

Gender Abuse in Nigerian Urban Space: An Impact Analysis of Domestic Violence against Women in Awka, 2000-2020

Festus C. Onuegbu,

Department of History and International Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria.

Mail: fc.onuegbu@unizik.edu.ng

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4205-917x>

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Amanda N. Nwafor-Orizu,

Department of History and International Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria.

Mail: amandaorizu453@gmail.com

Abstract

Domestic violence in Nigeria happens to both men and women but, oftentimes, it is mostly directed against women. The level of violence against women in the country increases by the day with two out of every five in most communities experiencing violent abuse at home, and the impacts on them are multiple. Women in both rural and urban spaces do experience it. Though many a scholar of gender and society has explored the problem of domestic violence against women in Nigeria, however, it is observed in their analysis of the problem that they not only tried to generalize the causes but tended to generalize the effects on women and how they respond to them. There is very little effort to dissect the experience in the urban spaces from what is obtainable in the rural areas as the latent social and economic elements in the two environments widely differ. As an attempt towards abridging this gap in knowledge, this paper, using Awka in Anambra State as a reference case, examines how domestic violence against women in the urban space impacts on them. It focuses on the family life, social relationships, psychological and mental health as well as economic wellbeing of the women. It makes some important findings: first, the impacts of domestic violence on women are more psychological damaging than physical; secondly, despite its deleterious consequences, many women seldomly report such abuses against them; and thirdly, very little instances of domestic violence against women have actually led to divorce. The paper adopts the thematic descriptive method of analysis. Sources of information used in this paper include: oral interviews, public government document and agency reports, books, journal articles, and the internet. The interviewees (informants) are drawn from different quarters in Awka metropolis, and were selected from amongst the victims as well as members of the general public that have relevant information or/and knowledge about the subject.

Keywords: Awka. Urban Space, Women, Domestic Violence, and Gender Abuse.

Introduction

The problem of domestic violence or gender abuse at home is not new. It has been, and still is, one of the major societal problems, especially in Nigeria. According to J. Eze, “domestic violence is a serious social, economic and psychological problem that is pervasive in Nigerian society. Although, sometimes, perpetrated in secluded places under several cultural and societal norms, the outcomes may be emotional/psychological trauma, physical injuries or even death.”¹ It suffices that domestic violence has profoundly destructive consequences for the victims or survivors, and both men and women are vulnerable to it. However, it is important to note that domestic violence in Nigeria is meted against women than their men counterparts; hence, domestic violence against women is very common. The fact remains that gender violence against women at home is, and continues to be, a serious societal problem in Nigeria with its negative consequences on the women and society at large despite the extant laws and several institutions in place to checkmate the ugly phenomenon.

A number of scholars have tried to probe the problem of domestic violence against women. E. Azinge and O. L. Uche in an edited work observe that the negative impacts are not only physical but, as well, emotional, psychological, social, and economic in nature. They can suffer bodily mutilations and harm, become psychologically imbalanced, develop signs mental retardation, and lose sense of self-worth.² The implication is that the adverse effects of domestic violence against women are multiple and devastating. It can impair the physical conditions of the women victims as well as how they see and think of themselves and the world around them. I. Ezedinachi and C. Udoka, similarly, note that gender violence against women dangerously has a culture of silence notwithstanding how it undermines their health, dignity, security, autonomy and self-perception as full-fledged human beings with natural and societal rights and choice of coexistence.³ This goes to suggest that women

victims usually do not speak up about it because it is degrading and demeaning. In most cases, it is considered a private family issue that does not need much public attention as it is commonly seen in some cultural societies a stigma to tell one's family problems outside. Hence, S. E. Abonyi, C. I. Ezeh, and C. O. Chukwujekwu posit that domestic violence against women is one of the least recognizable human rights abuses in Nigeria. It remains largely a muted problem that few societies openly confront it. It is such a problem that in one way or the other is reinforced by some cultural and societal practices in a number of communities.⁴ That is to say, in most cases domestic violence against women appears to be overlooked because some cultural and societal norms are silent about it.

