



## **GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: STUDIES ON NIMO IN WESTERN IGBOLAND**

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**Abstract:** Gender based violence in Nigeria and Nimo in particular has attained frightening increase and unacceptable levels. It undermines the health, dignity, security, and autonomy of women and girls, its victims, yet it remains shrouded in a culture of silence. This paper examines different forms of gender based violence such as child marriage/forced marriage, female circumcision, physical violence, sexual assaults/crimes, widowhood rites and psychological violence. While using descriptive and interpretative qualitative research methodology, the paper contends that gender based violence is a common phenomenon in the society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and that the majority of the people in Nimo and Nigeria in general do not consider it a problem or crime. The study relied on Liberal and Socialist Feminist Theories and primary and secondary sources of data were employed for this work. The paper recommends aggressive education and training that cuts across every strata of the society. Furthermore, it insists that a collective measure that comprises all stakeholders such as the local, state and federal government as well as the international agencies are required for the effective eradication of gender based violence against women.

### **Introduction**

The deleterious phenomenon of “Gender Based violence” (GBV) is a global problem and a subject of concern in Nigeria and especially in Nimo in western Igboland. One of the remarkable features of the present day traditional setting in Igboland, particularly in Nimo, has been the growing interest in perpetuating violent cultural practices against women, and also excluding them from the socio-economic development of

their immediate milieu. Although this exclusion is currently strong and widely upheld, there has been a relative silence on how to liberate women from the firm hold of these cultural practices. This is consequent to the fact that the GBV have constituted a major stumbling block to development hence women’s roles are jeopardized by men. In Nimo just like in other parts of Nigeria, GBV against women has been one of the most difficult things that are yet to be

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resolved. The most common acts of GBV include harmful traditional practices, domestic violence, physical violence, sexual violence, socio-economic violence, forced marriages and female genital mutilation. Cultural and religious norms have been advanced as the main reasons why women condone and tolerate these types of violence because they are expected to endure any vices in their marriages for fear of being ostracized. Studies have found that more females experience both physical and sexual violence than males. News channels are littered with stories of wife battery, rape of minors, torture and inflicting of serious bodily harm and in fact death of women in the hands of family members, spouses, mistresses and other adults.<sup>1</sup> In the same vein, GBV against women has been acknowledged worldwide as a violation of basic human rights, increasing research has highlighted the health burdens, intergenerational effects, and demographic consequences of such violence.

The statistics are startling but the spiritual damage, the suffering, the pain and hunger cannot be given in figures. Women from different communities, ethnic groups, religious, cultural and social backgrounds: literate or illiterate; rich or poor; in peace time or in war, continue to be undermined and suffer one form of violence or the other at the hands of the community or their own family. It is a fact that gender based violence as a phenomenon is not only on the increase, but also has no respect for age, social status, or

geography. It is in the cities even among those who have reached stardom, among the wealthy, the ghetto dwellers and perhaps worst in rural areas. This phenomenon gains support from archaic cultures, backward beliefs and sexists' religious teachings that portray women as rewards which men must appropriate. Not only are these beliefs backward, nativistic, anachronistic, out of touch with the times and also an antithesis of rational reasoning, it is also devoid of civility and human decency.<sup>2</sup>

The problem of GBV is not different especially in Nimo and in other areas of Nigeria. The Nigerian print and electronic and social media continue to show the world that cases of GBV are not lessening. This exposes the fact that many people live together with abusive partners. The fact remains that majority of the victims in Nimo and Nigeria in general remain silent about the abuse they face in their respective homes since they have no one to talk to or nowhere to report the case. Women and girls may suffer violent acts in the household and within the family which could be habituated by socio-cultural attitudes and traditions. Indeed, any form of violence against women and girls is a violation of human right which extremely hinders them in contributing to national development, disempower them and impoverishes families.

Thus, this paper focuses on prevalence, types and effects of GBV in Nimo. The research reveals that the magnitude of GBV against women in Nimo is relatively high, and that some cultural values and

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practices such as male preference, freedom of men to discipline their wives, traditional consideration of women as inheritable properties of men and the disposition that women are second class citizens in the society are the major cultural practices that engender GBV against women. Thus, the study affirms that the major causes of GBV in Nimo are the effects of some cultural values and practices.

