly high prevalence of domestic violence in Zimbabwe states, “These figures are shocking, but what is worse is the fact that in most cases this violence against women is carried out under the guise of culture and tradition, which is intolerable” (“Domestic violence is not part of African culture,” para. 2). However, she denounced the belief that culture and tradition are to blame for the high prevalence of domestic violence in Africa:

In my culture, when I got married, my father gave my husband a stick. That stick came with a message that my husband should never beat me. So where is this culture of beating coming from? It is not and has never been an African value or part of our culture that wives should be beaten or battered (para. 3).

In his article on the issue of violence against women and domestic violence among the immigrants and minorities in the USA, Dasgupta (1998) cautions about the “quick allocation of blame to an immigrant’s culture when discussing domestic violence” (pp. 209 – 221). He further states that, “although culture may be used to justify violence against women, there is a danger of presenting the role of culture in domestic violence as a purely negative force” (pp. 209 – 221). Arguing against the stereotyping of culture and tradition as having only negative influence in perpetuating and combating domestic violence in particular, and violence against women in general,

Dasgupta and Warriar (1996) opined that, “all too often, the fact that cultural practices and beliefs can serve as protective factors for battered women is ignored or denied” (pp. 238 – 59).

It is pertinent to state at this juncture that some of Nigeria/Africa’s cultural and traditional beliefs and practices do not offer any subtle tolerance and/or give support to the perpetuation of domestic violence in all its ramifications. As a matter of fact, “some” Nigerian cultures and traditions frown at any form of violence perpetuated against individuals as human beings. The value system and morals inherent in some African cultures and traditions are often more protective of the citizens’ rights and fundamental freedoms when weighed against some international human rights treaties. Conversely, there are some aspects of Nigeria/Africa’s cultures and traditions that are in need of transformation to avoid relying on them to perpetuate inhuman and degrading treatments on vulnerable individuals.

5. Gender Value System

Schalkwyk (2000), states that “gender identities and gender relations are critical aspects of culture because they shape the way daily life is lived in the family, but also in the wider community and the workplace” (p. 1). In Nigeria, as in many other African countries, the pattern of gender value system is unequal and tends to accord more value, respect, and recognition to men than women (OECD, 2014). The arrival of a new baby brings joy and happiness to every family in Nigeria as in other countries. However, across most of the ethnic groups in Nigeria, the male child is more valued and accorded more rights and privileges than the female child (Labeodan, 2005). A family in many ethnic groups in Nigeria that does not have a male child is considered incomplete (Nwoko, 2012). Men in most cases will take a second wife if they do not beget a male child with their first wife. Similarly, couples that may have decided to have three children may end up having ten children as they try to get a male child (“Child sex controversy,” 2012).

Furthermore, this unequal gender value system demonstrates how some families treat their male and female children (Uchem, 2001). Married women and female children are not allowed to participate in special community meetings where important decisions are taken and laws made for the community (Okeke & Agu, 2012; Nworah, 2010). In the Igbo nation of the Southeast part of the country, kola nut is not presented to women (Nwoke, 2013; Uchem, 2001). The Igbo ethnic group reverence kola nut and use it to welcome visitors in their homes and at occasions. A female child is not allowed to become head of a family, regardless of her position in the family, and female children do not have inheritance rights in many ethnic groups in the country (Okany, 1986; Igwe, 2012). The female children are taught from childhood to be respectful and submissive, while the males are thought to be macho, outgoing, outspoken, and domineering (Nworah, 2010). Religion does not treat women any better, nor does it accord them equal rights and privileges (Uchem, 2001). The role of women in many Christian religions is not on par with that of men. For instance, in the Catholic Church, women are not allowed to become Catholic priests. There are many verses in the Bible that obliges the women to be submissive to their husbands, as they will to their Lord (The Holy Bible, KJV, Ephesians 5:22-24). Many men have relied on these verses to demand total submission from the wives. They often argue with their wives using these verses as a reference point, while ignoring verse 21 of the same chapter that enjoins both husband and wife to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Beside some cultural and religious beliefs and practices that treats women unequally compared to men in some parts of Nigeria, there are positive laws in some parts of the country that are discriminatory against women. The penal code of northern Nigeria, section 55(1)(d) gives the man the right to correct his wife as long as he does not inflict grievous bodily harm, and so far as the native laws and customs of the couple permits it. When this provision is considered against the provisions of Articles 1 & 2 of CEDAW, Article 5 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR), and Article 42(1)(a) of the Constitution of Nigeria, the discriminatory nature inherent in section 55(1)(d) becomes apparent. The obligation of Nigerian government under Article 3 of CEDAW and Article 18(3) of the ACHPR as regards the continued existence of section 55(1)(d) is very clear, and should be implemented to achieve the spirit of the Conventions, which is rooted in one of the goals of the United Nations: the equal rights of men and women.

