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INCIDENCE OF PHYSICAL SPOUSE ABUSE IN NIGERIA: A PILOT STUDY

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Abstract

This exploratory study of the incidence of physical spouse abuse in Nigeria reveals that women are the primary victims. The study further reveals that early marriages, length of marriage, number and ages of children, size of household, amount of household income and the reluctance of the police to intervene in familial affairs affect the incidence of spouse abuse in Nigeria. Based on these findings, the author suggests that laws making all forms of domestic violence a crime be passed, victims be encouraged to take legal actions against perpetrators, and that the criminal justice system arrests, prosecutes, and punishes violators.

Statement of the Problem

The social organization of marital relationships and the differing expectations, responsibilities, and obligations of men and women in their respective positions as husbands and wives suggest that marital relationships are fertile grounds for conflicts because such expectations, responsibilities, and obligations are not based on competence or interest but on sex alone (Besharov 1990; Buzawa and Buzawa 1990; Dobash and Dobash 1998). As a result, most altercations that occur between married couples begin with arguments about issues that are mostly meaningful to the individual men and women in the relationship. Studies of the sources of marital conflicts have identified four problematic areas: a. men's possessiveness, jealousy, and expectation of sexual exclusivity (Gelles 1972; Thorman 1980; Gelles 1997, Dobash and Dobash 1998; Mills 1998). b. disagreements and expectations concerning domestic service and responsibilities (Gelles 1972; Alexander 1975; Steinmetz 1977; Davis 1998; Dobash and Dobash 1998; Mills 1998). c. men's assumed right to control women and punish them for perceived wrongdoings (Alexander 1975; Gelles and Cornell 1983; Ohlin and Tonry 1989; Davis 1998). d. the importance to men of asserting their power and authority over their wives (Gelles 1972; Steinmetz 1977; Leslie 1979; Gelles and Cornell 1983; Ohlin and Tonry 1989; Buzawa and Buzawa 1990; Ammerman and Hersen 1991; Gelles 1997; Davis 1998).

Since the social positioning of marital partners allows husbands to control and dominate their wives by various means including the use of force, it is not surprising then, that, in America, women are six times more likely than men to experience violence committed by an intimate (Neubauer 1999). Also, 3 out of 4 victims of intimate murder are women (Greenfeld 1998) and 85% of the victims of intimate violence in 1998 were women (Rennison and Welchans 2000). It is also not surprising that over 8 million women are victims of spouse abuse each year and that 35% of emergency room admissions are women seeking help for injuries they sustained at the hands of men (Roberts 1998). As Hotaling and Sugarman (1986) have pointed out, couples who have high levels of marital conflict also have high incidence of physical abuse, and as the incidence of physical altercations increase the severity of injuries sustained also increases. It is evident from the above that physical spouse abuse is a major social problem and women are the primary victims.

History of Spouse Abuse

Spouse abuse has a long history as a deep-seated social phenomenon. Societally sanctioned violence against women has persisted since biblical times (Leslie 1979). The Bible explains and condones

violence against women on the basis of women being the source of all evil (Buzawa and Buzawa p. 22) and the unwholesome tempters of men (Leslie p. 166). The origin of these views dates back to the time of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when, according to the Bible, Eve caused Adam to sin. According to the Christian interpretation of what happened between Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the aggressive sexuality of men and responsibility for carnal desires are placed upon women because all women are considered tainted with the sin of Eve (Leslie p. 166). According to this view, women are evil and as such, must be controlled through the use of physical punishment. Genesis 3:16 specifically gives men the authority to punish women for Eve's transgression (Gelles p. 22). According to Thorman (1980:160), the status of women in the church was so degraded during the Middle Ages that Amen were exhorted from the pulpit to beat their wives and wives to kiss the rod that beat them. So, the curse God placed on all women after Eve caused Adam to fall out of favor with Him is the earliest example of the negative definition of women which makes them legitimate targets of antagonism.