### **A Geographical Description of Nimo**

The geographical location of Nimo is important in the understanding of the present analysis. Indeed, as professor J.C Anene has pointed out, the historical experiences of a community is generally 'written in its geographic features'.<sup>3</sup> Nimo is located in the western part of Njikoka local government area of Anambra state in south western Igboland, sharing common boundaries with Enugwu-Ukwu on the north, Abacha and Abatete on the south. It shares boundaries with Neni, Adazi and Agu-ukwu Nri on the eastern side and it is boarded on the western side by Eziowelle and Abagana. Nimo has four villages namely; Etiti Nimo, Ifite Ani, Egbengwu and Ifite Enu. The climate is fairly hot, the hottest period being February and March while the coldest is in the dry harmattan month of December. The coolest is in the raining months of June, July and September. There is usually a little break towards the end of July or the beginning of August.

### **Conceptual clarifications**

#### **Gender**

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines gender in the following way:

The term gender denotes the qualities associated with men and women that are socially and culturally, then biologically determined. Gender includes the way in which society differentiates, appropriate behavior and access to power for women and men. Although the detail varies from society to society and change over time, gender relation tends to include a strong element of inequality between women and men and are strongly influenced by ideology.<sup>4</sup>

Gender thus refers to social attributes that are acquired or learned during socialization and define activities, responsibilities and needs connected to being male or female and not to biological identity associated with masculinity and femininity. Such learnt or acquired attributes are expressed as power, roles, resources and privileges of men and women. In fact, gender is a socially constructed identity through which roles are assigned at different levels and which can differ according to culture and can be changed by circumstances such as periodic crisis.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, gender also refers to the socially division of human beings into male or female constructed roles and responsibilities of women and men in a given culture or location. In our context, it refers to the expected roles and responsibilities of men and women in Nigeria and Africa in general. These roles are influenced by perceptions and expectations arising from cultural, political, environmental, economic,



social, and religious factors, as well as custom, law, class, ethnicity, and individual or institutional bias. Gender attitudes and behaviors are learned and can be changed.<sup>6</sup>

This construct is more often than not, a structured relationship of inequality between men and women. It is often reinforced by customs, law and specific development policies. As Mblinyi puts it: “Gender relation are historical, changeable, subject to abolition and transformation through every day happenings as well as periodic moments of crisis and transformation”.<sup>7</sup>

Gender differentiation is well pronounced in patriarchal societies where a group of individuals have been tagged and groomed to be the decision makers for another group considered inferior, weak and subordinate. The invocation of cultural beliefs, values and the maintenance of the status quo keep the decision-making group at the top. Unfortunately, in many societies, women are considered weak, while the men are the decision-makers.<sup>8</sup>

### **Violence**

Violence as a concept encompasses a number of connotations. According to Echoes, violence connotes “... an encounter with life threatening forces that affects millions of people in their communities and in the global economy”.<sup>9</sup> Dzurgba defines violence as the exercise or use of force that causes damage, injury, or abuse to people, property, principle or anything of value.<sup>10</sup> He went further to say that value is associated

with the attitude of aggression, hostility, cruelty, brutality, harassment, threat, force, etc. and these violent tendencies are nurtured in words and actions. Dame Deaux and Wrightsman defines violence as “any behavior directed towards harming human being”.<sup>11</sup> Violence is considered as any behavior in which an organism intentionally seeks out to harm any other organisms. Intention to inflict harm, be it physical harm or verbal affront, is therefore an important element in identifying violence.

It is argued that violence against women includes anything that results in or could result in physical, sexual or psychological hurt. This constitutes an impediment towards the achievement of equality, development and peace for all because women’s rights are human rights.<sup>12</sup> Deducing from the above, violence can be defined simply as a behavior that is executed with the intention of hurting other people either directly or indirectly and which is capable of inflicting physical and emotional pains on the affected person. This working definition recapitulate the fact that violence causes physical damage, injury, pains (both physical, emotional and psychological) and destruction to human kind and when this happens, the person violence is directed upon suffers serious physical and emotional pains.<sup>13</sup> Hence, acts of violence against women are often intended to intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, threaten or hurt women and girls.

