

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CRIME AGAINST WOMEN: AN AFRICAN CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The trust of this paper is on the cultural perspectives of domestic violence and crime against women in Nigeria. Culturally, the Nigerian woman is regarded as divine being with a noble role of motherhood and never as "rib" or "an appendage" or "after thought to man". Thus, there is no important facet in Nigerian life where women have not been fully represented in her socio-political life. The so-called domestic violence and crime against women, therefore, may be a behaviour pattern that is adaptive in a disaggregated environment which is essentially devoid of the "intention to harm". A salient point is made that the fast changing status of women in the western world may have no relevance to the Nigerian cultural and psychological perspectives of womanhood. Whatever be the mode of changes adopted in controlling the adaptive behaviour involving conflict between male and female in the Nigerian social environment, therefore, has to seriously address the problem of poverty.

Introduction:

The high rate of violence and crime has generated an interest in exploring the potentiality of non-violence and non-violent techniques in reducing violence and crime in human society. At the physical level, violence and crime entail a high degree in terms of destruction of life and property with their attendant hatred and malevolence. At the psychological level, violence and crime have led to the destruction of people's psychic resistance,

emotional stability and other personality qualities. Violence and crime have therefore become important social issues both at national and domestic levels and have formed the subject of researches, conferences and seminars. Reputable scholars as far back as the 1950s, such as Coser (1956), Gregg (1966), and Ardrey (1966) have conducted studies on domestic violence and crime. In this regard, therefore, discussion on violence and crime against women in general, and in Nigeria in particular, appears necessary. Such discussions are useful because of the crucial role of women in contributing effectively and efficiently to national development. An understanding of the African cultural perspectives of violence and crime against women appears equally necessary because such knowledge may be useful in determining the limit of violence and crime within a cultural environment. On this depends the understanding, control and prevention of violence and crime against the female folk particularly in the Nigerian environment.

Definition of Domestic Violence and Crime

Dame, Deaux and Wrightsman (1963, p. 217) define violence as "*any behaviour directed towards harming human being*" (emphasis mine). Violence is considered as any behaviour in which an organism intentionally seeks out to harm any other organism. Intention to inflict harm, be it physical harm or verbal affront, is therefore an important element in identifying violence and crime against the female folk. Similarly, the Fourth World Conference on Women as reported in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) defines domestic violence and crime against women as:

A violation of the human rights and fundamental freedom of women . . . it means any act of gender based physical, sexual or psychological violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, or girl- children, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty. Violence that occurs in private within the family includes battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence-related

exploitation. In the public domain, violence perpetuated or condoned by the state, whenever it occurs.

Acts of violence against women also include forced sterilization or abortion, coercive or forced use of contraceptives, female infanticide and pre-natal *sex selection*, as well as violations of women's human rights in situation of armed conflicts, in particular murder, systematic rape, sexual slavery and forced pregnancy (p.17).

The acts of violence and crime against women listed above by the World Conference on Women could be considered as non-violent, if such acts are devoid of "intentionality to harm" (Dame et. al 1963). This paper attempts to explain this claim.

Domestic Violence and Crime Against Women.

Thirteenth century Franciscan monks called women "the head of sin, a weapon of the devil, mother of guilt, corruption of the ancient law" (Adinoyi, 2002 p. 37). In today's Judeo-Christian works, many women labour through life under the burden/guilt of the original sin, and until recently, destructive storms, tornadoes and hurricanes had mostly feminine names in North-America. Generally speaking in Africa, widows loose their hair, stay in-doors, mourn and live an austere, miserable life for at least three months after the death of their husbands. But these taboos are not required of widowers. In Freetown, Sierra Leone, Ode-lay masked performers usually cover their costume with "juju" to protect the maskers from witches (women). Among the Ba-Rongas, Bantu groups in South-Africa, widows have to go through a series of rigorous purification rites to throwaway the malediction of death. The Maories of New Zealand believe that when a woman enters the area in which a sacred boat is being built, the sea-worthiness of the boat is affected and it cannot be launched. Among the Hindus of India, widows must either commit "suttee", throw themselves into their husbands' burning funeral pyre, or live forever in austerity and misery.