Secular laws have more vividly affirmed a male-dominated family structure in which the patriarch has the right to enforce male standards of feminine behavior through whatever means necessary, including the use of force. For example, under Roman law, a husband reserved the right to kill his wife if she committed a variety of offenses, particularly, adultery (Buzawa and Buzawa 1990; Stacey, Hazlewood and Shupe 1994; Gelles 1995; Dobash and Dobash 1998). The English Common Law which also gave men absolute authority over all members of their household later limited male-directed punishment to beating their wives rather than taking their lives (Stacey et al. p. 16). This theory of moderate chastisement was predicated upon the assumption that the only means to enforce male standards of feminine behavior was force (Gelles p. 452; Buzawa and Buzawa p. 22). The legendary but infamous rule of thumb which restricted the instrument of wife beating to a stick no larger than the man's thumb reflected this idea of restraint (Ammerman and Hersen 1991: 273; Stith and Straus 1995; Gelles 452). Following in the spirit of the Common Law, one eighteenth-century law limited the husband's right to discipline his wife to blows, thumps, kicks, or punches in the back where no marks would be easily visible (Dobash and Dobash 1979). The moderate chastisement laws notwithstanding, excessive abuses of women have persisted and continue to be a major problem in contemporary society (Buzawa and Buzawa 23).

Spouse Abuse in Nigeria

The extent of spouse abuse in Nigeria is unknown and may never be known. But, the following excerpts show that it is a problem worth investigating. In "Our Wives Strike Back", Abati (1997) reports about the brutality, violence, and humiliation an American woman who followed her Nigerian born husband to Nigeria experienced. According to him, spouse abuse occurs in Nigeria because the Nigerian society has a set of unwritten norms that guide marital relationships and the responsibilities of the men and women in those relationships. Violation of such norms, he says, could spell death for a woman.

While spouse abuse may be a universal phenomenon, the reasons why it occurs vary from one society to another and from one couple to another. While Ejerebe (1998) feels that spouse abuse occurs in Nigeria due to the social disorganization of the family, the Women's International Network (1998) blames the traditional value system which treats women as property that could be inherited. Further, Agbango (1997), remarks that domestic violence is high in Nigeria because the government, individuals, and groups use violence to redress societal wrongs and to initiate change in society, while Gelles and Cornell (1983: 9) feel that spouse abuse occurs in Africa because of cultural values that legitimize and encourage men to abuse their wives. According to Gelles and Cornell, men in most parts of Africa have orthodox views that reduce the roles of women to bearing and raising children, farming, cooking, and general care of the entire family. Failure to fulfill these expectations, they say, may have deadly consequences for a woman (op. cit. 144).

Further, during a recent public campaign of enlightenment against domestic violence and spouse abuse in Lagos, Nigeria, Akumadu (1999) called on the federal government and the criminal justice system to arrest and punish perpetrators of such violence which she says has been on the increase. The call was made after the death of a 34 year old woman who was burnt to death with acid by her husband. Commenting about spouse violence in Nigeria, Chukwuma (1998: 23), states that since the first incident of acid attack in 1990 in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, several women have been burnt to death with acid by either their boyfriends, husbands, or in-laws. Oyibo (1999) adds that this form of barbaric behavior has been on the increase in Nigeria, particularly, within the last three years.

With reference to the above, this study makes the following assumptions: 1. Spouse abuse is rampant in Nigeria 2. Women are the primary victims. 3. Women in polygynous marriages experience more abuse than those in monogamous relationships. 4. Full time housewives experience higher incidence of abuse than married women who are employed. 5. Couples who are college educated have less incidence of spouse abuse than those who have high school diploma or less education. 6. Incidence of spouse abuse is higher among couples in the low economic class than among those in either middle or upper classes.

Theories of Spouse Abuse

Spouse abuse is a form of violence that occurs between people who are in an intimate relationship. Violence of any kind carried out against another human being is difficult to comprehend and like other forms of complex human behavior, is even more difficult to explain. Theories of the causes of spouse abuse provide a framework for understanding and responding to this phenomenon. Different theories point to particular variables that might alert researchers and policy makers to the potential for spouse abuse in an intimate relationship. The theories fall into three broad categories (Jasinski and Williams 1998: 1) socio-cultural theories which include the cultural theory, resource theory, role theory, structural theory, and the feminist theory; (2) intra-individual theories which include general systems theory, pathological theory, and symbolic interactionist perspective; (3) social-psychological theories which include social learning theory, the circle of violence theory, and attribution theory.

