

Violence Against Women in Nigeria: How the Millennium Development Goals Addresses the Challenge

by

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Introduction

Violence is a major obstacle to growth and development. Violence against women in particular hinders progress in achieving development targets in Nigeria. Despite the growing recognition of violence against women as a public health and human rights concern, and of the obstacle it poses for development, this type of Violence continues to have an unjustifiably low priority on the international development agenda and in planning. This document highlights the connections between the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the prevention of violence against women by showing how working towards the MDGs will reduce violence against women; and preventing violence against women will contribute to achieving the MDGs.

It is estimated that one in every five women faces some form of violence during her lifetime, in some cases leading to serious injury or death. Until recently, most governments have considered violence against women (particularly “domestic” violence by a husband or other intimate partner) to be a relatively minor social problem. Today, due in large part to the efforts of women’s organizations and the evidence provided by research, including that of the World Health Organisation (WHO), violence against women is recognized as a global concern.

Understanding Violence Against Women

One of the most pervasive violations of human rights in all societies exists on a continuum from violence perpetrated by an intimate partner to violence as a weapon of war (Grown, 2005:231). Violence against women is a major threat to social and economic development. This was recognized in the Millennium Declaration of September 2000, in which the General Assembly of the United Nations resolved “to combat all forms of violence against women and to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women”(United Nations, 2005:12). Such violence is intimately associated with complex social conditions such as poverty, lack of education, gender inequality, child mortality, maternal ill-health and human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS).

Although some of the associated conditions of violence are targeted in the goals set up to guide the implementation of the Millennium Declaration, violence against women is not highlighted in either the targets or the indicators. Violence against women takes many forms, from the overt to the subtle. WHO has adopted the following definitions of physical and sexual violence to aid in research and programming, concentrating on identifiable acts? *Physical violence* means a woman has been: slapped, or had something thrown at her; pushed, shoved, or had her hair pulled; hit with a fist or something else that could hurt; choked or burnt; threatened with or had a weapon used against her. *Sexual violence* means a woman has been: physically forced to have sexual intercourse; had sexual intercourse because she was afraid of what her partner might do; or forced to do something sexual she found degrading or humiliating. Though recognized as a serious and pervasive problem, *emotional violence* does not yet have a widely accepted definition, but includes, for example, being humiliated or belittled; being scared or intimidated purposefully. *Intimate-partner violence* (also called “domestic” violence) means a woman has encountered any of the above types of violence, at the hands of an intimate partner or ex-partner; this is one of the most common and universal forms of violence experienced by women.

Understanding the Millennium Development Goals:

The MDGs are currently the highest-level expression of the international community's development priorities. They commit the international community to an action agenda which emphasizes sustainable, human development as the key to fulfilling social and economic progress. All 191 Member States of the United Nations have pledged to achieve these goals by the year 2015. The Goals and their targets and indicators have been widely accepted as a framework for measuring national and global development progress.

Violence against Women, violence against women is a prevalent harm to the basic rights, freedoms, health, and welfare of women. It occurs in many settings and at many hands, including those of relatives, acquaintances, employers, and the state. In fact, most forms of violence directed specifically against women in Nigeria are met with silence not only by the state but also by much of the human rights community.

The Millennium Declaration explicitly recognizes that the equal rights and opportunities of women and men must be assured and MDG 3 specifically addresses the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. In addition, gender equality is recognized as key in achieving all eight Goals. As an interim report by the Millennium Project on progress towards Goal 3 points out that: *development policies that fail to take women to be actors in those policies and actions will have limited effectiveness and serious costs to societies. The reverse is also true: the achievement of Goal 3 depends on the extent to which each of the other goals addresses gender-based constraints and issues.* Although gender equality is visible in the Goals, the continued existence of violence against women is inconsistent with these commitments and with Goal 3 itself (WHO, 2002:43). The relationship between sustainable development and violence against women is not explicit in the Declaration and Goals and, at first glance, none of the indicators relate directly to violence against women. Closer examination reveals, however, that violence against women – both as an extreme manifestation of gender inequality and a means of perpetuating it – is highly relevant to all of the Goals. Furthermore, the Goals provide powerful arguments and entry points for a variety of approaches to eradicating violence against women. In the following sections of this document, each MDG is examined separately for its relevance to addressing violence against women and for the strategic opportunities it offers to prevent and eliminate such violence.

Cultural institutions, particularly religion, are often cited for their role in violence against women. The frequency with which women, the family, and the home are seen to overlap with culture—indeed, to be the main vessels for the maintenance and continuation of cultural and religious traditions is quite striking.