However, it is common to see from the above that scholars in their analyses tend to generalize the impacts of domestic violence on women and the factors that sustain it. Acknowledging that women in every environment and society be it rural or urban can experience it, they most certainly do not experience and respond to it the same manner. The experience and the impacts on women in the rural area are not the same with those in the urban space. There has been a very little effort to investigate the peculiarities in each of these two differing spaces. It is this observed gap that engages this paper. The paper, therefore, examines the impact of domestic violence on women in Awka as one of the urban spaces in Nigeria where domestic violence is common. It does not just capture the peculiar factors that brew and sustain domestic violence against women in such environment but essentially explores the kind and dimensions of the impacts it has on them and their response to it. It thematically focuses on the family life, social relationships, psychological and mental health conditions, and economic well-being of the women victims or survivors. The basic aim is to show that domestic violence against women and their responses to it in the urban spaces differ from what is obtainable in the rural localities.

Clarifying 'Domestic Violence' and 'Gender Abuse'

A proper conceptual and operational understanding of *domestic violence* and *gender abuse* as working frames in this paper cannot be overstated.

- ***Domestic Violence***

Domestic violence has been defined by various scholars and institutions on gender and family. However, one amongst those definitions as provided by the United Nations is compellingly considered here. It is defined as 'abusive behaviour used as an advantage by one against the other at home that is not only dehumanizing physically but, also, emotional and psychological'.⁵ The implication is that domestic violence does not only take place at home but it is destructive, and has a perpetrator and a victim. It is instructive to note that 'home' does not necessarily imply a physical shelter in a given place but primarily a 'family and its household'. It suffices that domestic violence takes place amongst persons that usually live together and share common family affinities; hence, it is often called family abuse. In trying to list what constitutes domestic abuse, the United Nations notes that:

Abuse can manifest in the form of beating and battering, rape, sexual harassment, victimization and intimidation, negative stereotyping, scapegoating, emotional and moral blackmailing, willful withdrawing from one's essential responsibility with no just cause, withholding and damaging one's means of livelihood, opposing and suppressing one's opportunity and potentials to achieve goal and life dream.⁶

In other words, domestic violence is not only distraught and reduces self-worth of the victim(s) but spares no one. Office on Violence Against Women clearly states that domestic violence is a form of abuse and it is primarily meted against one on account of his/her person; not necessarily on account of the gender, though it has largely defined by gender sensitivity as most domestic abuse happen between man (husband) and woman (wife) and vice versa.⁷ The point remains that the man against woman or/and vice versa analogy understandably has not only shaped how domestic violence is understood but also how it is defined. This paper, therefore, operationally defines domestic violence as a 'violent gender abuse' at home.

- ***Gender Abuse***

Gender abuse is a form abusive behaviour meted against one on account of his or her gender by another.⁸ It suffices that the main object of abuse is the 'gender' and can only happen man against woman or/and vice versa. M. Smith and J. Segal note that gender abuse can happen either in the open or the closed places with no particular place or environment as the only place of occurrence.⁹ In other words, it can occur at home, workplaces, schools, recreation and parks, religious houses, markets, malls, service stations, construction sites, public events and occasions, in transits, public roads, and adventures in the forest, mountain or sea. They further note that abuse does not consider age, status and occupation, education, religion and creed, culture, geography and time.¹⁰ As a form of abuse in the broader spectrum of abuse, gender abuse can occur in the form of beating and battering, rape, harassment, victimization and intimidation, unwelcome stereotyping, scapegoating, slander and maligning of character,

emotional and moral blackmailing, withholding one's means of livelihood, opposing and suppressing one's opportunity and potentials to achieve goal.¹¹

Hence, 'domestic violence' takes place at home, and home is one of the places that 'gender abuse' occurs, it is somewhat difficult to treat the two separately and independently of each other. Therefore, this paper operationally sees little or no difference between gender abuse and domestic violence. However, it is important to note that the scope and understanding of gender abuse is expanding and changing in the face of global 'transgender' question. This new reality is seriously challenging the traditional notion of gender and what constitute gender abuse in a way never witnessed before.

