

Cultural Tolerance in the Face of Universally Held Gender Based Violence: Implications on Marriage Institution Among the Esans of Edo State, Nigeria

by

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Abstract

This study investigated how married women perceive and respond to intimate partner violence in Edo state, Nigeria and the implications of attitudinal responses to the marriage institution among the Esan people. The population of study was married women who have been married for the past ten years. Through the Multi-Stage sampling technique, 240 respondents were selected for the study. In-depth interview were conducted to elicit data from respondents. The data were analyzed through content analysis. The findings of the study show that Esan women would rather abide by Esan cultural orientation regarding the treatment of women, being the shared values of Esan people, rather than universally based precepts. Hence, the women responded peculiarly to spousal abuse, depending on the circumstance, against the universal definition, thus, there is a high level of culture of tolerance and endurance, even in the midst of justifiable reasons to leave violent partner.

Keywords: Cultural tolerance, intimate partner violence, marriage institution, Esan.

Introduction

Generally, violence against women has always existed in every society. Until very recently, violence against women, particularly domestic violence was considered a private issue. But about two decades ago, the international community started to address it as gender based violence and a form of human right abuse (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2016). Subsequently, it has created wider awareness and acceptance, and today it is being considered as gender-based violence and as a form of human right abuse (Ashimi & Amole, 2015; Umana, Fawole, & Adeoye, 2014; Aihie, 2009). In 1993, the United Nations (UN) defines gender based violence as "... any act of gender based violence that results in, or 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 in private life". The pervasiveness of violence against women as a constraining factor to women's inability to enjoy their human rights and as a fundamental freedoms of women was further reemphasized at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 by expanding its scope in a variety of settings; (UN, 1995). Gender based violence in this study means Intimate Partner Violence as perceived and/or experienced by married women within the cultural confines of the study population.

Statement of the Problem

Intimate Partner Violence is very prevalent and pervasive in most societies of the world. The menace of intimate partner violence is so alarming and threatening that it has been recorded as the third major cause of mortality among married women of reproductive age; (WHO cited in Umuna, 2014). In most African cultures, the fundamental basis for intimate partner violence is believed to have been rooted mainly in the patriarchal dominance (Oyediran & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2005). In the context of Nigeria, available evidences reveal that about 2/3 of Nigerian women experienced intimate partner violence in their homes while about 65% of literate women are found in this situation as compared to their low income counterpart which has about 55% reported cases of intimate partner violence. However, about 97.2% of the abused women do not report these abuses to the authorities (Abayomi, 2014). This trend is based on the fact that the perception and response to intimate partner violence vary within and between countries (WHO, 2005). There is a deep cultural belief which underpins that intimate partner violence is socially permissible and acceptable in Nigeria as it is believed to be a corrective measure for the wife (Abayomi, 2014). Hence, it is socially acceptable for a husband to beat his wife as a form of discipline (Yusuf, Arulogun, Oladepo & Olowokeere, 2011; Ashie, 2009). While these forms of abuses are permissible in developing societies like Nigeria, this is less in advanced societies of the world because the level of tolerance or acceptability of spousal abuse differ depending on the circumstances and context (Adegoke, 2010; WHO, 2005). An unfortunate divorce is one of the consequences of spousal abuses.

It is unfortunate because at marriage it was the desire of couples to live together as husband and wife and it is a necessity because it is a protective strategy from further abuse. Records show relatively high divorce rate, arising from intimate partner violence, in most advanced countries of the world. For instance, In Canada, the divorce rate is about 50%; while it is 65.4% in Russia, 61.2% in South Africa, about 53% in United Kingdom respectively. United States is said to have the highest divorce rate in the world (WHO, 2005). Comparatively, divorce rate arising from spousal abuse in Nigeria is believed to be relatively low. Though there is no available official statistics of divorce rate in Nigeria, it is believed to be relatively low when compared with advanced countries of the world (WHO, 2005). According to WHO (2012), most abused women are not passive victims to intimate partner violence. They often adopt strategies, including divorce, to protect themselves and their children. Thus, this study intends to provide answers to the following questions: how do married women perceive and respond to intimate partner violence in Esan land? What are the implications of such attitudinal responses to the marriage institution in Esan land?

