

PREVALENCE, FORMS AND FACTORS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN CALABAR, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) has remained a serious development challenge, locally and globally. This study is part of a pilot study that is aimed at examining GBV and VAWG in Nigeria. The focus is to identify the prevalence, nature and sources of the phenomenon as well as identify some of the solutions that have been adopted as a way of curbing its prevalence. While depending on extant literature for existing theoretical and empirical data, we carry out a focus group study involving four (4) WhatsApp groups whose members live in or have lived in Calabar, Cross River State for not less than 2 years. This paper reports the findings of our initial WhatsApp focus group survey, with 14 participants. Using content analysis, we collate and analyse their responses in a descriptive format under the main themes: prevalence, forms/manifestation and factors responsible for GBV and VAWG in Nigeria. We find that GBV and VAWG is perceived by a large percentage of women as not declining, the most common forms being sexual, emotional, verbal, financial and physical violence.

Key Words: Girls, Gender, Gender-Based Violence, Women, Nigeria

Introduction

The challenge of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is not only local but also global. GBV and VAWG affects the physical and emotional health of women and can potentially destroy communities and societies. It is a systemic issue that permeates and affects diverse sectors of any society with implications for growth and development and so cannot be ignored. According to the World Bank, GBV and VAWG is “a global pandemic that affects 1 in 3 women in their lifetime and failure to address this issue entails a significant cost for the future (World Bank, 2019).

The term GBV is used in this study to describe violence against women hence our usage of the term in conjunction with VAWG. We adopt the comprehensive, robust and

all-encompassing definition of the United Nations which states that gender-based violence or violence against women refers to:

any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty whether occurring in public or private life. It includes physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, in the community, or perpetuated by the state. It includes battering, sexual abuse of female children, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence, rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, trafficking in women and forced prostitution. It includes physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state wherever it occurs" (United Nations' 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women).

While some may argue that this definition may not be as encompassing as it seems, we find that it provides a conceptual framework around which this study can be anchored adequately. What makes Africa particularly vulnerable is that several factors, some of which are culture, politics, protracted conflicts, economic development issues and religion, interact and affect women and girls in peculiar ways triggering and sustaining GBV and VAWG. Describing the prevalence of GBV in South Africa, South African President is quoted to have said his country is "the most unsafe places in the world to be a woman" (BBC Africa, 2019). In Nigeria, 28% of women between the ages of 25-29 have experienced some form of physical violence since the age of 15 (United Nations, Africa Renewal Report 2019). United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) observes that the incidence of GBV continues to grow in some parts of Nigeria, particularly in the North as a result of the insurgency and terrorist activities in the North-East (UNFPA, 2019). They observe that GBV manifests in form of forced early marriages as well as physical, mental and sexual assaults against women and girls (UNFPA, 2019).

Several initiatives have been set up at the national levels to help curb the problem of this violence. Nevertheless, it remains a very real problem and requires continuous research and studies that will explore its nature and dynamics in order to continue to improve and enhance whatever strategies may be operational. World Bank strategies of dealing with GBV, for instance, include investment, research, learning and collaboration with stakeholders (World Bank, 2019).

Research is encouraged in this area to draw attention to the realities of the issue and increase the evidence based in GBV and raise awareness of the magnitude of this issue and its negative impact on society. This study is expected to explore the perspective of women and girls on the issues raised here as discussed in the focus group. The contribution of this

study is to increase data that is evidence based and lead to further research and evidence-based policy around GBV and VAWG.

Literature Review

Extant literature on GBV and VAWG can be categorized in some major themes ranging from definitions, prevalence, characteristics/forms/nature, to consequences and effectiveness or the lack thereof of policy models aimed at dealing with it. Most studies are regionally based with some largely World Bank or United Nations funded studies covering several case studies at a time. One of the features of GBV is that it knows no social or economic boundaries, exists in both developed and developing countries, and affects women and girls of various economic and social backgrounds (World Bank, 2019). However, for the purpose of this paper, the literature reviewed in this section cuts across several of these themes but with particular reference to Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and Nigeria in particular.