Socio-cultural Theories

Socio-cultural theories of spouse abuse focus on the influence of social norms, values, beliefs and practices on the incidence of spouse abuse. According to these theories, societies that have cultural norms and values that approve of the use of force to achieve specific objectives will have high incidence of spouse abuse (Ohlin and Tonry 1989:67; Gelles 1995: 469; Stith and Straus 1995:8; Wallace 1996:10) and that since men have greater access to societal resources, they are in a position to control the behaviors of other members of the household (Steinmetz 1977:17; Hasselt, Morrison, Bellack and Hersen 1988: 60; Ohlin and Tonry p. 68; Gelles 1995:468; Stith and Straus p. 8; Wallace p. 13; Gelles 1997:129). These theories also point out that because assignment of family roles is not based on abilities, training, or interest but on sex alone, a husband who is criticized for inability to fulfill the responsibilities inherent in his multiple statuses may resort to violence to preserve the dominant position society prescribed for him (Dallos and McLaughlin 1993:22; Klein and White 1996:104-105; Gelles 1997:129).

Further, socio-cultural explanations of spouse abuse also maintain that patriarchal societies have rules and practices that implicitly or explicitly subjugate women to the authority of men. According to this view, societies that permit polygyny sexualize aggression toward women and by so doing promote their victimization and exploitation (Hasselt, Morrison, Bellack and Hersen p. 72; Ohlin and Tonry, p. 67;

Dallos and McLaughlin p. 22; Gelles 1995:469; Stith and Straus p. 55; Wallace p. 13). Socio-cultural explanations of spouse abuse also maintain that partner violence is one of many historically institutionalized methods of oppression and subjugation of women by men (Stith and Straus p. 8; Klein and White 1996:198). As a result, the brutalization of an individual wife by an individual husband is not an individual or family problem but simply one manifestation of a male-dominated social structure and socialization practices that teach men and women gender-specific roles (Dallos and McLaughlin p. 22; Hasselt, Morrison, Bellack and Hersen, 1988:79; Klein and White p. 1996).

Intra-individual Theories

Intra-individual theories of spouse abuse emphasize the role of alcohol and other drugs, psychological traits such as low self esteem and anti-social personality disorder (Roy 1977), biological and neurological factors such as childhood attention deficit disorder or head injuries (Elliott 1988), the characteristics of each family unit, and the interactional patterns of the couple (Stith and Straus p. 55; Stacey, Hazlewood and Shupe 1994:1) in the spouse abuse equation. According to this view, the rules that govern marital relationships are implicitly or explicitly made by both partners because such rules emerge from the characteristics of the family unit itself and the interactional patterns of the couple. Consequently, it is argued, spouse abuse is not a situation where one family member (the husband) victimizes another (the wife) but a sign of interactive dysfunction between husbands and wives who are both equally involved as perpetrators and provocateurs (Ammerman and Hersen 1991:274). Intra-individual theories of spouse abuse also suggest that there are significant differences between people who abuse their spouses and those who do not and between people who are abused and those who are not (Dallos and McLaughlin p. 17).

Socio-psychological Theories

Socio-psychological theories take the position that spouse abuse is learned in much the same way other forms of complex human behaviors are learned (Stacey et al. p. 35). According to this view, abusive behavior can be learned by direct experience or by observing the behaviors of others (Hasselt et al. 1988:51; Stith and Straus p. 8) and once learned, can be bequeathed from one generation to the next (Gelles 1995: 466; Wallace p. 15). Applied to the family, this theory posits that the family serves as a training ground for violence by providing both exemplars for imitation and role modeling and contingencies of reinforcement and punishment that often unintentionally encourage violence (Ohlin and Tonry p. 65). These theories also hold that children who are victims of child abuse or who witness violent aggression by one spouse against the other will grow up and react to their children or spouses in the same manner thereby perpetuating the circle of violence (Gelles 1995: 467; Wallace p. 15). Socio-psychological theories also call attention to the processes used by individual family members to impute motivations to the actions of other members. According to this view, the structure of family relationships is such that there is a high probability of malevolent intent being attributed to the actions of other family members. When this happens, it is argued, it can set in motion an escalating cycle of resentment and aggression (Ohlin and Tonry p. 66) which if left uncontrolled, could lead to spouse abuse.