As a result of violence or a fear of violence, Nigerian women are unable to protect themselves from infection and to access HIV/AIDS services. Although Nigeria has ratified international and regional human rights treaties providing for women's rights to protection against violence and women's rights to health, the unchecked domestic violence and the lack of access for women to HIV/AIDS services are clear indications that the government is failing to meet its responsibilities. In addition to women's greater physiological susceptibility, social, cultural, and legal forms of discrimination compound their vulnerability to HIV. Domestic violence, already a leading cause of female injury, deprives women of bodily integrity by eliminating their ability to consent to sex, negotiate safer sex, and determine the number and spacing of their children (Karanja, 2003:10). In many cases, the threat of abandonment or eviction constrains economically dependent women to remain in abusive relationships, thereby exacerbating their vulnerability to HIV infection.

Nigerian women confront a male dominated power structure that upholds and entrenches male authority in the home. Customs such as the payment of "bride price," whereby men essentially purchase their wives' sexual favors and reproductive capacity, underscore men's entitlement to dictate the terms of sex.

Practices such as widow inheritance by a man of his brother's widow can expose women to unprotected and unwanted sex with HIV-positive partners. When women in polygamous marriages are coerced into unprotected sex, they are exposed to a higher risk of HIV transmission as a result of the man having unprotected sex with multiple partners. We live in a world in which women do not have basic control over what happens to their bodies as far as cultural practices are concerned. Women are unable to depend on the government to protect them from physical violence in the home, with sometimes fatal consequences, including increased risk of HIV/AIDS infection.

How the MDGs Connect with Prevention of Violence Against Women:

While the linkages are not always explicit, the MDGs and their targets afford many options for addressing violence against women.

MDG 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Provides an opportunity to ally violence against women with poverty reduction efforts aimed at protecting the poorest and most vulnerable women.

MDG 2: Achieve universal primary education

Can be used to highlight how the drive towards universal primary education can be hindered by gender-based factors – including violence and lack of security – that prevent girls and young women from entering and completing school. Conversely, better education for girls and boys may contribute to the reduction of violence against women.

MDG 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Provides a solid basis for promoting equality and women's empowerment as a sustainable development strategy, which at the same time is a key strategy for reducing and eliminating violence against women.

MDG 4: Reduce child mortality and MDG 5: Improve maternal health

Provide opportunities to raise the profile of violence against women as a serious obstacle to improving maternal and child health, and as a threat to the health and well-being of all women.

MDG 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

Establishes the value of anti-violence efforts in HIV prevention, highlighting the evidence that violence against women undermines HIV prevention and care efforts, and conversely that preventing this violence contributes to the prevention of HIV.

MDG 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

Opens useful avenues for designing interventions which, in addition to preserving the environment, can empower and protect women in both rural and urban settings.

MDG 8: Develop a global partnership for development

Supports arguments for the participation of women and their representative organizations in policy and programme design, thereby allowing such efforts to include issues important to women, such as violence.

The Nexus Between Violence Against Women and the MDGs:

Violence against women occurs in all social and economic classes, but women living in poverty are more likely to experience violence. Although more research is needed to fully understand the connections between poverty and violence against women, it is clear that poverty and its associated stressors are important contributors. A number of theories about why this is so have been explored. Men in difficult economic circumstances (e.g. unemployment, little job autonomy, low socioeconomic status or blocked advancement due to lack of education) may resort to violence out of frustration, and a sense of hopelessness. At the same time, poor women who experience violence may have fewer resources to escape violence in the home (Birdsall, et.al 2004:16). Efforts to reduce poverty and hunger may help, in and of them, to prevent violence against women and should thus be supported. But economic development strategies must be conceived in ways that respond to and address gender inequality. For example, such strategies must:

- promote increased access to post-primary, vocational and technical education for women; address gender gaps in earnings as well as barriers to accessing credit for women;
- extend and upgrade childcare benefits to enable women's full participation in the paid labour market;
- address issues of occupational segregation that often translate into inferior conditions of employment for women; and
- ensure social protection and benefits for women in precarious employment situations – often those involved in informal employment.

In summary, economic development strategies should aim for decent, productive work for all (Jewkes, 2002:66). It should also be recognized that increasing women's educational status and economic independence does not guarantee the elimination of violence. In some cases, this may actually increase women's chances of experiencing violence – at least initially. Improved economic conditions may provide more opportunities to escape and avoid violence, but they are only part of the complete eradication of violence against women. *Programmes to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger should be designed specifically to promote women's economic participation and independence of women in ways that do not expose them to increased violence.*

Poverty and hunger force many women to migrate as a survival strategy. In many countries, women migrants working in domestic service or factories are at high risk of experiencing abuse by employers including confinement, slave-like conditions, and physical and sexual assault. Some women may resort to transactional or commercial sex in order to survive, or fall into the hands of traffickers (Heise et.al 2000:13). *Efforts to reduce poverty and hunger should be allied with efforts to safeguard female migrants, and to reduce trafficking of women and girls.* Specific measures include creating local economic opportunities for women so that they do not have to migrate, pre-emigration education and counseling (pioneered by the Philippines and since taken up by other countries), and programmes in host countries to protect migrant women's rights. Women and girls often bear the brunt of conflicts. It is estimated that at least 65% of the millions of people displaced by conflict are women and girls who face daily deprivation and insecurity (International Organisation for Migrants, 2002:47).

