

## **An exploration of the Socio-Cultural Factors that influence Gender-based Violence against Women in Nigeria**

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**ABSTRACT:** In Africa, a range of socio-cultural factors, influence the perpetration of domestic violence amongst couples in relationship. Such factors do not only impact the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of victims, but creates unnecessary tension in marital relationships. These factors include harmful traditional practices and beliefs, taboos, community, expectations, rules, laws and policies that govern a community. The lack of economic and physical resources is also a predisposing factor to intimate partner violence. Utilizing anonymous survey methodology, the study offers findings from a study within a conservative Christian denomination. The data were collected from 377 congregants of five Seventh-day Adventist churches in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The analysis reveals that 36.5% of the samples in this population have experienced at least one act of emotional violence with an intimate partner. Further analysis of this study reveal substantial differences in emotional abuse between men and women in this population. Result indicate those who experienced the highest levels of emotional abuse were women hence the need to decrease emotional violence in intimate partner relationships. The clergy, and the helping profession in the Church will play important roles on domestic violence prevention amongst couples in this population.

**Keywords:** Socio-cultural factors, Emotional violence, Women, Prevention, and Church.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The perpetration of domestic violence, commonly referred to as spouse abuse (SA), intimate partner violence (IPV) and family violence (FV) among others, appear to be prevalent in the Nigerian society (Francis, 2005). Sometimes one finds it difficult to distinguish violent behaviours amongst Christian and non-Christian population in the society. Such violence criss-crosses cultural, geographical, religious, social and economic boundaries without respect for persons (UNICEF, 2005). Studies on gender violence, show that emotional violence (EV), especially against women, is a major source of concern and touches on the lives of many. Ndugasa, Okemgbo, and Odimegwu, (2002) and Ogunseye, (2004) argue that the high level of emotional violence that exists in Nigeria and, by extension, Sub-Saharan African countries, appear to be driven by culture and the lack of regard for women. This is however intensified by escalating dowry and bride price which is synonymous with purchasing a property (Omorogbe, Obetoh & Odion, 2010). Studies indicate that cultural norms and practices that emphasize the power of tradition appear to explain the widespread of emotional abuse against women. These norms include the belief that Men are fundamentally superior to women (Oluremi, 2015) and that family matters are private in nature (Bowman, 2003) and therefore inappropriate for anyone to intrude in family matters that does not concern him/her (Adegoke & Oladeji, 2008). Unfortunately, many women who suffer from these abuse do not report them to law enforcement authorities, because of shame and for fear of reprisal (Afronews, 2008; Akintunde & Abeodan, 2002).

As a pastor, I have on numerous occasions been confronted by many people within and outside my congregation on intimate partner violence that show no signs of abating. I have even been confronted with heart-breaking situations involving husbands and wives and their children begging for some sort of relief from these pains. In my desperation I ask, "Is there anything that the clergy and the Church community can do to ease the pain of victims while confronting perpetrators of abuse? Brade, (2002) argues that the Church must not say Amen in violence cases, but provide educational programs that helps to decrease violence between intimate partners in faith communities. Helping clergy understand the elements of domestic violence, and providing support for those who have been impacted by domestic violence is important in the fight against domestic violence.

Currently, there are too many violent crimes in intimate partner relationships and such violence are committed more frequently against women without segregation (Battaglia, 2001; Nason-Clark, 2001). These include lethal and non-lethal forms of abuse (Bevan & Higgins 2002). Although distinction must be made between physical violence/abuse, which is the most researched, and emotional, or psychological, abuse (Busch

and Rosenberg, 2004). Engel, (2002) describes emotional abuse as any non-physical behavior or attitude that is designed to control, subdue, punish, or isolate another person through the use of humiliation or fear. Emotional abuse also includes verbal assault, dominance, control, isolation, ridicule, or the use of intimate knowledge of a spouse for degradation (Follingstad, Coyne, & Gambone, 2005). Abuse of this nature targets the emotional and psychological well-being of the victim, and it is often an antecedent to physical abuse. Gondolf, Heckert, and Kimmel (2002) argue that there is a high correlation between physical abuse and emotional abuse in batterer populations, and the presence of verbal abuse early in a relationship predicts subsequent physical spousal abuse (Schumacher & Leonard, 2005). There is the need for violence intervention programs for victims and their abusers in order to reduce the perpetration of violence.