Extant literature suggests that the approaches towards understanding GBV and VAWG are varied and range from individualist approaches, familial/systems approaches to structuralist theories (Macdonald, 2001). Within the individualist approaches, the problem of GBV and VAWG is located within the individual and as such she is the site of change. The causes range from individual choices, characteristics, interests, biology, genetics and pathologies of the individual. From this perspective, the cause is the individual, the problem is the individual and the solution will definitely lie with the individual. The second approach the familial/systems approach focuses on the relationships between couples and within families and households. From this perspective GBV and VAWG is a result of dysfunctional relationships within families and among couples; the family is the site of contestation. The third approach the structural approach places the problem in society and its social, political, cultural and ideological structures. For this approach the cause and solution is not the individual or the family but the larger society.

Diana Prieto (2009) in a panel discussion organized by the Wilson Centre to discuss GBV in Sub-Saharan Africa, has argued that there is a lack of state involvement and policies towards domestic violence. She argues that although an estimated one in three or four women is affected by GBV, any other problem which affects the entire population to that degree would provoke an immediate response but states contribute to the widespread acceptance of GBV, legitimizing inequity in families and society through a lack of criminal sanctions, protection of human and legal rights, and policies to promote access to health and education; and limited or absent resource allocation for implementation and capacity building.

Beyene et al (2019) argue that GBV is a public health issue with a high prevalence in Sub-Saharan Africa. Beyene et al (2019) identify sexual, physical and emotional violence as

the most common forms in Sub-Saharan Africa and observed that GBV was particularly associated with place of residence, witnessing parental violence, substance abuse, marital status and educational status. Interestingly their study showed that Nigeria had the lowest prevalence compared to Ethiopia which had the highest prevalence.

According to a United Nations (UN) Africa Renewal report, the most common acts of violence against women and girls in Nigeria include sexual harassment, physical violence, harmful traditional practices, emotional and psychological violence, socio-economic violence and violence against non-combatant women in conflict situations (UN, Africa Renewal, 2019). The high incidence of GBV in Africa according to the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) report, can be correlated to low levels of education, exposure to violence elsewhere, patriarchal systems, attitudes accepting of violence and gender inequality and low access to information on women's rights (AUDA-NEPAD, 2019).

Badri (2014) in her study of GBV and girls in secondary schools finds that the main causes of GBV and VAWG are interconnected. She finds however that GBV against girls of secondary school age is not related with socio-economic level of parents (Badri, 2014:1). Djamba and Kimuna (2015) rightly observe that discussions of GBV are more or less taboo in everyday discourse as result of patriarchal cultural norms that tend to limit women's autonomy. Baldasare (2012) also observes that GBV stems from and maintains itself at every level of society, from individual to societal, and in a wide array of forms, from private to public. Successful efforts will require coordinated, comprehensive and multi-sectoral responses. Baldasare (2012:2) also posits that patterns of GBV vary from place to place as do cultural and legal understandings of its acceptability, and it may be experienced differently throughout a person's life time from the pre-natal stage to old age.

Terry and Hoare (2007) argue that GBV originates from power imbalances between men and women and serves to maintain them among groups and as individuals on the personal, household, community and state levels. It is important to note however, that not all forms of GBV are products of men's peculiar behaviour as Terry and Hoare (2007) may seem to suggest as GBV may be the product of culture and tradition even practiced, enforced and preserved by women themselves (Baldasare, 2012:2).

According to the World Bank Gender and Development Group (2008), GBV includes a range of mechanisms that can be subtle or obvious, including but not limited to Physical Violence, Emotional Violence, Sexual Violence and Economic violence - physical violence can manifest in slapping, kicking, hitting or use of weapons; emotional violence can manifest in systematic humiliation, controlling behavior, degrading treatment or threats; sexual violence manifests in coerced sex, forced sexual activities considered degrading or humiliating and economic violence manifests in restricting access to financial or other resources with the purpose of controlling a person.