Theoretical Orientation

Given the cultural multiplicity of the world, it is not possible to have universal ethical norms including human rights because what may be regarded as gender based violence in one culture may not be regarded as such in another culture. In view of this, this study shall be guided by Cultural Relativism theory which emphasizes that each culture or ethnic group should be evaluated on the basis of its own values and norms of behavior and not on the basis of another culture or ethnic group (Kluckhohn, 1944 as cited in Rosado, 1994). For every culture, some moral judgments are valid but not all moral judgments are universally valid. Therefore, every moral judgment should be culturally relative (Johnson, 2004). Similarly, the concept and perception of gender based violence should be relative to the values and norms of the context of every society. This means in marital union, what constitutes intimate partner violence could vary across cultures or societies.

Method

The study area is Esan ethnic region which occupies the central senatorial district of Edo State, Nigeria. It has a population of 591, 534, of which 299,695 are males and 291,839 are females. The study population comprises of all currently married women in Esan land who have been married for the past ten years. Sample sizes of two hundred and forty married women were selected. A multi-stage sampling technique was used. Firstly, Esan was divided into five clusters based on the existing five local government councils. Three clusters (i.e., three local governments) were selected through simple random sampling technique. These clusters were further stratified into six strata based on the various monarchical kingdoms within the sampled population.

The strata were labeled as A, B, C, D, E and F. Through the method of purposive sampling technique, forty married women were selected from each stratum for sampling. To ensure anonymity of respondents in this study, they were code-named from number 1 to number 240. The data collection instrument was interview method. An interview guide which contains some questions was designed to elicit information from respondents on issues that border on intimate partner violence, their perception and reactions and its implications on marriage institution in Esan land. To this end, this study is anchored on Wengraf qualitative research interviewing method which emphasizes the need for a narrative and semi-structured method of questionnaire in eliciting information from respondents (Wengraf, 2001).

Attributes of Respondents

The age distribution of respondents shows that 22% of them are within the age category of 30-39 years; 31% falls within the age of 40-49 years; 38% are between 50-59 years and 9% falls within 60-69 years. Respondents' marital status shows that 91% are married; 2% are divorced and 6% are widows (who had experienced one form or the other of intimate partner violence). About 40% of them are resident in urban centers (the respective local government centers) while 60% of these respondents are domiciled in the rural areas. The respondents' educational qualifications indicate that 36% of them are primary school leavers; 49% of them have secondary school certificate and other allied qualifications and 12% of these respondents attended tertiary institutions.

Analysis of Data

In the study, 89% of the respondents reported that they experienced one form of intimate partner violence or the other ranging from physical, emotional (psychological), sexual and verbal violence. Despite these respective experiences from their spouses, 87% of these women expressed their unwillingness to report these abuses to the relevant authority like the police.

The unwillingness to report these perceived abuses to either the police or family members, as they remarked, was based on the fact that they prefer to keep their family affairs private and secret. Only 6% of them have and /or intended to report to the police when such violence from their spouses is at the extreme. This position was expressed mainly by those working class women with tertiary education. Within the category who would want to report to the police, 38% of them preferred to report such cases to either religious leaders (Priests or Pastors) or relevant family members or associates depending on the severity of the case. At the extreme, 49% of these women preferred to remain silent and endure the situation, thinking such challenges shall be resolved with time.

Those who are apathetic to reporting their abuse gave such reasons such as fear of reprisal from in-laws and/or religious leaders; they are also apprehensive that the police would trivialize such abusive case as private issues which should be resolved at the family level. They generally reported that acceptance and endurance of intimate partner violence is part of the cultural orientation they received prior to their marriage. This comment from a respondent in the rural areas represents this opinion, *'As I was preparing for my wedding my mother gave me some tutorials about the excesses and unpredictable characters of men..... that I should not be surprised that my husband would suddenly change as soon as we settle down together..... therefore I should be ready to accept and tolerate my husband abuse'*, (Respondent 55, Stratum B, 19/01/17).