Within the framework of my pastoral experience, I have come to realize that the Church has a tendency to overlook this issues as couple relational problems, thus focusing her attention to evangelism and missions to the world. Pastoral involvement in providing succour for victims and the less privileged appear to have taken back seat in our congregations. This is a major source of concern and frustration for many pastors who are ill equipped with skills to address the issues of human rights abuse in their parish. Addressing issues of human rights that confront members, is pivotal to an effective Church ministry. The Church must therefore wake up to address the realities of abuse in our congregations amongst couples in relationships (Brade, 2009; Fortune, 2006; Fowler & Hill, 2004, Ellison & Anderson, 2001). Such proactive stance would be a stitch in time that could save lives.

## **II. RISK FACTORS OF ABUSE**

The socio-cultural factors influencing the perpetration of emotional abuse against women in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa are diverse (Aina, 2004; Akolisa, 2002; Omorogbe, Obetoh & Odion, 2010). Studies highlight a number of them and they include: age, and marital status (Aderinto, 2004; Adesina, Oyugbo, & Olubukola 2011), the cultural belief that beating a woman is an appropriate way to correct her (Oluremi, 2015; ) and the belief that family matters are private and restricted to the family circle (Afronews, 2010; Nason-Clark, 2004; Okereke, 2002 Takyi & Mann, 2006). Other risk factors include having low income as a result of being unskilled or unemployed ; experiencing or witnessing violence in one's family of origin (Jewkes, Levin, & Penn-Kekana, 2002), demand of high bride price in marriages which invariably makes a woman vulnerable to abuse and (Garcia, et al., 2006) ). Being disrespectful to in-laws and producing more female children than male in marital relationships (Okereke, 2002). All these and many more, increase the perpetration of intimate partner violence. Additionally, studies have also pointed to some conservative Christian beliefs such as women submission and maintaining family unit at all cost as potential risk factors of abuse. Researchers, believe that the Christian teaching of maintaining the family unit at all cost, without considering all variables, is a potential risk factor of emotional abuse in intimate partner relationships (Nason-Clark, 2000; Drumm; Popescu; McBride; Hopkins; Thayer and Wrenn, 2006).

Consequently, Njovana and Watt (1996) expounded the reasons why domestic violence is rampant in the society. They argue that women's low status as well as the rapid social change in the world, contributes to IPV amongst couples. This view is also corroborated by Hindin, (2003) and Udegbe (1995) who opine that emotional abuse is a product of patriarchal culture that neglects the needs of women. From the forgoing, we argue that emotional abuse and exploitation of women is perpetuated, where the relationship between a husband and his wife appear to be that of senior and junior, or that of a master and a servant. This kind of attitude, leads to a pattern of dominance and control in relationship (Adewale, 2007). Although, African traditional marriage is premised on submissiveness to husbands according to biblical injunction, it is also important to realize that marriage is the coming together of two equals, but with different responsibilities, to make for a happy home. The idea that one must be overtly subservient to the other, is alien to the purpose of intimate partner relationship. Because of the forgoing, it is observe that violence disclosure for many women become a difficult task for fear of reprisal and abandonment (Knapp, 2001; Johnson, 1995; Koenig, et al., 2003).

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

This descriptive study utilized questionnaires and anonymously surveyed 377 participants attending Seventh-day Adventist churches in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. All participants consented to participating in this study without coercion. The research questions include:

1. What is the current and lifetime prevalence of intimate partner victimization among this population?
2. How does characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, culture, educational attainment, socioeconomic status, religious conservatism, and witnessing violence as a child associated with emotional victimization?