As Maynard (1996) rightly notes, these forms of abuses do not have to take place individually, but can sometimes manifest as a combination of one or more forms while they continually serve as covert or overt mechanisms to subvert the autonomy and self-esteem of women and girls. Masson et al (2017:6) in their study on Chad observe that VAWG is a daily risk and is not a problem that exists only in times of conflict and crisis. They find that the most reported forms of this violence are early child marriages, physical and sexual violence perpetrated by relatives, polygamy and associated discrimination against women such as homelessness, risk of divorce and the denial of opportunities and resources (Masson et al, 2017:7). Shahnazaryan (2016) rightly observes, GBV and VAWG “is the cause and negative outcome of women’s multidimensional disadvantages in social and political life. The main contributing factor of such comprehensive phenomenon can be divided into two main categories: structural and cultural, with both factors interconnected and interdependent.”

This study adopts the structuralist approach because it places emphasis on the society which is home to individuals and families, as well. It places the problem of GBV and VAWG in the social, political, cultural and ideological structures of society. As such we can identify forms of GBV and VAWG within the society that will reflect individual, cultural, political, cultural, religious or ideological forms as well as familial forms. On this basis we adopt a feminist sociological theory as the theoretical framework for analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist theory analyses the status of women and men in society with the aim of improving the quality of life of women. It is concerned with giving women a voice, creating awareness and enhancing their potential and actual contributions to the development and stability of society. There are several feminist theories that deal with issues of GBV and VAWG however for the purpose of this study we choose to use the Gender Inequality, Gender Oppression and Structural Oppression explanations as a framework for our analysis.

Theories of Gender Inequality recognize that men and women are seen as different and do not naturally enjoy the same status in society as their experiences in social situation is also perceived as different. Theories of Gender Oppression suggest that women are actively oppressed, subordinated and abused by men. Physical violence is at the base of patriarchy and can be destroyed if women recognize their own value and strength and confront the oppression together as women. Theories of structural oppression locate the experience of women’s oppression in capitalism, patriarchy and racism. In other words, economic variables, ideology, ethnicity, class, religion, age and a host of other variables peculiar to varying contexts interact to sustain the oppression of women in society. Taken together, these three perspectives form the basis of explaining the nature of GBV and VAWG, its prevalence and the enabling factors sustaining its existence in this study.

Study Area and Methodology

Calabar is the capital of Cross River State and is situated in the South Eastern part of Nigeria (Ottong et al, 2010). It has an area of about 406 square kilometres and a population of about 371,022 and is made up of Calabar South and Calabar Municipality (Enang et al, 2014). The Efik culture, which is the dominant culture in Calabar, has a display of patriarchy - meaning there is a preference for male dominance in the society's value system (Ben, 2017:361). Interestingly there is also an element of gender balancing manifesting in the presence of Iban Isong a female socio-cultural group that tends to pressure men to treat women with a sense of value and esteem (Ben, 2017:361). Also, the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)/ Female Circumcision, a harmful traditional and cultural practice/ritual or rite of passage (Nyong et al, 2018:20), has also been said to be common in this society. FGM is described as a form of violence against women and girls (Otu et al, 2012:220). In December 2018, the state government set up a centre to address the GBV and VAWG. Women were encouraged to report all cases to the centre to help punish perpetrators (Uchekwue, 2018).

This study examined the prevalence of GBV and VAWG in Calabar, Cross River State and the forms of violence common to the society's context. The study seeks to answer three main questions: (i) Is GBV and VAWG still prevalent in Calabar, Cross River State? (ii) What are the forms of GBV and VAWG that are considered common in Calabar, Cross River State? (iii) Who is to blame for the increasing rate of GBV and VAWG?

We use both secondary and primary data. Secondary data from pre-existing surveys documenting the nature and prevalence of GBV and VAWG were collected largely from World Bank reports, United Nations Reports and some other relevant sources. While depending on these extant literatures for existing theoretical data, we get our primary data by carrying out a WhatsApp focus group discussion with four (4) different women groups via their WhatsApp Platform. One group was a Christian Women Group, the Second was an Alumni of Secondary School Classmates, the Third was a Family Group and the Fourth Group was a work group. We label them Group 1, Group 2, Group 3 and Group 4.