Gender-Based Violence

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Sida defines GBV as any harm or suffering that is perpetrated against a woman or girl, man or boy and that has negative impact on the physical, sexual or psychological health, development or identity of the person.<sup>14</sup> the cause of this violence is founded in gender-based inequalities and discrimination. GBV is the most extreme expression of these unequal gender relations in society, and a violation of human rights, as well as a main hindrance of the achievement of gender equality. Women and girls are mostly affected by GBV, and globally at least one third of all women have been exposed to violence in an intimate relationship, but also men and boys can be subjected to GBV.<sup>15</sup> While gender inequality, unequal power relations and discrimination based on gender are the overarching causes of GBV, and this violence is not limited to specific regions or socio-economic, religious, ethnic groups or sexual orientation and age, but occur everywhere, the interplay between other causes and contributing factors influences the prevalence of GBV.

In fact, GBV is an umbrella definition which includes a wide range of expressions of violence such as sexual harassment, physical violence, harmful traditional practices, female Genital mutilation (FGM), and early marriage, emotional and psychological violence. The social reality is that all these are common acts of gender-based violence found in Nimo and in Nigeria in general which have found justifications under cultural, social or religious

myths. GBV is the most pervasive yet least visible human rights violation in the world. It undermines the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims, yet it remains shrouded in a culture of silence. It is violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately. GBV can take various forms such as physical (results in injuries, distress and health problems), sexual, psychological (controlling, coercion, blackmail) and economic abuse. Other forms are battery, forced/early marriage, female genital mutilation, rape and sexual harassments. In fact, the problem of gender-based violence reaches every corner of the world and the number of women and girls affected by this problem is staggering. According to the United Nations, Violence against Women means:

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 deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life.<sup>16</sup>

In Nimo just like in other areas of Igboland, the position of women predisposes them to various acts of GBV. For instance, women do not have and cannot hold title to land. It is an exclusive preserve of the male and is in turn inherited by male children in the family. The socio-cultural dynamics of the Igbo exposes the women to the control and gender-based violence by their male





folk. The family authority structure clearly favors men who take major decisions affecting the household without reference to the women. In situations where women become influential their husbands are usually held with contempt. The women have no influence and control over economic resources, a situation that has wasted the potentials in them, thus bringing about a decline in economic resources available to the family.

### **Theoretical Guide**

The work adopts feminist theories in seeking to explain the sources of women's oppression and marginalization in the society. There are different strands of feminism but two of these namely; liberal feminism and socialist feminism, are adopted. Liberal feminism is based on the understanding that first, all people are born equal and therefore equal opportunity should be provided for them. Women subordination arose because of the non-recognition and implementation of this principle, Liberal feminists holds that women subordination is derived from the pattern of socialization of men and women into different roles in society, and that the bad positioning of women in the society is also reinforced by discrimination, prejudices and irrationality perpetrated by men, the family and the state and its agencies.

Moreover, since women's subordinate position has been institutionalized, and which implies that women cannot as individuals free themselves through change in consciousness, a

mass movement is required to organize and coordinate their struggle. They also conceive that autonomy deficits like these are due to the "gender system" or the patriarchal nature of inherited traditions and institutions and that the women's movement should work to identify and remedy them and the state can and should be the women's movement ally in promoting women's autonomy.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the Liberal perspective on feminism explains women's exclusion or inequality with reference to ideas of female inferiority or incapacity that inform the upbringing and education of both men and women. They seek to challenge ideas and practice that treat women as second class citizens and call for empowerment of women to secure full equality. For them, gender should not be a barrier since men and women are endowed with the same rational and spiritual capacities. Liberal feminist theory is of the view that biological differences should be ignored in order to achieve gender equality. Women and men should be treated in a gender-neutral manner, especially under the law.

Socialist feminism has roots in Marxist political and economic thoughts. It is based on the understanding that class system in society is essentially responsible for the oppression of women. Historically, women did not occupy an inferior place in society until when the primitive-communal society broke down into classes and the introduction of private property, and the



family.<sup>19</sup> The function of the woman has since then been that of a breeder, and became a possession of her husband. In the capitalist economy, women suffer double oppression, in the work place as an exploited worker, and in the family as a subordinate person with little status.