Amongst the Ebira, ethnic groups in Kogi State, connections are generally made between calamity (evil, misfortune, death, impurity, etc) and the female folk. For instance, an epidemic - small-pox, that is known to be devastating and unsparing, is endearingly and reverently referred to as "mother". The Ebira priests and medicine men (no woman) consulted the oracle and it identified a nameless female spirit as being responsible. In the tradition of the Ebira social arrangement, there is a strong belief among men that most women are endowed with hidden powers and energies, which could be used either creatively or destructively against men. When a male dies a mother, a wife, stepmother, sister, aunt or a niece is commonly held responsible.

Currently amongst the Africans, there seems to be two forces that direct the world, namely the heavenly forces with God (called different names Ohomorihi - Ebira, Olorun - Yoruba, Ubangidi - Hausa) as the Supreme Being and the earthly forces made up of the gods, the earth, women and the spirits.

Women have a measure of control over man's worldly affairs. Women exercise this control through the spirits that act as agents of the gods. When men fall victims after the judgment by gods, the remains are given to the earth. For instance, in the tradition of the Igala, another ethnic group in Kogi State, the survival of the king depends on the whims and caprices of their women. This is why the Inikpi (goddess) played a vital role in the Igala kingdom.

With reference to domestic violence and crime against women in African cultural perspective, what do we make of the contradictions inherent in the connections made between calamity and women? Firstly, how could a killing spirit be a "mother"? Secondly, how could tornadoes, hurricanes and death that appear to be beyond the knowledge of African man be given feminine names? It will appear to this writer that the reverence in which men hold women is tinged with fear and awe. The perceived capacity of women inspires fear in men and men's desire to contain or curb the destructive capacity or power of women, can only be successful with precautionary veneration or reverence. The interplay between the mystical powers of women and men's

need to control this power is a central theme of "agonistic behaviour" (Scott and Fredericson 1975). For instance, using the basic principles arising from a polysynthetic theory of agonistic behaviour in non-human animals and the practical implications of those principles, the acts as contained in the definition of the Fourth World Conference on Women, could be viewed as a system of behaviour patterns that are adoptive in situations involving conflict between members of the species. A situation of conflict is defined as one in which the behaviours of two or more organisms are mutually incompatible with adaptation. By adaptation is meant behaviour that is fundamental in the sense of favouring continued existence (Scott et.al.1975p.7).

African Perspective of Womanhood

Literally, it appears that the fullness of time has finally arrived for female citizens of the world regarding their rightful places in the socio economic and political life of mankind. This trend of events equally applies to Nigeria of today, especially after the Beijing Declaration of 1995. But from the African historical perspective, there has not been any period in the life of the traditional African societies when African women were not fully represented in the socio-political and economic life of their people. Culturally, the woman in Africa was never seen as "a rib or an appendage" or "an after thought" to man but as "a divine being with a noble role of motherhood" (Ivan1988). Women served as representative figures and their achievement and flaws were symbolic to those of the generality of womanhood. In African oral tradition, women are depicted as very concerned about the life of their communities. In times of emergency, women as well as men, have to be involved in the struggle for their survival. Long before the colonial period, women were perceived as articulate in theory and practice of African tradition.

It is within this perspective that reference will be made to traditional women in the Nigerian society.

In the Nigerian traditional communities, there were reputable women such as Queen Amina of Zazzau, Queen mother Idris Aloma of Borno Empire, Tinubu of Lagos, Moremi of Ife, Hajiya Fatima Lolo of Nupe Kingdom, and

Inikpi of Igala Kingdom. These women have played their roles in their own rights, as citizens with constituted authority and powers, a fact that positively underscores the non-newness of the recent "female equality campaign" in the contemporary Nigerian society. The symbolic roles of the women included their participation in wars, the accumulation of political and economic power through the expansion of empires as the evidence of certain fundamental human rights in the process.