The same questions were posted on the platforms of these groups and participants indicated interest by responding and we focused on those who volunteered to participate. While each of these groups have an average number of 20 members, we had a total of 14 participants - 3 from Group 1, 4 from Group 2; 4 from Group 3 and 3 from Group 4. The 14 participants were all educated women with a minimum of Secondary School Certificates (SSCE).

The discussion involved three major open-ended questions that allowed all respondents to answer the questions in as many words as they felt necessary. The questions focused on types of violence they have seen or heard about in Nigeria, What or who they felt was responsible and whether they felt incidences of GBV and VAWG were rising or declining. All participants were Nigerians although some of them live outside Nigeria but

have previously lived in Nigeria for over six (6) years. Using content analysis, we collate and analyse their responses in a descriptive format. Discussion of findings is done around the major themes of the study namely, prevalence, nature and sources of GBV and VAWG.

Discussion of Findings

In this section findings are discussed under the three major themes that form the focus of this study.

One: Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Calabar, Cross River State

Prevalence refers to the commonness of a condition or situation. In three of the focus groups, there were narratives of well-known cases of GBV and VAWG experienced by a sister, cousin, neighbour or friend. This is in line with Prieto's (2009) observation that an estimated one in three or four women is affected by GBV. Although some literature suggests that GBV and VAWG require more awareness, it does seem that these cases of violence are more common than we know at the moment. A participant noted: "My neighbour's twin sister went into depression because of the way she's being treated by her husband and it landed her in Psychiatric hospital. This happened last year December."

From the discussions we deduced that about 80% of the participants knew someone who was experiencing violence. It was also clear that many of the participants were careful not to make the experiences they narrated seem like their own. This may suggest that many women still do not feel comfortable talking about their experiences in this regard and would rather narrate these stories as belonging to others. We find also that depending on reported statistics to identify the prevalence of GBV and VAWG may be unreliable as many women in certain societies would rather keep things to themselves than speak up or seek help. In our discussions another participant stated:

...a lot of women just hold everything in because they have been told 'just hold all in because your great great grandma did so' and due to the pressures of our present world a lot of us don't have the strength and staying power like our mothers to swallow it all and drink a cool glass of water to push it down, so we snap, go crazy.

We deduce therefore from these discussions that GBV and VAWG is common in Calabar, Cross River State and needs to be addressed by all the relevant parties – Government, Faith-based Organizations, Traditional Institutions, Civil Society and Individuals as well.

Two: **Main Forms and Manifestations of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Calabar, Cross River State**

The main forms of GBV and VAWG in Calabar, Cross River State that we identified from the discussions include emotional, verbal, financial, physical and sexual violence. Participants were found to repeat these five (5) forms of violence even without it being suggested. All the four (4) groups identified these five (5) forms either by giving examples or categorizing them in clear terms. Also we find from our discussants that these forms of violence take place most often at home, in the work-place and in extended family settings. Some mentioned that this violence takes place as discrimination in churches too.

Table 1: FORMS AND MANIFESTATIONS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV) AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS (VAWG) IN CALABAR, CROSS RIVER STATE

Emotional Violence	Verbal Violence	Financial Violence	Physical Violence	Sexual Violence
-Ignoring one's wife in public -Disrespecting one in public or in the presence of another person - Keeping Malice - Criticism of every action	-Using Abusive words -Mono-syllabic responses in conversation -Shouting -Commanding -Talking disrespectfully in front of children	-Not allowing her to work -Choosing the kind of work she should do -Denying financial assistance for up keep - Making her give the husband all her money to control	-Beating, slapping, Hitting, Kicking, punching, dragging - Threatening to beat etc - Starvation or food rationing,	- Denying sexual relations, sexual distancing - Rape - Forced sexual relations when the partner is not ready - Insisting on Sexual practices the partner is not comfortable with