### **3.1 Sample and Data Collection**

The data for this study was collected from five medium sized churches in Port Harcourt area of Rivers State in Nigeria using the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979) and the National Violence against Women's

survey (NAVAW) instrument. (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). This study was formally approved by Andrews University Institutional Review Board (IRB)USA and was backed up with consent from the regional authority of the Seventh day Adventists Church in Port Harcourt Nigeria, as well as the participants of this study prior to data collection.

### 3.2 The Process of Data Collection

A pre-arranged worship session prior to data collection was organized. At this session, participants were given presentations on intimate partner violence in heterosexual relationships. At the end of the service, women and men were separated to two different locations. This was to allow for convenience for those wanting to opt out of the process to do so quietly. In addition, the participants were instructed to drop their completed questionnaires by themselves into a box with a lid and securely locked to ensure privacy.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

A computer software program, Statistical package for Social Sciences (SPSS), was used to convert the raw data into a form useful for data analysis. This involved scoring the data by assigning numeric values to each response and using the variables to form scales in simple percentages.

### 4.0 Measures

The Standard measure used in this research was intimate partner victimization. In order to measure the prevalence of emotional abuse in this population the survey asked a variety of questions. The survey asked “In your adulthood with an intimate partner has this EVER happened to you?” To measure the prevalence of current emotional victimization for each item, the survey offered an option of, “How often has this happened in the last twelve months?”

#### Emotional or psychological abuse

Emotional abuse consists of behavior intended to shame, demean, intimidate or humiliate. Examples include yelling at or insulting the other person, or limiting his contact with friends and family. Such behavior often occurs within relationships that are also physically abusive. To assess emotional abuse respondents were asked: How often does your spouse or partner engage in this type of behavior with you in the past twelve months and if you have ever experienced this behavior. (1) Told you what to do and expect obedience, (2) Made big family and household decisions and spending without consulting you, (3) Limited your involvement with others (friends, family and co-workers), (4) Did not let you have access to family/personal income, (5) Restricted your use of the family Car, needed you to get permission and restricted you from getting a car license, (6) Prevented you from getting or keeping a job/education. Result indicates 36.5% experienced emotional abuse in the twelve months preceding the survey. The summary is presented here in table 2

**Table 2.** Emotional Abuse Items and Percentages

Survey Items	Sex	Number	Percentages
Threatened to take the children away from you	Male	6	3.9%
	Female	7	4.4%
Insulted, swore at you or called you names	Male	36	23.7%
	Female	44	27.8%
Tried to convince you that you were crazy	Male	14	9.2%
	Female	14	8.9%
Threatened that he/she would attempt suicide	Male	8	5.3%
	Female	10	6.3%
Destroyed Property or cherished possessions	Male	11	7.2%
	Female	15	9.5%
Threatened to abuse your children	Male	7	4.6%
	Female	13	8.2%
Abused your children or pets to punish you	Male	12	7.9%
	Female	14	8.9%
Ignored or discounted your accomplishments or activities	Male	32	21.1%
	Female	36	24.1%
Was extremely jealous or accused you of having an affair	Male	32	21.1%
	Female	36	22.8%

#### 4.1 Demographics and Background Variables

The demographic and background variables measured in this study in relationship to victimization were: sex, age, marital status, spouse education, income, economic situation, church attendance, church affiliation, practice church doctrines, and ethnicity.

1. Sex
2. Age measured by a set of dummy variable related to the age groups (18-25; 26-35; 36 -45; 46-55; 56-65; 66-75; 76-85; 85+).
3. Marital status as measured by a set of dummy variable related to each of the six marital status groups (Single, Married, Separated, Divorced, Widowed , with Partner (husband/wife
4. A divorced separate dummy variable (1 = divorced or separated, 0 = Not divorced or separated)
5. Family economics (Very difficult and stressful; difficult, but manageable; adequate; better than average; very comfortable)
6. Education level
7. Spouse education level
8. Church attendance (once per year or less including never; Several times per year; One to three times per month; at least once per week)
9. Practice church doctrine (Very conservative; Closely or traditionally; Conservatively; Liberally; Interpret doctrines more non- traditionally; non practicing)
10. Ethnicity was measured by a set of dummy variables