Many female children in Nigeria are brought up with this mentality of subordination to their male counterpart. If a woman with such an internalized mind-set happens to marry an abusive man, it may be difficult for her to consider the abuse meted to her by her husband/partner as a crime. Likewise, the husband may consider his abusive behaviour as normal; that he is living up to his cultural expectations as the head of the family, which includes controlling and chastising his wife and children if they fail to conform to his instructions. Hence, the husband may be perpetuating the abuse in ignorance and the wife acquiescing to it in ignorance. Both are blinded by their cultural, traditional, and religious unequal gender value system. Enlightening the abusive husbands to overcome their perception of domestic violence, based on their cultural, religious, and traditional beliefs may enable them to comprehend the unacceptable behaviour towards their wives or partners. Similarly, enlightening the women to overcome their perception of domestic violence, based on their cultural, religious, and traditional beliefs may enable them to realize that the actions of their husbands/partners are unacceptable and a crime. Hence, they are likely to take appropriate steps to safeguard their lives and, perhaps, the lives of their children.

6. Inheritance Rights

In Nigeria, the law recognizes two kinds of disposition of property on death: testate and intestate inheritance. They are governed by three heads of laws: common law, domestic laws of Nigeria (statutory law), and customary law, which includes Islamic law (Sagay, 2006). The common law consists of received English law, while customary law is a body of customs accepted by members of a community as binding upon them (Elias, 1956). According to Elias (1956), customary law is the organic or living law of the indigenous people regulating their lives and transactions. They have some inherent characteristics and are generally unwritten. Islamic

law is known as “Sharia” which is set out in the Quran and the teachings of Prophet Mohammed in the Sunnah (Olakulehin, 2008). Unlike customary law, Islamic law is written, substantially rigid, and governs the way of life of Muslims, including their inheritance rights in Nigeria, especially those in the Northern regions (Nwogugu, 2011).

In a heterogeneous society like Nigeria, as in many other African countries, (Bamgbose, 2002), rightly observes that “customary practices differ from place to place and no one practice can be said to be inferior or superior to the other” (“Customary law practices in Nigeria,” Para. 1). Likewise, in all the ethnic regions in Nigeria, one can easily find traces of discriminatory inheritance practices against women, either as a female child, wife, or widow (Igwe, 2012). The severity of these discriminatory inheritance practices differs according to each ethnic group. It may not be possible to discuss the customary inheritance rights of all the ethnic groups in Nigeria, hence, I shall endeavour to discuss briefly the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria: The Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa.

Under the Yoruba customary law of inheritance, the children of the deceased, whether male or female, are entitled to inherit their father’s property on his death intestate to the exclusion of other relations. In *Sule v. Ajisehiri [1937] 13 NLR 146*, it was held that the partition must be equal between those entitled regardless of sex. However, a wife has no right of inheritance of her deceased husband’s estate. As Jibowu F.J., observed in *Suberu v. Sunmonu [1957] 2 FSC 31*, “It is a well settled rule of native law and Custom of the Yoruba people that a wife could not inherit her husband’s property since she herself is, like a chattel, to be inherited by a relative of her husband.”