<sup>20</sup>

Socialist feminism holds that sexist ideology and structures such as the family are responsible for sustaining women's inferior positions. These structures continue to exist and perform crucial functions for the capitalist system. Therefore, a socialist revolution is required to end women oppression. This implies that the very structures that nourish oppression such as private property and class division must completely be abolished. In addition to the above, women must continue to fight not only for free and equal entry into the productive sector of the society, but for the socialization of house work. Housework must not remain the responsibility of the woman alone. They should struggle for equal pay for equal work, equal opportunity in education and employment, free abortion on demand, and free community-controlled child care center.

Also, women must sustain their struggle for liberation alongside with men who suffer equal forms of oppression like them. Socialist feminism also argues that, the feminist socialist society is that which is politically and economically democratic. In this society, the means of production would be collectively owned, and the output from production will be

equitably distributed. Sex will no longer play any role in the determination of individual's status in society.<sup>21</sup>

The feminist theory has however been criticized on the ground of its exaggerations of a patriarchal society. Some argue that the feminist movement has already achieved its goals as men and women are now almost of equal footing while yet another group of critics go further to say that not only have women achieved equal footing with men but that women are now attempting to seek a higher status over men, a term known 'misandry'. These arguments seek to emphasize the irrelevance of the feminist theory in contemporary times.<sup>22</sup> However, while admitting that feminists have made progress in bridging to some extent the inequalities between men and women, the theory is still relevant in patriarchal and developing countries like Nigeria because if made practicable, it will enhance the contributions of both sexes to the socio-economic development of the society, and by so doing the socio-cultural and economic imbalances that hinders women will be addressed.

### **Forms of Gender-based Violence (GBV)**

Perhaps one of the most repulsive restrictions on women's sexuality is the issue of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a process of female circumcision performed on young girls in childhood. Female circumcision is considered a significant custom in dozens of countries across Africa, Asia and Middle East, where girls may be



seen as impure and unworthy of marriage if they have not undergone it.<sup>23</sup>

In Igboland, FGM though an un-necessary gruesome and crude surgery that involves partial or total removal of the external female genitalia is considered as a pre-requisite to earn respect and recognition. It is often carried out by traditional practitioners, not by medical personnel, the majority of girls go through FGM before the age of 5. During the makeshift surgical procedure, or the ritualistic sexual mutilation, sharp objects such as razors and knives, which are most often not sterilized, are used by non-medical practitioners in the home or other non-clinical setting to cut young women, removing the sensitive little soft knob at the front of the vagina, in the name of initiating them into womanhood.

The reasons traditionally advanced for the ritualistic sexual mutilation are, namely: that the exercise de-sensitizes the clitoris reducing libido and curbing sexual promiscuity; it ensures cleanliness, prevents immorality, keeps babies alive during birth, prevents an overgrowth of the clitoris and also enables a woman to be more marriage –eligible. Many women and girls die or have their reproductive organs permanently damaged during this practice. However, through mobilization of village elders/leaders, encouraging dialogue and raising awareness, FGM is no longer a common practice in Nimo.<sup>24</sup> Early/child marriage, a formal or informal union before the age of 18, is a form of GBV as it robs

girls of their right to childhood, health, education and security. In Nimo, and in other areas of Igboland, some cultures encourage denying women and girl's access to education. Consequences of early/child marriages can include: domestic violence and rape, undesired pregnancies, illegal abortions, inadequate or lacking pregnancy follow-up and antenatal care leading to high risk delivery and heightened risk of the death of very young expecting mothers. Early/child marriage often occurs in contexts of poverty. Often times, parents do not consider it worthwhile to educate girls because doing so amounts to expense and not investment. These are very common practices in Igboland and across Nigeria.<sup>25</sup> Women are not given adequate attention in the area of education except in recent times, parents did not send their daughters to school instead it was mainly male children that were sent to school.<sup>26</sup>

For various reasons including poverty, ignorance and inhumanity, the children are forced to marry people they do not even know; these so-called husbands abuse and destroy their innocent lives.<sup>27</sup> Early child marriage is fundamentally an assault on women. In the Igbo traditional societies when young girls were given out in marriage at very young ages, often during the process of puberty, they were delivered of healthy children. However, the consequences of early child marriage most times were tragic because most of girls felt frustrated and worthless after being diagnosed with vesico-





vaginal fistula (VVF). VVF is a direct pathological communication between the urinary bladder and the vagina resulting in the uncontrolled leakage of urine into the vagina from the bladder.