In the philosophical thoughts of the Ebira, an ethnic group in Kogi State of Nigeria, the creative force resides in the inner recesses of the Supreme Being. This is expressed and manifested in all creatures in varying degrees, depending on the individual's closeness to the Supreme Being. In the Ebira tradition, all human beings are created equal in essence. The Supreme Being created both man and woman as equal in essence and destiny. Women exist within their own personal reality as they pursue their self-realization and fulfillment. Sofola (1990) put it succinctly thus:

. . . the African societies were organized on gender lines, each line carrying adequate authority which serves as checks and balances for a harmonious orderly society where everyone has a voice and where everyone is catered for.. Social organizations have male arm and female arm, priests, priestesses, female professionals in all works of life. ... the women. . . have two titles of authority which confuse the Europeans namely Olori (Yoruba) or Anasi Obi (Bendellbo) for the political head of women's arm of traditional government (p.8).

In the African perspectives, therefore, women generally possess a transcendental divine power over and above men and direct the affairs of men. Women possessed certain mystical, metaphysical and technical powers containing both positive and negative forces (Le. forces which are creative, nurturing, fruitful, sustaining as well as injurious, impervious, unfruitful and unproductive) that empowered them to gain ascendancy over men. This explains why women are recognized both at peace and war times. Women, considered in these perspectives can cause the men's endeavour to be successful or

unsuccessful, depending on the men's vision and respect for women's edification and creative essence on earth. Women were, therefore, held in contradiction because men's vision of women is tinged with fear and awe. The perceived capacity of women inspires fear in men and men's desire to contain or curb the destructive capacity or power of women, can only be successful with precautionary veneration or reverence.

With such an exalted position carved out for the women, their place and greatness has never been in dispute among men. With this postulation, the current struggle- between women and men, be it economic, political or social might be considered as agonistic tendencies inherent in all human species in the sense of functional adaptation for continued survival. This, therefore, underscores the concept of violence and crime against women in the cultural settings of Nigerian societies. Women's struggle for "equality" may have no psychological meaning in Nigeria and to some extent in Africa.

In this context the major scientific problem between the African (Nigerian) man and woman may be explained in terms of agonistic behaviour.

General Principles of Agonistic Behaviour

As the focus is on Nigerian women, this discussion will be limited to the existing Nigerian traditional typology which may however cover other cultural groups in Africa. The principle of a polysynthetic theory of agonistic behaviour (Bandura, 1993) is that an animal has a tendency to respond with agonistic behaviour in any situation in which a fellow member of the species either injures or threatens to injure it. In some sense, an animal may associate an internal feeling of discomfort with the presence of another individual and respond agonistically even if the two events are entirely coincidental. Another major principle is that agonistic behaviour not only entails a behaviour system within an individual but also takes place within a larger social system. Thus, the nature of the social system largely determines the expression of agonistic behaviour and exerts its effects both on the development of the individual and on the evolution of the species. The nature of the agonistic behaviour varies according

to:

- (a) The nature of organization of the various systems and subsystems;
- (b) How these systems become organized;
- (c) How the organizations are being modified.

Along this line, the issue of violence and crime becomes relative especially between male and female in a given environment and economic system. No part of the total system, however, can exist in isolation without being affected by heredity and the environmental, economic, cultural and political systems of other areas. This theoretical position presents a scheme that integrates the action of various factors and process that modify violence and crime against women folk. Agonistic behaviour being inherent in human species evolves towards functions that positively favour adaptation and existence of the species or individual's that live in an environment. In this context, the major scientific problems of behaviour between the Nigerian man and woman may be explained in terms of:

- (a) The nature of organization of the various systems and subsystems in Nigeria; and
- (b) The means and ways by which these various systems and subsystems are being modified.

The question of ultimate violence and crime against women in Nigeria becomes irrelevant since the adaptive mechanism for continued survival for both male and female in the Nigerian environment are more plausible. Thus, using slogans such as "Women quality" "Women Liberation"; "Better Life for Rural Women" and "Family Support Programme" may not be productively efficient in a disorganized Nigerian setting where violence and crime are in form of injury or death to the individuals in the sub-ordinate group. One can, therefore, claim that the violence and crime associated with agonistic behaviour in Nigeria arose from disaggregating of a system, because when a social system becomes relatively weakened due to dominance and sub-ordinate order, such a social system lacks effective control mechanisms. Disaggregation as observed today in Nigeria, are

the residual behaviour of the victims (innocent victims) where foreign. Social systems are introduced without due regard to the existing cultural settings.