Methodology

The following is an exploratory study of physical spouse abuse in Southeastern Nigeria. Because very little has been published on the subject of physical spouse abuse in Nigeria, informal/unstructured interviews were used to collect data from a convenient sample of 84 participants (50 females and 34 males) who agreed to participate in the study. Most of the participants were husbands and wives but there were instances when only one spouse supplied information because the other spouse either could

not be reached or was unwilling to participate. And because violence within the family is not discussed openly or publicly in Nigeria, it was necessary not to restrict the scope and content of the questions asked or to constrain the nature of the data to be collected by asking uniform questions that required specific answers. Further, because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, open-ended questions were used to make it easier for the participants to respond to the questions and to allow the author to probe certain responses and to focus on the contexts in which abuses occur.

Analysis of Data and Discussion of Findings
TABLE 1: Age and Number of Years Married

Age at time of study	19 years old or less (6 or 7%)	20 to 29 years old (39 or 46%)	30 to 39 years old (22 or 26%)	40 years old and above (17 or 20%)
Age at marriage	17 years old or less (4 or 5%)	18 to 20 years old (23 or 27%)	21 to 24 years old (31 or 37%)	25 years old and above (26 or 31%)
Number of years married	2 years or less (17 or 20%)	3 to 5 years (32 or 38%)	6 to 9 years (17 or 20%)	10 years or more (18 or 21%)

The above table shows that 67 or about 80% of the participants are less than 40 years old. Examination of the data revealed that the highest incidence of abuse occurred among participants who were less than thirty years old at the time of the study. For instance, whereas participants who were twenty-nine years old or younger reported an average of almost 11 incidents of abuse within the last 12 months preceding the study those who were thirty years of age or older reported an average of less than 8 incidents within the same period. Table one also indicates that 66 or more than 78% of the participants have been married for less than ten years. Analysis of the data also revealed that the longer a couple is married, the lower the number of incidents of physical spouse abuse experienced by the couple. For example, of the 66 participants who have been married for less than ten years, the highest incidence of abuse occurred among those who have been married for five years or less. Whereas those who have been married for five years or less reported an average of 10 incidents of abuse within the last 12 months preceding the study, those who have been married longer experienced an average of about 7 incidents within the same period. The table further shows that 58 or 69% of the participants got married at or before their twenty-fourth birthday. Incidence of abuse is higher among participants who got married at or before their twenty-fourth birthday than among those who got married when they were at least twenty-five years old. For example, whereas those who got married at twenty-four years of age or younger reported an average of about 11 incidents of abuse within the last 12 months preceding the study, those who were twenty-five years of age or older before they got married reported an average of about 8 incidents within the same period. From the above, it could be said that there is an inverse relationship between age at the time of marriage and length of marriage and physical spouse abuse. That is, the current study provides further support (see Ammerman and Hersen 1991:44-45; Dalos and McLaughlin 1993: 12; Klein and White 1996; Dobash and Dobash 1998: 216; Greenfield 1998) that those who get married at age twenty-four or younger and those who have been married for five years or less have higher incidence of physical abuse than those who get married when they are 25 years of age and older and those who have been married for longer period of time.

TABLE 2: Household Characteristics of Participants

Number of children	0 to 2 (19 or 23)	3 to 4 (34 or 41%)	5 to 6 (25 or 30%)	7 or more (6 or 7%)
Ages of children	0 to 6 years old (36 or 43%)	7 to 12 years old (26 or 31%)	13 to 16 years old (15 or 18%)	17 years of age and above (7 or 8%)
Number of people living in the household	2 to 4 (14 or 17%)	5 to 7 (44 or 52)	8 to 10 (22 or 26%)	11 and above (4 or 5%)