Sexual violence by non-partners include for example sexual assault, sexual harassment and rape. According to Section 357 of the Criminal Code and relevant provision of Penal Code, rape implies unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman or girl without her consent.<sup>28</sup> although the trend of both physical and emotional violence has been fluctuating in Nigeria, sexual abuse has consistently increased across all age groups.

Intimate partner violence is often systematic and contains parallel physical, sexual and psychological violence. It may take many different forms, be conducted by different perpetrators throughout the lifetime, and have severe direct and indirect health consequences. Even when intimate partner violence is legally condemned, many still see it as a private matter and women are often held responsible for the violence inflicted upon them. Reference to the privacy of the home, in both law and practice, contributes to impunity for violence against women at the hands of family members, after all, marital rape, economic and emotional abuses are still not considered criminalized acts within many legal frameworks. This creates a stigma which often deters women and girls from seeking medical service or legal redress.

All human beings are born free and of equal dignity and rights, hence, wife battery is anti-human rights. Battery against women constitutes an oddity because women are the direct targets, even though the entire society indirectly shares in its effects in the long run. Every day, women are slapped, kicked, beaten, humiliated, threatened, sexually abused and even murdered by their partners.<sup>29</sup> Financial issues prevent women from leaving bad and abusive situations. Many of the women have been beaten down and prevented from working and earning any income to keep them financially dependent on the abuser. According to Nwaneka from Etiti-Nimo village in Nimo, a university graduate who had left her abusive husband, “I was forced to return to him because I could not pay school fees or take care of other necessities required by our children”.<sup>30</sup>

Another form of GBV is Widowhood practice/discrimination Women experience various forms of social injustices. It usually becomes pernicious once the woman loses her husband. Firstly, she is accused of killing or causing the death of her husband and so is required to prove her innocence by performing certain rituals, such as drinking the water used in bathing the corpse. Widows are forced to marry their husbands’ brothers (widow inheritance) and apart from being compelled to drink bath water, these widows are often subjected into sleeping with the corpses, sitting on the floor and eating from an unwashed and/or broken plates



throughout the period of mourning which however, varied according to the status of the deceased.<sup>31</sup>

In Nimo and in other areas of Igboland, a widow is addressed as Nwanyi isi mkpe (a woman without a head; the deceased husband being the head), and this labelling justifies her widowhood status. At her husband's death, the rites of passage associated with widowhood practices begins. For example, the ritual practices accorded the dead varies according on the status of the male deceased, but culture demands, irrespective of the status of the deceased, that the wife goes into traumatic wailing immediately, beating her chest, flinging around her arms and falling down, and only to get up to repeat the cycle again and again until other women surround her immediately and restrain her and force her to sit down on the ground where they sit around her to commiserate with her. Among the Igbo, this kind of bitter wailing is expected to go on until the deceased is buried.

Joy from Ifite-ani village in Nimo was discriminated against, and subjugated to all kinds of ill treatments even by her deceased husband's siblings. Prior to the burial of the deceased, the siblings sold everything they had in Lagos thereby rendering Joy with her two son's homeless.<sup>32</sup>

It is a usual occurrence in Igboland where in some cases, the kinsmen of the deceased forcefully take everything that belongs to widow

and her children without a second thought on how they will cope.