Source: Focus Group Discussions

Table 1 presents a summary of the common forms of GBV and VAWG and their manifestations in the society under study. These forms of violence are found to be experienced in the domestic context, work place and the extended family settings. It was also observed that these forms do not take place in isolation but often times involve a combination of two or more forms. This is in line with the observation of Maynard (1996) who states clearly that forms of abuses “do not have to take place individually, but can sometimes manifest as a combination of one or more forms while they continually serve as covert or overt mechanisms to subvert the autonomy and self-esteem of women and girls”. However, from the discussions we find that many women believe that physical violence is considered as the worst form while other forms are considered not so bad and so should be tolerated.

Talking about verbal violence a participant noted as follows: "I have seen a lady that behaves like a child because of her husband's verbal abuse yet instead of calling the man to order, they say *shebi* her case is better because he has not beaten her neither starve her." What this shows is that there is a preconception that as long as a woman or girl is experiencing any form of violence that does not involve beating and starvation, she is lucky and is expected to bear it and manage the situation. However, this is an erroneous narrative and should be debunked as awareness continues to be created on the issues of GBV and VAWG. As earlier noted, the World Bank Gender and Development Group (2008) states that, GBV includes a range of mechanisms that can be subtle or obvious, including but not limited to Physical Violence, Emotional Violence, Sexual Violence and Economic violence - physical violence can manifest in slapping, kicking, hitting or use of weapons; emotional violence can manifest in systematic humiliation, controlling behavior, degrading treatment or threats; sexual violence manifests in coerced sex, forced sexual activities considered degrading or humiliating and economic violence manifests in restricting access to financial or other resources with the purpose of controlling a person.

Three: Factors responsible for Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Calabar, Cross River State

The main factors that contribute to GBV and VAWG include the following:

(a) *Tradition and Culture* There are traditional and cultural expectations in the society that continues to define and sustain the wrong treatment of women and girls. Some of these expectations include, the fattening-room practice, and cultural beliefs of women as inferior to men, expectation of women to serve the men, marital expectations of women to be quiet, obedient and submissive. Women are treated as maids in some families. Also, the upbringing of man and boys is said to contribute to the problem. In relation to the issue of upbringing, some participants noted:

Most men do not have good mentors or father figures to model the right kind of marriage or the right way to treat a woman – be it a wife, sister or daughter so many men have grown up in very dysfunctional families and homes begging to see a better father who treats women right... some have grown up struggling to mix and match the different ways they saw women treated around them and that's all they know and so struggle at home to do better by whatever measure they know how to ... Some of our mothers/mother-in-laws don't help the situation because some of them weren't treated right think it's okay for their sons to go on treating the woman/wife in the same manner.

(b) *Preference for Polygamy* There is also a preference for polygamy that manifests in the society as men having more than one wife or married but still having affairs. This is in

line with the findings of Aneke et al (2011:153) that there is a high percentage of males favouring polygamy in Calabar. The implication here is that women are seen as properties that can be owned and added unto. Consequently, infidelity is seen as one of the major causes of domestic violence, alongside other socio-economic factors.

(c) *Socio-Economic Conditions* There are several socio-economic conditions identified as responsible for the prevalence of GBV and VAWG. Some of these include lack of well-paying jobs, unemployment, poverty, lack of access to proper education, lack of adequate and affordable health care, lack of adequate support systems for women and girls. Women's potentials are under recognized and under-utilized. There is still discrimination in the work place against women.

(d) *Lack of Adequate State Intervention* Another factor identified as responsible for the prevalence of GBV and VAWG is the lack of effective state intervention. Until recently, there has not been a clear policy of the Cross River State government against GBV and VAWG. This is not to suggest that nothing has been done, it has just not been adequate. Some participant stated as follows:

Personally, I blame the government who refuses to carry out its responsibility in dealing with these men who abuse their wives . . . Our social welfare is not as strong and effective as expected. It's just a name and does not fulfil its responsibilities. If these men are dealt with properly according to the law, I don't think we will have more cases of abuse in this country. . . I will say that violence against women is persisting because our government has refused to give true justice to women who suffer from it instead out of fear these women are advised by religious bodies and friends to endure believing the man will change some day.