The above table indicates that 62 or about 74% of the participants have children between the ages of 0-12 and that 65 or more than 77% of the participants have 3 or more children at the time of the study. The table also shows that 70 or more than 83% of the participants have 5 or more people living in the same household. Examination of the data revealed that the incidence of spouse abuse is higher among participants who have three or more children than among those who have two or less children. For example, while women who have two or less children reported an average of about 6 incidents of physical abuse within the last 12 months preceding the study, those who have three or more children reported an average of more than 9 incidents within the same period. The data also revealed that women who have children between the ages of 0 and 12 reported more incidents of abuse than those whose children are between the ages of 13 and 16. Those whose children are 17 years of age and older reported the lowest incidence of abuse. For example, while women who have children between the ages of 0 and 12 experienced an average of about 11 incidents of abuse within the last 12 months preceding the study, those whose children are between the ages of 13 and 16 reported an average of about 6 incidents whereas those whose children are 17 years of age or older reported an average of about 3 incidents during the same period. These findings are consistent with studies done by Stith and Straus (1995) concerning the relationship between spouse abuse and number of children and by Rennison and Welchans (2000) concerning the relationship between spouse abuse and age of children but does not support the claim that the more people in a household, the higher the incidence of physical spouse abuse. Instead, participants who live in households with five or more people reported higher incidence of violence among siblings.

TABLE 3: Socio-Economic Status of Participants

Level of education	Less than secondary education (8 or 10%) 2 males; 6 females	Secondary education (44 or 52%) 14 males; 30 females	College education (20 or 24%) 10 males; 10 females	Graduate education (12 or 14%) 8 males 4 females
Employment status	Unemployed (29 or 35%) 7 males; 22 females	Homemaker (16 or 19%) 16 females	Employed (32 or 38%) 22 males; 10 females	Self-employed (7 or 8%) 5 males; 2 females
Annual household income in naira	19,999 or less (15 or 18%)	20,000 to 39,999 (45 or 54%)	40,000 to 59,999 (21 or 25%)	60,000 and above (3 or 3.6%)

As this table indicates, 8 or about 10% of the participants have less than high school education. Women make up 75% of this sub-group. Only 14 of the 32 participants who have college education or

higher are women. This means that only 28% of the 50 female participants have college education whereas about 53% of the 34 male participants are college educated. This disparity could mean that the education of women in Nigeria is not viewed to be as important as that of men and partly explains why incidence of physical spouse abuse is high among the participants because as Steinmetz (1977:126) notes, couples who are more educated use discussion rather than physical violence to handle marital conflicts more often than those who are less educated. The table also shows that only 12 or 24% of the 50 female participants were employed at the time of the study, whereas 27 or more than 79% of the 34 male participants were employed. Conversely, 38 or 76% of the female participants were unemployed whereas 7 or about 21% of the male participants were unemployed at the time of the study. The reasons for the high rate of unemployment among women in Nigeria are illuminated below by the Women's International Network (1998:12) which states:

Women experience discrimination in employment because the government tolerates customary and religious practices that adversely affect them; women remain under-represented in the formal sector; under some customary land tenure system, only men can own land; many customary practices do not recognize a woman's right to even inherit her husband's property; in some areas, a woman is considered part of her husband's property and she too may be inherited by his family; polygamy continues to be practiced among both Christian and Islamic communities; the testimony of women is not equal to that of men in Sharia courts; girls are sold into marriage at a very young age.

The above statements indicate that there is institutionalized discrimination against women in Nigeria in social, economic, and political spheres of life. And as long as the above practices continue, incidence of physical spouse abuse would probably remain high.

Table 3 also shows that 60 or more than 71% of the participants live in households that make a total annual household income of less than 40,000 Naira, which was equivalent to about four hundred U.S. dollars at the time of the study. Although cost of living in Nigeria is relative to income, it is becoming more difficult for married couples with children to make ends meet especially since monthly salaries are not paid regularly. One of the participants had this to say about irregular payment of salaries and the hardship this puts on people who have family.

An annual salary has been increased for teachers but the major problem is that you are not sure when the money will be paid. Sometimes you will not be paid for three months at a time and when the money comes, they may pay you only one or two months salary. The money is not enough for people who have children. It is extremely hard these days to make ends meet especially people who have children.

From the above, it is obvious that not only is unemployment high in Nigeria, those who are employed are not sure they will be paid at the end of the month.