Methodology

This research centers around Awka metropolis and thus takes little consideration of traditional village groupings therein. The aim is to investigate the effects of domestic violence against women living in Awka urban, not necessarily about Awka indigenous women. Oral informants were drawn from different locations within Awka urban. They are selected on either the account of their direct personal experiences, level of knowledge, or social treatment of the subject matter. Important documents and pieces of information are obtained from the Anambra State Ministry of Women and Social Welfare. To complement, these sources of information, a list of relevant literature on the question of domestic violence from the physical space and online are reviewed.

Domestic Violence against Women and the Family

The family in Igbo society is seen as a cultural and social monolithic unit; hence, any crisis that brews therein spares no one. The Igbo notion and system of family are rooted on the inseparable philosophy of 'indivisible unity and oneness'. It does not just express a sense of solidarity, reciprocity, compassion, complementarity but 'collective privacy' between and among the constituting members. The implication is that things in the family are often handled within and not outside it. Such privacy is seen as a way of maintaining its avowed oneness and indivisible unity. In as much as this orientation has helped to maintain monolithic mosaic of the family, it has largely built a kind of culture of silence and suppression that is recipe and responsible for a number of family crises and breakups. One of those unspoken problems is domestic violence against women. No wonder, G. Domechen avers that domestic violence is a society problem that takes place in the family, regardless of age, economic status, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or nationality.¹² Most times people erroneously think that domestic violence only has negative impacts on the victim without recognizing the spillover effect it could have on entire family. Domestic violence in Awka has touched the physical, emotional, psychological, economic, social, and value orientation in the affected families. Needless to say, the consequences are deleterious and, in many cases, have taken up a whole lifetime and permeated generations.

Domestic violence does not only affect the woman victim but the husband, children and even extended members of the family as well. It is revealing that in families where women are meted with violence, they most likely record a number of children that have no good moral orientation and are associated with vices as prostitution, crime, drug abuse, and street cultism. O. Khemthong and T. Chutipongdech posit that 85 per cent of violent abuse that happened between parents took place when children were present, thus got them abused emotionally in the process.¹³ In most cases, the trauma has led to family breakup which left the children unattended to and uncared for. It has strained relations between families and in some situation broken the bonds that once united them.

Ikenna Anaekwe, narrated a case of a woman in Umuokpu Awka that ran out back to her father's house at Eziowelle on 10th February 2007 as a result of repeated violent abuse from the husband. This incident did not only rub off peace between the two families but threatened the lives of her abandoned children.¹⁴ It has not only deteriorated family relationships and the psychology of the children, it has also led to loss of lives in families where they happened. Okwuamaka Enebogu recalled how in August 2010 a man was caught at Eke Awka market by angry youths while trying to run away after beating his wife to death at Amikwo, and in another instance on 4th February 2017 how a man in Umuoroko poured boiling hot water on his wife which led to her sustaining permanent physical injuries.¹⁵ This brought serious family rift as the wife's brothers threatened to kill the husband. Occasions abound where the woman, or the child(ren) died as a result of violent abuse in the family. Available report in the Anambra State Ministry of Women and Social Welfare Awka shows that more than 50 per cent of women whose conditions informed being enlisted for livelihood and household support in Awka urban have suffered series of domestic violence in their married families, in which 28 per cent of them had broken families.¹⁶ In such families, depression, hate, anger, bitterness and intolerance abound, and negatively affected the character of the children. One way or the other it has placed a social stigma on the families with regard to community social relations, acceptance in marriage, and public respect.

It is worthy to note that at the instances of these violent domestic abuse, the women were largely the scapegoat and bears the brunt. The abandoned children rest on their care: they shelter, cloth and feed them. All the pain and expense are on her. The society largely still blamed her for not being a bad person and not respectful and courageous enough to keep her marriage and family together at all odds. That is to say that woman is largely important in the survival of a family in Igbo society. In that frame when a domestic violence is meted repeatedly against the woman, the family is negatively affected.

Domestic Violence, Women and Social Relationships

Aside the effects domestic violence against women has had on the family in Awka; it has impaired the woman's social relationship. One of the most important aspects of human social development is the ability to interact with significant others in the society. Such social relationships include interaction with parents, peers, teachers, friends and so on. Thus, social relationships involve meaningful interactions and values that shape them between and amongst family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers and host of others. This network of interactions is vital for the well-being of a woman as the center of compassion, love and care in the family. In an atmosphere where the personhood of the woman and the perception of herself is so demeaned and abused, her active engagement in these social relationships would be badly bruised and jeopardized. In other words, domestic violence tends make woman withdrawn from social relationships and as her sense of self-esteem dissipates.