In the Igbo custom, daughters and widows have no right of inheritance to their father’s or husband’s movable or immovable property upon his death intestate (*Nezianya v. Okagbue [1963] ALL N.L.R. 358 SC*). In the case of *Ugboma v. Ibeneme [1967] F.N.L.R. 251*, Rev. Ibeneme’s daughters from Awkuzu in Anambra State were parties to the dispute concerning the sale of the deceased property. The learned trial judge held that in accordance with the general Igbo custom, which is also the custom of Awkuzu, women are not entitled to inherit land from their father. Consequently, the female plaintiffs have no *locus standi* in the action. This line of reasoning was also followed in *Nzekwu v. Nzekwu [1989] 2 N.L.L.R. 373*. Obioha (2003) observes that, “Married women customarily enjoy what belongs to their husbands while they are alive, and reverse becomes the case when they die” (p.13). Ezeilo (2002) asserts that, “wives do not inherit because of the customary notion that women are property and, therefore, object of inheritance themselves” (“Igbo customary law of inheritance,” para. 13). A man’s daughter can inherit from her father’s estate only if the father has no male issue, and she chooses to remain unmarried in her father’s house with a view to raise children in her father’s home. This is known as *Nrachi* or *Idegbe* institution. The idea behind this practice is to save the lineage from extinction. The daughter, as an *Idegbe* or *Nrachi*, is entitled to inherit both movable and immovable property of her father on his death intestate (Ezeilo, cited above, para. 14).

Under Islamic law, the children of the deceased, both male and female including the wife or wives, are entitled to the sharing of the deceased property if died intestate. Male children have equal shares and females get half of the male shares. A child may only be disinherited if he/she is not a Muslim or commits patricide (*Yanusa v. Adesubokun [1968] N.N.L.R. 97*). After paying the funeral expenses, debts, legacies, and other charges, the remainder of the estate is shared in accordance with the Islamic law, as the basic principle under the Maliki system stipulates (Emery, 2010).

The courts have ruled against some of this discriminatory customary inheritance laws against women in Nigeria, especially that of the Igbo ethnic group, but the practice still persists in some places. This is mainly due to a lack of awareness and financial constraints involved in legal proceedings and fear of retribution. In a landmark judgment recently, the Supreme Court of Nigeria voided the aspect of Igbo native law and custom that denies female children’s inheritance, especially of estates located in their home towns and villages (*Lois Chituru Ukeje & Anor v. Gladys Ada Ukeje [2014] LPELR-22724 SC; Mojekwu v. Mojekwu [1997] 7 NWLR 283*. Justice Bode Rhodes-Vivour, who read the lead judgment in the case states: “Consequently, the Igbo Customary Law, which disentitles a female child from partaking in the sharing of her deceased father’s estate, is in breach of Section 42 (1) and (2) of the Constitution, a fundamental rights provision guaranteed to every Nigerian.”

The lopsided customary inheritance practice against women in Nigeria, wherever it exists, needs to be equitably addressed. This discriminatory customary inheritance practice against women subjects them to untold hardship, which constitutes economic, emotional, and psychological abuse. Nigeria ratified the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 13 June 1985, and Article 2(a - g) of the convention is meant to protect women against all forms of discrimination, including intimate partner violence and inheritance rights. The intervention by the courts in rebuffing these customary laws should be followed with grassroots campaigns to enlighten the populace that the continued application of these laws, wherever they exist, is illegal. The perpetrators may be unaware that their actions in this regard constitute domestic abuse. The traditional, religious and community leaders need to be enlightened to overcome their belief and allegiance to these laws and its practice. If the perpetrators and victims are able to overcome their belief and allegiance to these laws, it will be a step in the right direction to combating its practice.

7. The Culture of Silence and Shame

In many Nigerian communities, the first advice that is usually given to young couples by their parents and elder relatives at the time of their getting married is to “always keep your marital issues within,” and endeavour to resolve them without the assistance of outsiders. To a certain extent, it is a good advice, but where to draw the line between trying to resolve marital issues within and seeking outside intervention is the puzzle. It is a matter of common sense that not every issue that arises between couples may require the intervention of outsiders to resolve it. Similarly, not every trivial marital issue should be blown out of proportion, as there needs to be an element of tolerance in every marital engagement. This was echoed by the Indian Supreme Court in the case of *Dastane v. Dastane [1975] 1 S.C.R. 675* that:

The foundation of sound marriage is tolerance, adjustment and respecting one another. Tolerance of each other's fault to a certain bearable extent has to be inherent in every marriage. Petty quibbles, trifling differences should not be exaggerated and magnified to destroy what is said to have been made in heaven. A too technical and hyper-sensitive approach would be counter-productive to the institution of marriage.