TABLE 4: Participants Who Experienced Abuse

Occurrence	Slapping/Kicking/Punching	Pushing/Shoving/Grabbing
	(Minor Abuse)	(Serious Abuse)
Within the last month	7 (all females)	1 (female)
Within the last 6 months	27 (3 males; 24 females)	11 (all females)
Within the last 12 months	49 (7 males; 42 females)	16 (2males; 14 females)

As Table 4 indicates, 42 or 84% of the female participants have been pushed, shoved, grabbed or otherwise threatened in some way (minor abuse) within the last 12 months preceding the study whereas 7

or about 20% of the male participants reported having similar experiences during the same period. The table also shows that of the 16 participants who said they have been slapped, kicked, and/or punched (serious abuse) by their spouse within the last 12 months preceding the study, 14 or more than 87% are females. These findings supports the claim that women are the primary victims of spouse abuse and the assertion that whatever female aggression that exists, is in response to male violence.

TABLE 5: Most Frequent Causes of Physical Spouse Abuse

Under what circumstances is your husband most likely to use violence against you?

Causes	Number	Percentage
1. Not following his instructions	50	100%
2. Talking back at him	50	100%
3. Food not ready on time	50	100%
4. Going out without his permission	41	82%
5. Going out for too long	39	78%
6. Retaliation	7	14%

As can be seen from the table above, all of the 50 female participants stated that their husbands are most likely to use physical force against them for not following his instructions, talking back at him, and not having food ready on time whereas 41 and 39 of them stated that going out without their husbands permission and going out for too long could make their husbands resort to violence against them respectively. As can be seen, these specific causes of marital violence in Nigeria emanate from the differing social expectations and responsibilities of men and women in their respective positions as husbands and wives. Since the Nigerian society expects women to be responsible for most domestic duties, servicing the mans needs could easily lead to arguments that could result in the use of violence as Dobash and Dobash (1998: 146) point out:

Some men are particularly concerned about household work, especially when tasks are associated with serving their personal needs. The content, preparation, and timing of meals constitute a particularly sensitive area for criticisms and verbal confrontations that sometimes end in violent attacks on women.

Further, the patriarchal nature of marital relationships in Nigeria puts husbands in super-ordinate positions over their wives and as a result, a wife who does not follow her husband's instructions or who talks back at her husband becomes a victim of physical violence because Nigerian men do not believe that their wives have the same right as they to argue, negotiate, and/or debate. Arguing with ones husband is seen as a sign of disrespect and a challenge to his authority and violence could be used to silence debate, to reassert authority, and to maintain unquestioned respect. Once violence is used, it facilitates the men's ability to control their wives through various forms of intimidating behaviors as well as through subsequent acts of violence.

The fourth and fifth frequently stated causes of physical spouse abuse by the female participants are going out without their husband's permission and staying out longer than they expect them to respectively. It is important to note that these "causes of violence" reflect the traditional view of husband/wife relationship in Nigeria where women are expected to follow the instructions of their husbands without query and not to go anywhere without their husbands approval. Even when such permission is sought and granted, not coming back when expected to would require an acceptable explanation otherwise violence could result. It is also important to note that these causes of abuse are not mutually exclusive. The probability that a woman will be beaten by her husband increases if two or

more of the above factors are present. For example, a woman who disregards her husband's instructions not to attend a specific activity in the town will be guilty of not following instructions, going out without permission, and probably not having dinner ready on time. The more factors that are present in a situation, the more likely it is that violence will result and the more violence is used in one situation to achieve specific behavioral expectations, the more likely it is that it will be used in the future in the same or similar situations (Gelles 1972:73; Gelles 1997:127; Dobash and Dobash 1998:164). Further, the more violence is used to achieve conformity to specific behavioral expectations, the more volatile subsequent applications of violence could become, more so, if the woman attempts to fight back.

Even if 7 or 14% of the female participants stated that their husbands are likely to use violence against them in response to their own acts of aggression, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that women are the overwhelming victims of both minor and serious spouse abuse in Nigeria. The size and superior strength of men leave even the provocative woman no chance. Although a number of researchers (Gelles 1972; Steinmetz 1977; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980; Stacey, Hazlewood, and Shupe 1994; Cook 1997; and Gelles, 1997) have argued for what has been termed the mutuality of violence between men and women, the small percentage of women in this study that are aggressive toward their husbands questions such assertion. But, at the same time, it does indicate that in order to fully understand the problem of physical spouse abuse in Nigeria, attention must also be paid to women aggression. If both men and women take responsibility for their own aggressive behavior, both can be helped to find alternative ways of conflict resolution.