One of the visible impact domestic violence has had on women in Awka is tendency amongst them to withdraw self from public spaces. The society was an enemy to them. Mrs Caroline [real name withheld] who narrated her firsthand experience with domestic violence said that the society would always have a way to blame the woman for everything. That the patriarchal nature of Awka society could not allow women to express assert their rights to challenge abuses from their husbands.¹⁷ Thus, the cultural and social patriarchy that patterned the rights relationship between the wife and her husband in the family in one hand and the community in the other hand, has scapegoated the woman. The women were easily blamed for any reactions they expressed against being violently abused in the family. Luke Anagboso, a social and family counsellor with Pro Life Campaign, observed that more than 60 per cent of women between the age of 27 and 50 years who abruptly resigned or suddenly fired from their job in different places of work in Awka probably due to poor performance or noticeable psychological issues faced violent emotional and physical abuses at home.¹⁸ They lost self-esteem and had no joy in what they were doing and felt the only way to feel peace was to leave the public space. This sense of low self-esteem and being withdrawn from societal interactions when not well managed lead to self-harm and attempted suicide. A number of them became unnecessarily antagonistic and irrational to everyone around them as they always entertained negative thoughts.

Women victims of domestic violence struggle to keep up with the society before them. The fact that they were labeled victim of domestic violence, and oftentimes being blamed for it, turned them passive and in most cases antisocial. Hence, K.J. Austin and K.S. Rook observe that social construction of 'victim' and 'blame' in gendered relationships in patriarchal societies discriminates against women.¹⁹ Situating her experience in this context, Ms. Jennifer [real name withheld] recounted the ordeal she passed through as a victim of domestic violence. She said, thus:

Praise heavens that man is not God! When I was living with my first husband, I saw hell. He would beat me, curse me, abuse me all because of childlessness. It made me wonder if it is man, and not God again, that gives babies... The worst of it all is that when I complained to my mother-in-law about the situation at home and the constant abuse from her son, she would snub me. She told me to my face in one occasion that "*nne*, you know if you had given your husband a child, you wouldn't be telling this story."²⁰

Domestic Violence and Mental-Psychological Health of Women

One of the devastating effects domestic violence has had on women victims in Awka is health related. The nature and degree of the health implications varied at length. According to Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence (ICADV), a non-governmental organization headquartered in Springfield, Illinois USA:

Victims and survivors of domestic violence face diverse range of health issues which can be immediate or afterwards. Such include physical disability, arthritis, asthma, activity limitations, stroke, high blood cholesterol, cardiovascular diseases, high risk factor of HIV and STDS. Escapist habits like chain smoking and heavy or binge drinking often result in. Abused women are 70% more likely to have heart disease, 80% more likely to experience stroke, and 60% more likely to develop asthma.²¹

Domestic violence has serious health consequences on women. The World Health Organization, in 2006, reported that the consequences of violence against women can impact negatively on the productivity, health and their well-being as well as lead to intergenerational transmission, resulting to increased poverty and underdevelopment.²² The point is that the health implications of domestic violence on women are multidimensional.

A number of women in Awka experienced some severe health problems as a result of serial violent abuse at home. The health problems range from physical, sexual and reproductive to mental and behavioral. Julius Abana-Okoye, a neuropsychiatrist at Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu University Teaching Hospital Amaku Awka, disclosed that 2 out of every five women in Awka that came for clinical check at the Neuropsychiatric Unit in the last years had depression, and at every instance of counselling were vulnerable to domestic violence. He further stated that the depression was caused by persistent feeling of sadness and anger. It came with a variety of emotional and physical problems, and affected the women's sleep, eating habits and weight.²³

Economic Impacts of Domestic Violence on Women

Domestic violence against women does not only cause social and psychological harms for women but also rubs them of economic capital and opportunities for better and secured livelihood. It has huge negative economic implications not just on women but on the society especially in the sub-Saharan Africa. A study by R. Ouedraogo and D. Stenzel posit that an increase in violence against women by two per cent results to about eight per cent decrease in the level of economic productivity.²⁴ The point is that domestic violence not only negatively affects the economic productivity of women that are victim of it, but the economic structure of society in where they live.