When a mourning process consumes a widow this much, episodes of depression, despairs, and regressive setbacks bound to envelope her. The perpetrators of the practices were not concerned even if widows die, and if they die, it was good riddance to bad rubbish because their death was a confirmation of their guilt. In other words, widows were not only regarded as prime suspects in the demise of their spouses, but guilty. Widows were labelled husband killers, husband snatchers, adulteress, problematic, destitute and women with ill-luck. In fact, their innocence as husband killers were only established when they under-went the diabolical ritual cleansing by drinking the filthy water used in bathing the corpses of their deceased husbands. Prior to the funeral purification, widows were secluded and locked up in a small dark room in order to compel them to confess their role(s) in their husbands' death. In the same vein, the widows were not allowed to take their baths, changed their clothes, brushed their teeth, washed their hands, clothes, or even washed the plates used in serving them food. They were expected to have only one set of black or white mourning dress (akwa mkpe), which they must wear whenever they were in public.<sup>33</sup>

According to Joy "the most humiliating of all the violent cultural practices meted out to me as a widow was the scraping of my hair with broken bottles by Umuada (first born daughters within



the extended family system), which usually left me with injuries on my skull.”<sup>34</sup> Ngozi Okafor from Ifite-Ani village in Nimo and her three daughters cannot stop recounting to whoever cares to listen; the story of abuse and deprivation they have had to endure since her husband died four years ago. Her major sin is that she couldn't give her husband a male child and since after the death of her husband, her husband's relatives have been maltreating her and her daughters.<sup>35</sup> All farm lands and economic trees belonging to her late husband have been taken away from her and she has been abandon to her uncertain fate. Yet another sin was that she refused to marry her husband's younger brother who had consequently vowed to continually torment her for the rest of her life. Ngozi is not alone in this gender- based violence as countless number of women and young girls have been victims of this cultural malady.

The research reveals that human greed inherent in man was responsible for all the religious rituals, the cleansing rituals, the superstitious sanctions, and other practices meted out to widows. According to Charles, this was to make widows more amenable to keeping silent over all other forms of oppression, and subjugation including being coerced to marry any of the willing siblings of their deceased husbands (widow inheritance) against their wish.<sup>36</sup> The human greed which manifested at the demise of a male member of the family offers t h e siblings the opportunity to confiscate the

deceased assets without considering whether the deceased had wife and children when alive.

### **Causes of Gender-based Violence**

The root cause of gender-based violence lied in unequal power relations between women and men. In Nimo in western Igboland and Nigeria in general, it is sad to know that women still experience a high level of gender inequality. Gender inequality is seen in the attitude of men towards women and vice versa. It is hugely a patriarchy as most men are made to believe their masculinity is established only when they are able to achieve supremacy over their female partner. In the process of socialization in Nigeria, women are made to accept the superiority of their male husbands or friends. She is always made to believe that male companion in her life will take major decisions and sometimes even as it pertains to her life. Gender inequality pervades all aspects of interpersonal relationships and creates an unequal distribution of power between the man and woman in a relationship. Cultural factors include gender stereotypes and prejudice, normative expectations of femininity and masculinity, the socialization of gender, an understanding of the family sphere as private and under male authority, and a general acceptance of male superiority as an acceptable means to solve conflict and assert oneself. Amongst the Igbo, the notion of entitlement and ownership of women legitimizes control over women's sexuality, which, according to many



legal codes has been deemed essential to ensure patrilineal inheritance.

Man had been known to Lord it over the woman with power and authority as he used tradition as the camouflage to help perpetuate his misdeeds even in the faces of national and international initiatives on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. In addition, the practice of wife beating is not just hidden and invisible, but hard to tackle because many traditional and transitional cultures have a blind-spot about it. The invisibility of marital violence, especially as it affected women stems not necessarily from the fact that victims covered up the problem, but from the fact that society regarded the problem as normal and therefore not a problem.

Thus, being a victim of gender-based violence is perceived in many societies as shameful and weak, with many women still being considered guilty of attracting violence against themselves through their behavior. This partly accounts for enduring low levels of reporting and investigation. Victims simply disguise that all is well, all for the purpose of concealing their bitter and heart-rending experiences. The concealment of their bitter and heart-rending experiences, were consequent to the fact that women fear that society would blame them for such happenings and homes where battery is frequent are often stigmatized as unsuccessful homes, and since no woman would want her marriage to be stigmatized, in the event of battery, most women

would rather keep the matter concealed than disclosed it. In addition to that, women would not want the public to know that their husbands have abusive tendencies because that would mean more battery from their spouses. So when women accepted social conditioning, leaving an abusive husband meant failing not only as a mother or wife, but as a woman and also as a human being.