While tolerance and respect are one of the bedrocks of every successful marriage or relationship, the ability to realise when to seek outside assistance is desirable. The culture of silence, which is the attitude of keeping quiet in the face of adversity, is prevalent in Nigeria, as in many other African countries and, indeed, many parts of the world (Channels Television, 2014). The adherence to the culture of silence has been blamed for the under reporting of domestic violence in Nigeria and other countries (Lewis, 2014). The late popular Afro Beat king, Fela Anikulapu Kuti (1978), termed Nigerian's attitude to the culture of silence in relation to their tolerance of government mismanagement and corruption as "Suffering and Smiling." However, in relation to the issue of domestic violence, I suggest it should be termed as "Suffering and Dying." Many Nigerians are dying as a result of the culture of silence prompted by the belief and adherence to its practice. In lamenting about the culture of silence that is militating against the reporting, seeking assistance and combating of domestic violence in Nigeria, Nwozo (2012), states that, "many Nigerians and African women have died in silence... Let us make a difference in another person's life by breaking this culture of silence. Domestic Violence is now a silent killer in our homes and lives..." ("Culture of silence and domestic violence," para. 11).

The issue of the culture of silence is exacerbated by its cousin in delinquency, "the culture of shame" (which is the attitude of not speaking out to avoid public ridicule or stigmatization). Many Nigerians regard the reporting of domestic violence or seeking help as shameful and washing of one's dirty linen in public. In many Nigerian communities, families regard it as shameful for their married daughter to separate/divorce from her husband, even in the face of threatening danger and looming risk of being battered to death by her husband. Also, in many Nigerian communities, there is a cultural tendency to blame the women for the breakdown of the marriage, as they are required to endure whatever situation they find themselves in. In cases of rape, domestic abuse and other related violent crimes, the culture of silence reinforces the stigma attached to the victim rather than condemning the perpetrator of such crimes (Onyejekwe, 2008). Obviously, stigmatization and religious beliefs are some of the reasons women remain in marriages in Nigeria, despite obvious threats to their life and wellbeing. Nwosu (2014), a Nigerian lawyer, opines that, "Because of the social stigmatization associated with failed marriages, some women have remained attached to the marriage even where none exists anymore, hoping against hope that things would change" ("Understanding domestic violence," para. 2). Continuing, Nwosu (2004), contends that "getting out seems to be an attractive option but the church teachings against divorce has left many to try to redeem their marriages at great cost to their lives..." (para. 4).

The culture of silence and shame do not affect women alone in relation to domestic violence (Onyemelukwe-Onuobia, 2012). Due to the upbringing and cultural expectation of men to be macho, enduring and domineering, many men suffer in silence in situations of domestic abuse perpetuated by their wives/partners. Men feel ashamed to acknowledge, report, or seek help when abused by their wives. Hence, they often fall victim to the culture of silence and shame with the potential consequences to either become depressed, develop high blood pressure, or battered to death by their abusive wives.

The need for Nigerians to overcome these cultures of silence and shame in relation to understanding, preventing, seeking help, and combating domestic violence cannot be overemphasized. Many innocent lives have been lost as a result of domestic violence, which would have been saved had the victims and the perpetrators had the courage to speak out and seek help to resolve their marital issues. In addition, friends, colleagues, and relatives of victims or perpetrators, who may be aware of ongoing abuse in their friends, colleagues, or relative's home, should be encouraged to speak out. There is a compelling need to overcome the belief that women who leave their matrimonial home bring shame to their families. The beliefs and practices of these cultures of silence and shame should be jettisoned, and the idea of encouraging couples to be vocal and seek help in situations of domestic violence encouraged.

8. Sense of Ownership

There is a prevailing cultural belief in many parts of Nigeria that married women are properties of their husbands. This belief finds expression in many ways that men tend to control their wives, which includes but is not limited to beating. Abiola et al. (2011) carried out a study on the perception of Nigerian men on domestic violence, especially wife battery, based on the 2008 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (DHS). The analysis of the survey shows that the majority of men perceive wife beating as justified if she disobeys or argues with her husband. The result may not be surprising to many people that grew up in some parts of Nigeria given the cultural belief that men own their wives and have the right to control and even chastise them if they question their authority or refuse to acquiesce to their wishes. This cultural belief is one the reasons that prompts some men to engage in the attitude of controlling their wife's earnings, her social life, relationships with other people, including her family members, religious affiliation, choice of profession, and participation in politics. Some men stretch this belief too far by demanding that their wife account for every expense she made, her whereabouts whenever she goes out, and the type of dress she wears. This sense of obedience inculcated in the mindset of the woman may be one of the reasons some of them perceive control and beating by their husband as "normal and justified."