This appears to be a uniquely peculiar phenomenon where the purpose of dominance is destructive. As violence and crime continued, the amount and degree of dominance and sub-ordination became greater. This classical instance can be explained in lower animals. For instance, when two strange hens are placed together in a competitive situation in which only one has access to a supply of food, they may start to fight. As a result of the fight, one wins and the other loses. On subsequent encounters, the behaviour is more and more reduced to symbolic forms, with the dominant hen pecking or threatening and the subordinate hen submitting to the peck or avoiding it.

(Scott 1977, p. 12). In this manner violence and crime become learnt to compete for whatever is desired. Dominance and subordination relationship once established, increases agonistic behaviour in the victims. We, therefore, have as our major significant role the need to suggest the major processes of reducing violence and crime to a, functional adaptive mechanism that guarantees and sustains both males and females in peaceful co-existence.

Reducing Violence and Crime Associated with Agonistic Behaviour

(a) Improved Child-Rearing Practices: Agonistic behaviour, crime and violence can be reduced to the lowest minimum by proper training from the very early days of the child, even before the nursery school age. The home can be organized in such a manner that the child-rearing practices are geared towards attempting to interest a child in constructive and peaceful activities.

This means that if the individual is busy' with constructive and enjoyable activities even in play, two things will happen:

(i) he/she will not be stimulated to engage in agonistic behaviour; (ii) he/she will form strong habit~ or attitudes of being peaceful with others.'

(b) Improved Mass Media: the mass media, particularly in Nigeria, glorify

crime and violence which the youth are too immature to intellectualise. Video cassettes and films of various kinds have brought into our homes series of crimes and violence' where guns are freely used. In a changing culture, the youths are helplessly trapped in problems of violent adaptation.

The mass media glorify crime and violence while the laws and regulations abhor crime and violence. To reduce crime and violence the mass media have to be improved.

(c) Re-organizing the Judicial and Police System: The African cultural heritage in general has witnessed violence and crime and these are still prevalent regardless of our political independence. Having established that agonistic behaviour inherent in us is' associated with crime and violence through reinforcement, the associated violence and crime could be controlled by introducing primarily corrective actions that make violence and crime non-rewarding. Reinforcement through corrective actions could be a process of stimulating constructive and enjoyable cultural activities such as formulating strong habit of being peaceful; by keeping individuals rewarded and satisfied so as to be disengaged from violent acts and encouraging competitive cultural activities that contribute positively to humanity. Social' changes that take place relatively slowly are culturally and psychologically rewarding because such changes could be measured from time to time. The police and criminal justice need be reorganized in a socially desirable manner. The judicial seems alien to our culture, and it needs be transformed by identifying its peculiar problems as related to crime and violence in the society. These reorganizations will have positive effects on our cultural life, socially, economically and politically.

(d) The Role of Government: The modes of political, economic and social changes in Nigeria are frequently through crime and violence such as through coups, or election rigging. These modes have negative effects on our happy living and it makes our economic, political and social system to be psychologically damaging. A government that engages in frequent reorganization as Nigeria, may provide frequent disorganization. One vulnerable point has to be accepted: that to reduce violence and crime, both private and

public establishments have to provide adequate employment opportunities. Through this process, reduction in crime and violence will be remarkable because people who are gainfully employed form a large potential market. Violence and crime cannot be reduced in periods of economic regression. This underscores concepts like money mopping through inadequate and infrequent payment of salary, import substitutions, structural adjustment and retrenchment of the national working force. These policies should be changed by government with concepts that guarantee the individual opportunity for gainfully satisfying employment in a conducive atmosphere.

(e) The Role of Wealthy Individuals: Another option in reducing crime and violence in Nigeria is to encourage the wealthy Nigerians to generate gainful employment opportunities for the youths. Wealthy elders should be encouraged to form major corporations that extend satisfying employment opportunities to the youth. This will be a change from the current government policy that seeks foreign investment in Nigeria. Some private establishments should be made functional and expanded to employ youths with relevant skills. Through this process, the role of private individuals will be established in controlling crime and violence in Nigeria.