A number of women in Awka lost their jobs in different workplaces and those in private business in one way or the other became demoralized. The zeal to help their husband in the family provisioning extinguished, even where they were the bread winners the urge to do more died. The resultant effect was poor economic living and more family frustration. In some occasions where the violent abuses led to separation in marriage in low income earning families, the children either would drop out of school or venture into criminality and prostitution for survival. When the woman refuses to support the husband in providing the family needs, his income would be overstretched, and sometimes may not adequately take of the needs. As the family is economically impaired, the society is already impaired. More than 30 per cent of women who lodged complaints of violent domestic abuses against them in the Ministry of Women Development and Social Welfare Awka lost their source of earnings and could not fend for their children.²⁵ It is against a scenario as this that Samantha Gluck, a Houston based journalist, wrote:

Many abused women find it difficult to function in their daily lives because of the effects of domestic violence. Absences from work or business, lack concentration when at work or in business often lead to low productivity often leads to loss of jobs or wounding up of business thereby creating serious economic gap for poverty.²⁶

Some of the women victims as result have been forcibly prevented from pursuing their career for any economic benefits. One Ebere Dike recounted how his neighbour went and locked up the wife's shop and later sold it off. According to him, that was the beginning of the current poor livelihood condition of their family as two of the children are no longer going to school.²⁷ Amaka Anachuna, in retelling her experience, also, said she was once so traumatized by her husband's abusive attitude towards her that nothing such as work or job comes to her mind. She recounted, thus:

What was more important to me at a point in my marriage was regaining my sanity. You know how it feels when you cannot even think straight... all that came to my mind at that time was 'how do I quit this marriage, how do I end it all'. I was not thinking of work or business...things I was used to, things I used to find fun doing.²⁸

Essentially, the economic implication of violent domestic abuse on women has serious multiplier effects. It does just affect the job and business prospects of the woman but lowers family income level. This puts the family in a serious financial strain that would lead to abandonment of training their young, giving care to their aged dependents, frustrations and loss of values as criminality and moral decay may set in, poverty and terminal ill health as result poor feeding and depression.

Conclusion

Domestic violence against women constitutes one of the major inhibitions on the way women toward achieving their self-set goals and potentials in Nigeria. From the Awka experience as one of the urban spaces in Nigeria it is evident that domestic violence impact negatively on women. It does not only affect the women's social

interactions, health and mental psychology, economic well-being but affect their children, families, and the society at large. Domestic violence against women is menace shatter many women lives, break a number of homes and disrupt peace in different families. It is canker worm that has no boundary in the way it affected women irrespective of age, status, religion and creed, education and training, occupation, etc. Violent domestic abuse against women is an established acute societal problem and, thus, seriously needs to be addressed headlong for peaceful and respectful mutual coexistence in the family and society at large.

To effectively confront this problem, a holistic approach that requires genuine commitment and collaboration from the individual, community, government, and civil society organizations. First, the individual men and women in Awka must strive to avoid things and lifestyle that promote domestic violence and maltreating of women such as ill temperament and intolerance, marital infidelity, alcoholism, gangsterism and crimes, hard drug addiction, economic laziness and embrace love, support, dialogue, openness and tolerance. Second, the Awka community should try to create a culture that dignifies and respects women in the family and societal roles they play likewise it does for men. Thirdly, the government both the Federal and Anambra State Government should as a matter of constitutional responsibility through their respective agencies and departments action various enabling national laws and domesticated international conventions against gender abuse and domestic violence to take their cause. When offenders are meted with the full wrath of the law, other intending offenders would be deterred. Fourthly, but not the least, civil society organizations and the media in the state and those that are borderless should strengthen their campaign and reportage against such ugly problem. It has a way of changing the orientation of the people and also set agenda for the government. Though, may not be totally eradicated as societal complex but if this 'four-pronged approach' is genuinely taken, the rate of domestic violence especially against women in Awka would be drastically reduced as well as the negatives undercurrents associated to it.

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