Violence against women is increasingly documented in crises associated with armed conflict, with rape and other forms of sexual violence used to humiliate and intimidate civilians and as tactics in campaigns of ethnic cleansing (Amnesty International, 2004:78). Women living in conflict situations or in camps for refugees or displaced persons are already very vulnerable to extreme poverty, hunger and illness. Their situation is frequently made even worse by the high rates of physical and sexual assault against them, including by intimate partners, which have been documented in such circumstances. In some cases, women and girls are forced to submit to sexual abuse in order to obtain food and other basic necessities as fuel and water. *Humanitarian relief programmes should be designed to protect women and girls in situations of war and displacement, and to ensure that their basic needs are met.* More education empowers women by giving them greater self-confidence, wider social networks, and greater ability to use information and resources, and attain economic independence. Alarming, 65% of the world's children who do not attend school are girls, and two thirds of the world's illiterate people are women (UNAIDS, 2002:43). *Policies and programmes aimed at universal primary education should promote education for girls and women as a means of empowering and protecting them, and of achieving gender equality in society.*

There is evidence that women with less education are generally more likely to experience violence than those with higher levels of education. Enrolment in and completion of secondary education is also a critical area of concern as it is clearly associated with employment opportunities and women's empowerment. The relationship between educational attainment and its protective effect is complex. Some men may react violently to women's empowerment through education, particularly if educated women then challenge traditional gender roles. Thus, in some societies there is actually increased risk of violence for some women until a sufficient number of them reach a high enough educational level and gender norms shift to allow its protective effects to operate. Schools, however, are an important site for normative change and should be seen to offer strategic opportunities for addressing gender inequality. As the task force for MDG 3 points out, "Girls and their families may find little reason to attend school if the curriculum or their teachers or counselors convey the message that girls are less important than boys or if the school tracks girls into fields of study or training for low-paid occupations considered appropriate for females" (Mc Ginn, 2001:65). *Educational programmes should include measures that enable girls and women to benefit from their increased educational level without fear of violence. This may include efforts to involve or sensitize the partners of women in education programmes, as well as broader awareness programming.*

Girls face many barriers to education, some of which involve violence or make them more vulnerable to it. For example, many families place little value on educating girls, and prefer to keep them working at home or for wages elsewhere. Some poor families can only afford to send one child to school, and the selected child is usually a boy. Poor girls who want to attend school, but whose families cannot afford tuition fees or supplies, can be pressured into exchanging sex for school fees, uniforms, books, and lunches. Early marriage can also cut short a girl's education. *Social and educational policies should seek to eliminate harmful gender norms that devalue the education of girls, together with practices such as child labour and early marriage.* For some girls, lack of safety in or around schools is the chief obstacle to getting an education.

In some countries, there are high levels of sexual violence and harassment from teachers and male students including rape, assault, and physical and verbal harassment (Jefferson, 2004:11). *Educational authorities must ensure that schools are safe places for all students, with special attention to the security of girls.*

A number of preventive interventions can be carried out. For example, curricula can be designed to change attitudes towards violence in general and violence against women in particular, and school facilities can be designed to reduce opportunities for physical assaults. At the same time, schools must adopt clear policies, including the enforcement of sanctions for perpetrators of violence.

Combating violence against women is central to the Goal 3, that of promoting gender equality; at the same time, achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is central to the elimination of violence against women. Since violence against women has such serious impacts on women's lives and their health, productivity and well-being, it must be addressed as a cross-cutting issue if Goal 3 is to be achieved. *The attainment of MDG 3 will require a comprehensive approach to overcome not only violence against women, but also gender-based discrimination in laws and policies, and deeply embedded social and cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequality.*

Violence against women and gender inequality result from a complex array of interwoven factors. These include harmful gender norms and traditions, and social acceptance of violence as an accepted means of conflict resolution. Violence against women is often embedded in social customs that allow it to be perpetrated with impunity – even, in many cases, without being considered as violence, let alone a crime. In many parts of the world, women have no social or legal recourse against violence by their husband or partner. Harmful gender roles can be reinforced by traditional practices such as widow-cleansing, wife inheritance, child marriage and female genital mutilation. *Efforts to empower women must address current norms and traditional social customs that legitimize violence against them, as well as legislation and enforcement of laws that discriminate against them.*

A wide variety of tools and strategies will be required to overcome deeply embedded gender norms and systemic discrimination against women. These include visible and sustained leadership by politicians and other key figures in society, communication campaigns aimed at changing norms and attitudes, law reform on issues such as property rights, divorce, and political participation, and credit and skills-building programmes to increase women's economic independence. Greater equality and empowerment will help many women to avoid violence. But the violence will never disappear unless men also change their attitudes and reject violence against women as acceptable behaviour in any context, including in the home.