(f) Improved Education System: With reference to African tradition, the procreative and domiciliary roles of women in Africa, Nigeria in particular, had assumed pride of place well before the advent of the Europeans into Africa, As Alele (1990) would put it:

.because of the complex and extended familial linkages assumed by women, they could maintain family linkages between their own families by birth, spouses' family by marriage as well as their children's family by marriage (Alele Williams 1990 p. 7).

In this regard one could claim that the role of women in Africa was that of mother, who cared for her children, husband and society in general.

All things being equal, education (western education) should have widened the horizon of African women to embrace the idea of a nation that fosters the growth of skills needed in a more differentiated economy with improved health and social welfare. Western education should have brought about silent revolution of immense proportion that changed more decisively the worth of womanhood in Africa.

But in the earliest beginning, women were discriminated against-such that the males had more access to western education. The prejudices that existed in Europe and Britain were imported into the colonies. Western education did not provide for the exceptional skills in African woman; for instance while the first primary school was established in 1842, it was only in 1940 that female schools were established namely Methodist Girls' High School in Lagos, Elderly Girls' Memorial School Calabar, Church Missionary Society Girls' Seminary Lagos, Queen's College, Lagos and Kudeti Girls' School, Ibadan. In 1949, the ratio of male to female students in the University College Ibadan was 40:1. Female names in schools were written in red ink only after males' names had been written. Furthermore, pregnant girls were humiliated out of schools for fulfilling her creative responsibility leaving the male counter-part untouched. It is worthwhile to note the preponderance of psyche damage these girls and their parents suffered by these prejudices. Yet the African man was viewed as conservative for not sending their girls to school. The biological physique of women and cultural norms dictate that women spend considerable time rearing children.

In spite of the imported prejudices, great prerogative was reserved in favour of educating girls in certain parts of Nigeria. Before the Beijing 1995 declaration, literate women in Nigeria had become permanent secretaries, ministers, commissioners, bank chief executives, and chairpersons of corporations; directors in ministries and professors in the University system. Nigeria has therefore been foremost in setting trends in women emancipation in Africa, thus the Nigerian education policies have continued to be fair and just to women. The late 1800s and early decades of the 1990's Suffragette Movement in Europe and Britain that won the right for women in these areas has nothing to

do with the African women because African women had obtained parity of treatment in services and jobs of all kinds by the opportunities provided for them, in education as brought by the colonizers. It is important to note that the education policies as formulated by the colonial lords created prejudices which militate against women in Africa.

Generally speaking the present education system in Nigeria needs be changed such that employment can keep pace with the products of the system. The products of our current education system need be fully engaged so as to guarantee the youths a happy living. Education should be an improved mechanism aimed at rewarding merit that enhances efficient contribution to humanity. Functional education seems a problem in Nigeria and Africa in general. Certification seems to have taken precedence over skill acquisition. Going by the rate of youth unemployment in Nigeria, the education system needs to be reviewed to make it more flexible and creative in areas of retraining and integrating social experience towards positive attitudes. Re-training of youths in productive ventures may seem a better option because once the youths are fully engaged; there will be remarkable reduction in competitions that aggravate agonistic behaviour.

Conclusion

Agonistic behaviour is inherent in human beings and it is devoid of intention to harm. Such agonistic behaviour could be trained and re-directed towards productive ends. In the African traditional societies, particularly in Nigeria, there was no important era in Nigerian history when women were not fully represented in the socio-political and social life of Nigerians. Culturally, Nigerian women are regarded as divine beings with the noble role of motherhood. In the Nigeria of today; there is ample legal participation for women in the Statute Books such as the Labour Code Act of 1974. In the rural community, women play important roles as farmers, traders, and entrepreneurs in their rights. The so-called violence and crime against women in Nigeria are not culturally based but a formed adaptive behaviour caused by disaggregating of a system by foreign reinforcement. That such disorders are the residual

behaviours of the "innocent victims" which have no relationship whatsoever with the fast changing status of the women in the European world.

However, Nigerian philosophy of life has to change towards socially desired goals .Nigerians has to choose between:

- (a) A materialistic philosophy, and
- (b) A productively creative environment that guarantees happiness to all, regardless of the level of material wealth.

Any option chosen should essentially express our collective will. Perhaps one of the most appropriate ways to start this might be through a National Conference. .

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