Other Contributing Factors

8 or more than 9% of the participants said that their spouses were chosen directly or indirectly by parents, relatives, or others in the community. This could mean that about 10% of marriages in the area surveyed do not involve pre-marital dating. Also, 21 (9 females and 12 males) or 25% of the subjects agreed that other people should get involved in the choice of marriage partners. While those who support this practice cited tradition/custom as their main reason, those who disapprove of it stated that marriage is a private affair and should be based on mutual affection. It is important to note that while 12 or more than 35% of the male participants support this practice only 9 or 18% of the female participants support it. This could mean that men are more likely to support this practice because it subjugates women to male dominance. It is also important to note that 11 or more than 64% of the participants who were 40 years of age or older at the time of the study were men. It could therefore be argued that men are more likely to support the involvement of other people in the choice of marital partners because through this practice they get to marry young women who are sometime, young enough to be their daughters. From the above, it could be argued that the high incidence of abuse among the participants is partly a function of the age difference between husbands and wives because as Dobash and Dobash (1998: 219) have pointed out, a young wife is more likely to be abused or even killed by her husband if he is much older than she is.

Also, marriages in Nigeria involve the payment of dowries or bride prices by the groom to the family of the bride (Okereke 1991). The traditional wisdom behind the payment of bride prices is to strengthen the bond between the couple and to challenge them to make the marriage work (pp. 94-95). But as the Womens International Network (1998) points out, economic austerity has made this custom obsolete because young girls are forced into early marriages to men twice their age by their parents and relatives who may need the bride amount to take care of other family problems (p. 12). From the above, it could be said that the higher the bride price, the more indebted the bride's family is to the groom and the less likely her family will be to support her if she wants to leave him even when abuse exists, because if she leaves, her family would be expected to return the bride price. This indebtedness of the family of the bride to the groom, therefore, is partly responsible for the occurrence of spouse abuse in Nigeria because

it forces women to remain in abusive relationships as noted below by this respondent:

He beat me all the time for many years but nobody will listen to me. After I had a miscarriage three years ago due to him beating me, I wanted to leave him but my parents refused because he paid a big bride price to them and he is nice to them. If I can pay back this money, I will leave him.

TABLE 6: Prevention of Spouse Abuse

What would you do to prevent future abuse against you?

Strategy to prevent abuse	Number	Percentage
1. Do what he says	50	100%
2. Let him do whatever he wants	47	94%
3. Get family involved	44	88%
4. Fight back	11	22%
5. Leave him	7	14%
6. Get him arrested	4	8%

As this table indicates, all 50 female respondents stated that by doing what their husbands want them to do physical violence could be avoided whereas 47 or 94% stated that letting their husbands do whatever they want will keep conflict at a minimum. If abuses start, 44 or 88% of the female participants stated that the way to prevent further violence is to get other family members involved by first complaining to the oldest male in the compound or to another close male relative who will advise the couple. If the abuse continues, other close relatives could be informed and the abuser could be fined. This informal process is the only means of settling domestic issues (including spouse abuse) that is approved by local customs. Most of those who feel that abuse could be reduced by being submissive, loyal, and obedient to their husbands stated that it is traditionally expected that they do so and believe that marriage is a family affair and as such, family problems (including spouse abuse) should be handled within the family.

One idea implicit in this belief is the assumption that the abuse will stop, but as Gelles (1979); Lloyd (1990); Herbert, Silver, and Ellard (1991); and Browne and Herbert (1997) have pointed out, being passive in an abusive relationship does not end the abuse but has the propensity of increasing its frequency and severity.

Further, it is interesting to note that only 4 or 8% of the women in the study felt that incidents of abuse should be reported to the police. In other words, 46 or 92% said they would not report incidents of abuse to the police because: 1. The police would not or could do anything about the abuse. 2. The issue would eventually be withdrawn by his family and settled according to local customs. 3. Family issues (including spouse abuse) are outside the jurisdiction of the police. 4. Fear of retaliation by their husbands, family, and/or other relatives. 5. Reporting family matters to the police is against tradition. 6. Concern for the long term consequences of such action on the perpetrator and/or the family. Not only that, the police in Nigeria are reluctant to get involved in family issues. This unwillingness partly stems from the fact that it is generally believed that familial matters are best settled according to local customs.