Furthermore, about 89% of the respondents couldn't want to quit their marriage, even in the midst of persistent intimate partner violence. Most of these respondent detested that it's a social stigma to oneself and disgrace to their parents to divorce no matter the odds. One of them from urban resident noted, *"When I was getting married I was told by my parents that I was entering into a life of enduring covenant that I must not break irrespective of the odds against me"*; Another reported thus: *"My mother told me before marriage to hold my husband by the heart even in the serious marital challenges..... but today many women hold their husband by the shoulder"* (Respondent 163, Stratum E, 22/02/17). They also reported their unwillingness to allow another person to take care of their children. This view is succinctly represented by a rural respondent who idiomatically expressed, *" akhala mu odor ador bor, edeh kia regbe khian omon aki dor bor"* (Respondent 37, Stratum A, 04/02/17). This means at the early stage of marriage one is married to her husband but at the later days or older time of marriage a woman is literally married to her children. Yet, another urban respondent remarked, *" As I was going to my husband house, my father bade me farewell and told me that I was going to a journey of no return Therefore it will be difficult for me to go back to a place I was told it's no longer my home. She further noted: that's is why in Esan today when you visit your parents and stay too long people around will continue to ask when are you going back to your home...?"* (Respondent 214, Stratum F, 29/01/17).

Some within these categories who got married statutorily are guided by the popular dictum of the Christian faith which says *'for better for worse'*. In view of this , an urban respondent noted, *"... the church does not easily permit nor encourage divorce, especially on flimsy grounds of spousal abuse... that is why many women prefer to endure rather than start the process of divorce that can never end"* (Respondent 113, Stratum C, 02/03/17). This is especially true of those from orthodox churches like the Catholics and Anglican who would not want to divorce as the process of divorce is very cumbersome and time consuming. A rural respondent said that another constraining factors to divorce was, *"...an average Esan woman who contracted her marriage in customary way cannot divorce her husband without the payment of bride price.. and such payment must be made by the father of the divorcee woman at the palace of the Monarch within that kingdom as required by our custom"*(Respondent 146, Stratum D, 15/02/17).

On the other hand, the few number of respondents, (2%), who reported to have divorced their husbands, gave reasons such as inability to have male child, infertility and infidelity among others. An urban respondent, who works at the Federal Medical Centre recounted, *“My husband abandoned me and my children when another lady outside gave him a male child because I couldn’t give him a male child after the birth of four consecutive children as females...I believed this was the best to do under such embarrassment. Though my parents still regard me as his wife since I haven’t paid back the bride price”*(Respondent 74, Stratum B, 23/02/17).

From the data analysis made above, the following major findings are identified:

- Though intimate partner violence is still deeply rooted among couples in the study population, there is a high level of tolerance which could be best explained by the cultural orientation of women in Esan.
- The centrality and importance of the marriage institution among women in the study population is not negotiable. That is why in the midst of excruciating spousal abuse an average Esan woman would want to remain in her matrimonial home.
- The conditions, under which one is qualified or permissible for divorce, as prescribed by the church and the culture of Esan, are very daunting for the women to fulfill easily.
- It is a social stigma for a married woman to leave or divorce her husband while it is also an embarrassing disgrace to the family.
- Esan could be said to be culturally homogenous. That is why we did not observe any significant variations between the urban and rural areas.

Conclusions

In every relationship, whether social or marital, there are rules or norms specifying the rights and obligations of members in such relationship. An attempt to stick strictly to ones defined or assumed rights without compromising at some circumstances could render such relationship crisis-ridden and end abruptly. To guarantee a long lasting relationship it is required that one of the partners must be ready to tolerate and endure the excesses of the other. Similarly, for a marriage to last long, a husband or a wife must be ready to accommodate the actions or inactions of a violent partner depending on the circumstance. An attempt to define and/or share rights and responsibility as specified by international instruments may lead to social strife. The study found that an average woman in Esan land relentlessly strives to sustain her marriage even in the midst of justifiable spousal abuses to quit the marriage. This is what accounts for the low level of divorce rate in the study population.

This study accepts the fact that the women fundamental human rights have been violated by their husbands, the culture of tolerance and endurance, as displayed by the women of Esan, is an overriding consideration over intimate partner violence. This study finally submits, therefore, that any universal definition, perception and application of laws and policies regarding gender based violence without recourse to varieties of cultures is a negation of the peculiarities and uniqueness of the multi-cultural societies of the world.

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