The lack of economic resources generally makes women vulnerable to GBV. It creates patterns of violence and poverty that become self-perpetuating, making it extremely difficult for the victims to extricate themselves. When unemployment and poverty affect men, this can also cause them to assert their masculinity through violent means. These factors interact with a number of drivers, such as low levels of women's empowerment, and socio-economic inequality. This is explicated in the fact that most women stayed on in battered homes because they had no other place to go and therefore, to avoid the difficulty of having no home of their own or for fear of becoming homeless, most women simply accepted the only option left, which was to stay, the level of battery, notwithstanding.<sup>37</sup>

### **Effects of Gender Based Violence**

The effects of violence on women vary widely and it depends on the nature of the particular incident, the woman's relationship with her abuser, and the context in which it took place. Gender-based violence typically has



psychological, physical and social impacts. For the survivors, these are interconnected. GBV threatens family structures and can cause home break up. Besides, children suffer emotional damage when they watch their mothers and sisters being battered.

Psychological scars often impede the establishment of healthy and rewarding relationships in the future. Victims of GBV may vent their frustrations on their children and others, thereby transmitting and intensifying the negative experiences to those around them. Children, on the other hand, may come to accept violence as an alternative means of conflict resolution and communication. It is in these ways that violence is reproduced and perpetuated.

Women also experienced Psychological trauma which can be both direct/ indirect effects. Direct effects include anxiety, fear, mistrust of others, inability to concentrate, loneliness, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide while indirect: effects include psychosomatic illnesses, withdrawal, alcohol or drug use. In fact, over thinking on the part of the woman has often times resulted to health issues such as stroke which can lead to death.

GBV in a girl child's formative years has far-reaching consequences on the child's physical, mental, sexual, and emotional well-being. Sexual harassment within the home or school environment can interfere with girl child's educational opportunities. Gender-based

violence devastates survivors and their families and also has significant social and economic costs. Victims of violence can suffer sexual and reproductive health consequences, including forced and unwanted pregnancies, pregnancy complications, chronic conditions, unsafe abortions, genital injuries, pelvic pain, traumatic vesico vagina fistula (VVF), sexually transmitted infections including HIV, and even death.

GBV has serious short and long term consequences on women's physical sexual reproductive and mental health as well as on their personal and social wellbeing. Mental health consequences for survivors include posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal behavior. Furthermore, a survivor of GBV may also face stigma and rejection from her community and family. Narrating her story, 28year old Jacinta, from Ifite-ani village in Nimo, said "I was raped at the age of 21. This was someone I trusted so I never saw it coming. It happened in my home in my bed and was done by someone I knew. I trusted him. I had invited him into my house and I was fully clothed." For fear of discrimination and other consequences that might follow, Jacinta did not go to the hospital neither did she tell anyone close to her about the assault.

According to her, "I became distant with people and battled with long term stomach ache anxiety and depression for three years. Following consultation with a doctor, questions arose and I





was left with no choice but to finally tell my story and I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder[PTSD]. I struggled with maintaining impersonal relationships and had low self-esteem. The irony is that no one knew I was going through all this quietly.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, commenting on the effects of women battering, the WHO agreed on this point that women suffer from gynecological problems, chronic pelvic pains, permanent disabilities, headache, miscarriage, sexual dysfunctions, suicide among others. <sup>39</sup>

GBV is hindering national productivity as it is occurring amongst people in the productive age group who are having to deal with the negative physical and psychological consequences of the vice. It constitutes a hindrance to economic stability and growth through women’s lost productivity and also to women’s participation in the development processes by lessening of their contribution to social and economic development. Indeed, the physical and psychological harm, fears and threats of gender-based violence, limit women’s ability to participate fully in economic, social and political processes that results in decreased productivity and reduced family income.