Even the legal institutions in some parts of the country, before the recent judgments that voided the discriminatory inheritance practices against women, lean towards the acceptance of this cultural belief. Many commentators have blamed the traditional practice whereby a man pays a bride price to the family of the bride as one of the reasons, which nurtures the idea of this popular belief of sense of ownership of the woman (Waheed et al., 2014). The proponents of this school of thought view "the exchange of bride price being evidence of a commercial transaction" (Adebunmi & Aluko-Arowolo, 2007, p. 7). Conversely, some argue that the institution of a bride price wherever it is practiced in Nigeria was never conceived to be a commercial transaction, whereby the family of the bride

exchanges their daughter for a certain sum of money. Rather, the bride price is a symbol that denotes the importance of the girl to her family, and commitment of her fiancé regarding his seriousness to the marital affair (Akanke, 1993). There is an emerging notion that the payment of a bride price is to compensate the bride's family for their expenses and effort in nurturing her. This perception is reinforced by how expensive it is to get married in many parts of Nigeria, especially in the southern part of the country. Cletus Ilobanator, a Christian from the southeastern part of Nigeria avers that, "The payment of dowry is an African culture. It is like having cultural access to such a person, and immediately the dowry is paid, the woman becomes your property" (Waheed et al., 2014, "Is bride price still relevant to marriage," para. 17). Similarly, as Adewunmi and Aluko-Arowolo (2007), argues, "In modern times, the bride price symbolizes sale of the girl and ownership by her husband and his family" and "due to this misinterpretation of customary law, the woman is regarded as the property of the man who is entitled to discipline her as he thinks fit" (p. 7). Undoubtedly, it is apparent that the belief in this sense of ownership of a woman by her husband may hinder the effective implementation of discriminatory laws in the country, especially domestic violence laws. The former Chairman of the Nigeria Bar Association, Ikeja chapter, Barrister Dave Ajetomobi, states that, "There are many laws against domestic violence, but they are not working because of the cultural belief that a man owns his wife. Even the police hold this belief" ("Domestic violence: beyond tradition and culture", para. 19).

Overcoming this belief of a sense of ownership would assist the men to realise that some of their actions toward their wives constitute domestic abuse. On the other hand, it may assist the women to realise they are being abused, and that they are acquiescing to these practices in ignorance. Likewise, overcoming these cultural, traditional, and religious beliefs would help both the perpetrators and victims to realise they are hurting each other in ignorance. Therefore, instead of clinging to this cultural sense of ownership, couples should endeavour to nurture, respect, and love for each other. Respect for one another is the key to a fulfilling relationship devoid of violence of any kind.

9. Conclusion

In Nigeria, hardly does any month elapse without the unfortunate news of homicide as a result of domestic violence in the country. Couples find it easy to murder one another for trivial reasons, and it is only when such incidents happen that people will start recalling and speaking out about their knowledge of the couple's marital problems. People should be encouraged to overcome this culture of silence and shame and speak out about their knowledge of domestic violence in any home before it is too late. Speaking out after it has resulted in the death or serious harm of one of the couples is of no use. For instance, during the just concluded 2015 presidential election in Nigeria, a pregnant woman allegedly stabbed her husband to death over trivial issue of political party affiliation (Usman, 2015). The couple supports different political parties and presidential candidates, and an argument ensued over which of the candidates would win the presidential election. In the heat of the argument, the wife allegedly stabbed her husband to death in their home with a kitchen knife. The neighbours acknowledged that the couple usually had marital issues that often resulted in physical violence.

While the increase in incidences of domestic violence is worrying, the most troubling is the fact that many Nigerians are still grappling to understand what constitutes domestic violence, its effect, and the fact that it is a crime. In the midst of such a lack of awareness and understanding, how can the issue of domestic violence be effectively tackled in Nigeria if the majority of the populace does not perceive it as a crime? This is one of the most challenging aspects in the efforts to combat domestic violence in Nigeria. The onerous task to combat this social malaise should not be left for the government and NGOs alone. The traditional and religious leaders have a vital role to play to ensure that these cultural and traditional beliefs and practices that inhibit the understanding and sustain the incidence of domestic violence are jettisoned in their respective communities.

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