One of the female participants said that this idea is so widely accepted that "even when the incident is reported to the police, another member of the family, usually another male, can still go and withdraw the complaint because it is believed that such issues are best settled according to tradition." This belief and practice coupled with the fact that the Nigerian Penal Code permits husbands to use physical means to chastise their wives partly explains police reluctance to get involved in familial conflicts except where there is grievous harm, which is defined as loss of sight, hearing, power of speech, facial disfigurement or other life-endangering injuries (Womens International Network p. 13). It is also important to note that

only 11 or 22% of the female participants said the way to prevent abuse by their husbands is to fight back whereas only 7 or 14% said they will leave the abuser. This unwillingness to fight back or to leave the abuser points to the economic discrimination experienced by women in Nigeria.

When the male participants were asked how domestic violence could be prevented, they stated that the women should: 1. Do what they are told. 2. Know their roles. 3. Respect their husbands. 4. Know and follow customs and tradition. 5. Not talk back at their husbands. These answers indicate that the men expect total obedience and respect from their wives including not questioning whatever they do. In Nigeria, women are socialized to be submissive to their husbands. This practice subjugates women to the authority of their husbands and since this custom favors men, they are more likely to invoke its tenets whenever necessary.

Conclusion

This study indicates that physical spouse abuse is rampant in Nigeria and that women are the primary victims. The incidence of abuse is highest among those who get married before their 25th birthday and those who have more than two minor children. It also reveals that unemployed housewives who have a high school diploma or less education and families that earn less than 40,000 Naira (\$400.00 at the time data was collected) annually experience a higher incidence of abuse than married women who are employed, college educated, or live in households that earn 40,000 Naira or more a year. Information collected from the two female participants who were in polygynous marriages suggests that women in these relationships experience less incidence of physical spouse abuse but are more likely to experience economic, emotional, sexual, and/or mental abuse than those in monogamous marriages. Further, the highly patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society encourages men to dominate, control, and even exploit women; marriage in Nigeria gives men authority over their wives and the right to expect domestic service, sexual exclusivity, and absolute obedience and control. It can therefore be argued that the high incidence of abuse against women in Nigeria is a product of the traditional value system, the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society, and the result of a breakdown in the social and economic infrastructure of the entire society rather than an indication of individual pathology.

Suggestions

With reference to the above, the author suggests that the cultural norms that subjugate women to the authority of their husbands and the customary and religious beliefs and practices that limit women's rights to own or inherit property or that otherwise limit what women can or cannot do should be abandoned. The author would also like to point out that sex-role socialization exacerbates violence against women. Women should be socialized to be independent and to pursue higher education, professional careers, and paid employment. The author believes that if the economic conditions of women in Nigeria are improved, women-directed violence would decrease because some of the female participants stated that they stayed in abusive relationships because there is widespread discrimination against them in employment and that divorcees are stigmatized and treated like social outcasts. As a result of such attitude toward divorcees, the rate of remarriage is much higher for men than for women. The author also proposes that marriage should be a matter of individual choice for both men and women and that the cultural norms, values, and practices that guide marriage and family relationships as well as the practice of allowing young girls to get into early marriages should be changed.

Further, this study reveals that some of the customs governing the marriage process including the payment of bride price have become problematic and need to be abandoned because inability to repay such bride price is forcing women to remain in abusive marriages. Finally, the author suggests

that the policy of governmental noninterference in familial matters be replaced with a law that would provide for a warrantless, probable cause arrest, prosecution, conviction, and punishment of perpetrators of spouse abuse. Such a law should also provide for shelters for abused women and spell out what the police and the judicial system should do when cases of abuse are brought to the attention of the criminal justice system. The new law should also make it illegal for any agency or individual to discriminate against a potential employee on the basis of sex, religion, or creed. Additionally, the government should launch a campaign against domestic violence in general and encourage the public to report incidents of such violence to the police. The author believes that once the public is sensitized to the effects of family violence on the members of the family and society in general, attitudes toward this behavior would begin to change because as Felson and Tedeschi (1993: 210) state: A domestic violence (or spouse abuse) does not occur unless the social context in which family members find themselves encourages or allows it.

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