### **Efforts to combat GBV**

An early effort to address these issues was Nigeria’s enactment of the Child’s Right Act 2003 to protect children’s right, girls inclusive.<sup>40</sup>

To reduce the cases of violence against women, Nigeria adopted in 2006 a framework and plan of action for the National Gender Policy. Consequently, the federal and state governments adopted several legislative and policy instruments, including The Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act of 2015, which prohibits female genital mutilation, harmful traditional practices and all forms of violence against persons in both private and public life –and includes the right to housing and other social assistance for victims of violence.<sup>41</sup> Following a series of high-profile cases of violence perpetrated against women, the Governors of Nigeria’s 36 states had in June 2020,unanimously declared a state of emergency on GBV. As part of their declaration, the Governors also called on all states to immediately launch sex offender registries and push for tougher federal punishment for abuse and violence against women. There has been other high-level engagement with the legislature to put in place strong laws against Gender-based violence in Nigeria.

In Nimo, owing to the growing concern over the maltreatment of widows, the women’s Christian organizations associated with the dominant Catholic and Anglican denominations became involved in a campaign to end GBV. The Christian Women Organization (CWO) domiciled in the Catholic Church, the Mothers' Union and the Women's Guild, both associated with the Anglican Communion led a community-



level campaign, seeking from the outset to obtain support from their own members, religious leaders, traditional rulers, town union leaders and traditional organizations and leaders especially the men. They consulted widely and sought the support of women in neighboring communities, selecting some male traditional leaders as patrons.<sup>42</sup> Community level support both increased the legitimacy of the state-level campaign and led to local pressure for changes in some cultural practices such as harmful widowhood rites.

According to Rose, a member of CWO, Saint Vincent Catholic Church Nimo, “we have transformed the usual August meeting from a social gathering to a problem solving venture and all Christian denominations in Nimo have keyed into this and we pray that it is sustained even in government.”<sup>43</sup>

However, challenges in efforts to eliminating GBV in Nimo and Nigeria in general can be majorly cultural. Culturally, it is not usual for women to speak up in public, so many female victims of violence may suffer in silence. Also lack of coordination amongst key stakeholders and poor implementation of legal frameworks, combined with entrenched gender discriminatory norms, has hampered government and civil society efforts to address gender-based violence. There is a lax enforcement of violence against women’s laws. Efforts are lacking in the health sector which is often times, the first entry point for most

survivors of sexual violence. The need therefore exists for mainstreaming GBV services within the healthcare system and linking survivors to other services.<sup>44</sup>

### **Conclusion/ Recommendations**

GBV is an issue of serious concern in Nimo and Nigeria in general. It affects men and women but this work sustains the idea that it affects women more in Nigeria. As demonstrated earlier, GBV does not affect only a particular set of people. It affects individuals in a relationship regardless of age, class in the society, educational level, religion, tribe etc. it is time to stand up and put a stop to this violence. The effects of GBV could be suicide, depression, mental illness, and many other problems. Consequently, this serious problem needs to be addressed immediately because it has lasting harmful effects on its victims.<sup>45</sup> the latest spate of violence across Nimo and Nigeria in general has underscored the critical need for government to act swiftly to protect its most vulnerable and put an end to GBV. All hands should be on deck to stop this brutality. The government at the federal, state and local levels, religious leaders and all other people in position of authority such as traditional rulers and town union leaders should find lasting solutions that would help in tackling this societal menace. The conclusion that can be derived from this study is that GBV is a reality in Nimo in western Igboland of Nigeria. The paper has shown that women's experiences of GBV are indeed powerfully conditioned by the strength of



patriarchy, which is the societal norm in Igboland and Nigeria in general.

Therefore, the state parties shall take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct for men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices, customary and all other practices that are based on the idea of inferiority or superiority of either of the sexes or on the stereotyped roles for men and women. The media is a key conduit for making GBV visible, advertising solutions, informing policy-makers and educating the public about legal rights and how to recognize and address GBV. Newspapers, magazines, newsletters, radio, television, the music industry, film, theatre, advertising, the internet, posters, leaflets, community notice boards, libraries and direct mail are all channels for providing information to victims and the general public about GBV prevention and available services.

The Federal Government of Nigeria should create more institutions that can address the root causes of gender-based violence, the impunity that often goes with the scourge, implement policies and enact laws, for a stronger national response that can support victims and survivors of violence. This should be done in conjunction with traditional leaders considering the fact that traditional leadership is often the only power structure communities recognize.

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