**Table 2** Demographics

	<b>TYPE</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>TYPE</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Sex</b>	Male	49%	Female	51%
<b>Age</b>	18-35	30%	56-75	13%
	36-45	33%	75+	0%
	46-55	27%		
<b>Marital Status</b>	Married	65%	Single/Never Married	12%
	Separated/Divorced	4%	Widowed	1%
	Living with a Partner	18%		
<b>Marriage</b>	1 <sup>st</sup>	91%	3rd+	5%
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	4%		
<b>Divorces</b>	1	66%	3+	9%
	2	25%		
<b>Education</b>	Primary school or less	7%	University grad.	62%
	Secondary School	31%		
<b>Spouse Education</b>	Primary school or less	4%	University grad.	61%
	Secondary School	35%		
<b>Income</b>	None	19%	N301,000-N500,000	17%
	N120,000-N150,000	23%	N501,000-N1,000,000	18%
	N151,000-N300,000	19%	N101,000,000+	5%
<b>Economic Situation</b>	Very difficult/Stressful	15%	Difficult, but manageable	44%
	Better than Average	31%	Very Comfortable/Adequate	11%
<b>Church Attendance</b>	Once per year or less	2%	1-3 times a month	6%
	Several times per year	50%	At least once a week	43%
<b>Church Affiliation</b>	Baptized SDA	92%	Attending SDA	7%
	Catholic	1%	No particular beliefs	0%
<b>Practice Church</b>	Very conservatively	17%	Liberally	24%

<b>Doctrines</b>				
	Conservatively	58%	Non-practicing	1%

## VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the socio-cultural risk factors of domestic violence against women in a conservative Christian church in Nigeria. The result of this study identifies controlling and demeaning behaviour as an enormous risk factor of abuse among participants of this study. The analysis reveals that 36.5% of the sample recently experienced at least one act of emotional abusive behaviour at the hand of an intimate partner. Analysis also revealed significant differences between men and women in terms of emotional abuse in intimate partner relationships. In addition, regression analysis shows insightful relationships between emotional victimization, age, gender, and religious attitudes towards IPV. Specifically, those who experienced the highest levels of emotional victimization were women. The descriptive findings in this study are not entirely surprising considering the level of domestic violence in the Nigerian society toward women.

Although the Church is a place of worship, safety and refuge for all people, it is also true that people of faith are not immune from the bitter experiences of a sin sick world with failed economy and vices that appear to be uncontrollable. These vices engender domestic violence amongst couple hence the need for women empowerment and intentionality in abuse prevention approaches that are faith based. There is need for a qualitative research in this area to address some myths and beliefs that give rise to IPV in Africa.

### What the Church can do to address the issue of DV/IPV

The old sayings that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” (author Unknown) is very true in abuse prevention. The deep emotional stuff and physical pain and the devastation left in the wake of an abusive incident leaves scars that last for a life time. In view of this we recommend the followings that the Church:

1. Be proactive in abuse prevention by speaking out against all forms of abuse. An environment that encourages open Dialogue and communication about personal and sensitive issues will foster healthy relationships amongst couples.
2. Promote healthy family life relationships amongst couples through mentoring newly wedded couples and by facilitating family life enrichment seminars and workshops. Lessons learned from such seminars could help couples improve their marital relationships.
3. Organize workshops and seminars and invite guest speakers to talk about issues affecting families in general. Offer prayers for those struggling with emotional abuse and family problems.
4. Support community initiatives that are geared toward violence prevention. The Church could participate in fundraising to provide help for victims of abuse and their children.
5. Create and encourage networks for the divorced and separated. A support network of this nature might help prevent abuse among estranged partners.
6. Address wrong theology about women submission and headship issues which engender marital violence and abuse in relationships
7. Make referrals a priority for the safety of victims and perpetrators and educate members on the importance of reporting abuse cases to avert regrettable occurrences of DV/IPV.

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