A mix of interventions specifically aimed at reducing violence and protecting women will be required. These interventions include enactment and enforcement of sanctions against men who perpetrate violence against women; training of judiciary, police and health care workers to recognize and deal appropriately with violence against women; and services for women experiencing violence such as shelters, telephone hotlines; psychological and legal advice, and support networks. Continuous monitoring of such initiatives is important. *Governments should ensure that statistics on violence against women, including on prosecution and conviction rates, are regularly collected and disseminated and that interventions to address violence are properly evaluated.* While the targets and indicators under MDG 3 recognize that education, literacy, wage employment and political participation are important indices of women's empowerment, their achievement– in and of themselves – does not directly address violence against women.

Child mortality is affected by violence against women in several ways. The most direct is through death and injury inflicted on girls and infants through both physical and sexual violence. Female infanticide is still practiced in many parts of the world, sometimes through direct violence, but also by intentional neglect or starvation. This is particularly the case where male children are considered more valuable than females. This attitude may also be manifested in traditions such as costly dowry obligations placed on the families of prospective grooms (Åsling-Monemi et.al, 2003:10-16). *Efforts to reduce child mortality must include efforts to eradicate female infanticide and discrimination against girls. Such efforts must address underlying harmful gender norms and biases, and prohibit practices that economically burden the birth of females.* They should also include measures to support women's right to choose when and whether they want to have children, including family planning programmes and better access to quality contraception.

Violence against women by an intimate partner has been shown to be associated with – among other things – mortality in children aged under 5 years. In addition, although pregnancy may be a protective factor against violence in some societies, violence during pregnancy is widely prevalent (Campbell et.al, 2004:23). It is estimated that one in four women worldwide is physically or sexually abused during pregnancy, usually by her partner. As well as traumatic injury to the fetus, violence against pregnant women is associated with a risk of miscarriage, premature labour, and fetal distress, and may be related to low-birth-weight. *Efforts to reduce infant and child mortality should include measures to reduce partner-violence against women.*

Development makes little sense if half of the population is excluded from participating, contributing and reaping its benefits. Yet that is exactly what happens when violence – together with harmful gender norms and discriminatory legislation – prevents women from being full partners in development projects. Such violence usually takes the form of intimate-partner violence through which men control women's work, income, social contacts and mobility. However, violence in the community, the workplace and in conflict situations, all play their part in denying women full access to education, health care, and social services. *Development strategies should promote women's ability to participate as full social, economic and political partners, unrestricted by harmful gender norms and violence.* The strategies must include interventions that range, for example, from quota towards ensuring that women have guaranteed access to certain types of jobs, education or governance positions, to gender-sensitive budgets that support equitable allocation of resources, to laws that do not discriminate against women and health and social services responsive to women's needs.

Concluding Remarks

As governments and communities mobilize around the MDGs, they should be aware that violence against women not only arises from the conditions being addressed by the Goals, but also hinders their achievement. This underlines the importance of advocacy efforts aimed at connecting development and health with violence against women in the minds of those who make policies and design development programmes.

The MDGs are about creating more dignified living conditions for all, but approaches to development that ignore gender dimensions risk leaving existing inequalities unchanged or only slightly improved for half the world's population. It is imperative that politicians, decision-makers and all other relevant actors remember that women and men live different lives, and that women's lives often include violence for no other reason than that they are women.

Domestic violence essentially denies women equality before the law and reinforces their subordinate social status. Men use domestic violence to diminish women's autonomy and sense of self-worth. States that fail to prevent and prosecute perpetrators of domestic violence treat women as second-class citizens and send a clear message that the violence against them is of no concern to the body polity.

In order for the targets of the MDGs to be realised, comprehensive approaches that acknowledge the links between gender inequality and violence against women must be developed and implemented. These approaches and actors will require some additional resources and it is essential that governments, donors and multilateral agencies ensure that these resources are available. Building concrete responses to violence against women into MDG strategies will help to ensure that the new millennium is the time when women no longer endure violence solely because they are women. In addition to working towards Goal 3 on gender equality and women's empowerment, issues of violence against women should be addressed across all Goals. Increased attention must be paid to addressing the risk factors for violent behaviour of men towards women as well as the risk factors for violence shared by men and women. Unless prevention and awareness of violence against women is integrated into all MDGs, sustainable development will continue to suffer – and the ambitious Goals agreed to by the international community will remain unattainable.

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