In response to this problem in December 2018, the State Government had to set-up a Centre Against Gender-Based Violence under the Ministry of Women Affairs to tackle the problem. Still within this context, there continues to be an absence of dependable institutions for seeking redress and rehabilitation.

(e) *Posturing of Religious Institutions.* Another factor responsible as identified in this study is the behaviour of religious institutions. Many participants tended to blame churches for not providing enough support for women and girls either by providing avenues for them to talk about their problems or by standing up for them against abusive men, partners or institutions. One participant noted:

You see a women being abused emotionally, verbally, physically and financially but when she cries to her family or the church they will tell her to endure or keep praying ... how about call the man to order or help the man seek for help? ...for me I report my husband to God in prayer

In a bid to preserve traditional family life, religious beliefs sometimes contribute to GBV as they prevent women from taking actions that could take them out of domestic settings of abuse. Beliefs against divorce and separation are some of them. Others include erroneous beliefs regarding the subservience of women and girls.

(f) *Fear of Stigmatization.* Finally, the fear of stigmatization by family friends and the society as a whole has been identified as a factor that enables to persistence of GBV and VAWG. Society's stigmatization of divorce and single parenting prevents women and girls from dealing with the problems they face in decisive ways. One participant stated: "Most women have died because of the fear of what people will say." Another observed as follows:

our society has made women so scared to report these cases because they are meant to believe that marriage is for better for worse even when she is dying in that marriage . . . single mothers are treated like outcasts without wanting to know what led to her story

The fear of stigmatization prevents women from speaking up against the violence they face. Some of those who speak up are afraid to take actions that would separate them from their abusers and so they continue to stay in those environments. These are the major factors that were identified in this study as responsible for the GBV and VAWG in Calabar, Cross River State.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the prevalence of GBV and VAWG in Calabar, Cross River State and the forms of violence common to the society's context. The study attempted to answer three main questions related to the prevalence, forms/manifestations and factors responsible for GBV and VAWG. We find that GBV and VAWG is still prevalent in the society. We also find that the most common forms and manifestations of GBV and VAWG include emotional, sexual, physical, verbal and financial violence in the home, work-place and society at large. The factors that enable and sustain GBV and VAWG cut across tradition, religion, the state, customs and practices, fear of stigmatization and socio-economic challenges.

Based on the above, we recommend the following: (1) More robust research should be carried out to enable knowledge-based policy interventions into the problem of GBV and VAWG. (2) Grass root awareness is necessary to modify age-old traditional and cultural practices that continue to enable and sustain GBV and VAWG. (3) Creation of more institutions that can deal with the root causes of GBV and VAWG. (4) Stronger cultural, religious and national responses that will make women and girls feel less vulnerable and

more useful to society. (5) Increase in activities of non-governmental organizations like the Girls Power Initiative (GPI) in collaboration with other CBO's in the state working assiduously to end GBV and VAWG. (6) Churches need to, of necessity, provide coping mechanisms that can be easily accessed by women and girls in a way that encourages them to open up and receive adequate assistance when they are confronted with issues related to GBV and VAWG. (7) Women need to be encouraged to speak out, seek help and use all non-violent means available to address GBV and VAWG in order to encourage other women in similar situations to take advantage of the opportunities provided to protect themselves against the consequences of GBV and VAWG. (8) The State Government through the leadership and structure of the Ministry for Women Affairs needs to be more engaged in the activities of the Centre Against Gender-Based Violence in order to monitor the progress of the Centre in fulfilling its mandate in checking the prevalence of GBV and VAWG in the State. (9) Improve Gender based policy at the State and Local levels in a way that reaches those in need of assistance and addresses the root causes of the trend of GBV and VAWG.

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