

The Impact of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Women in the Federal Republic of Nigeria with Regard to Domestic Violence and Rape

Dr. Sherihan Radi, Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus–Senftenberg, Germany

Abstract:- The COVID-19 pandemic turned the whole world upside down. It didn't only amplify flaws in healthcare and social services system but also aggravated the situation of vulnerable groups of people such as women. The paper examines the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable women in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It aims at contributing to the understanding of the women's serious situation particularly after the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria. The paper adopts the qualitative method and the deductive approach. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with a target population of twelve Nigerian women who are migrants in Egypt. Results revealed that COVID-19 has a significant negative impact on vulnerable women in Nigeria with regard to domestic violence and rape. Serious efforts should be undertaken to protect these vulnerable women despite of the pandemic crisis.

Keywords:- COVID-19, Domestic Violence, Rape, Federal Republic of Nigeria

I. INTRODUCTION

Based on Partners West Africa Nigeria(2020), the Federal Republic of Nigeria recorded its index case of COVID-19 on the 27th of February 2020. With the continuous spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria imposed on the 29th of March 2020 a fourteen-day lockdown in the Federal Capital Territory, Lagos and Ogun States to reduce the spread of the virus. Educational institutions and businesses have been shut down and restrictions were imposed on social and public gatherings. People were instructed to work from their homes and leave them only if necessary to buy important stuff such as food and medicine. With the virus spread, indicators in Nigeria demonstrated that this pandemic would create a socio-economic problem rather than a medical one particularly for women. The impact of this pandemic on women varied and included social, health, mental and well-being challenges and the increase in gender-based and sexual violence.

In order to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on women in Nigeria in relation to domestic violence and rape, it is important to have a better understanding about the women's situation and condition in Nigeria before the outbreak of the coronavirus.

➤ *Women's situation in the Federal Republic of Nigeria before the outbreak of COVID-19*

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, women in Nigeria were vulnerable and were suffering from the worst conditions particularly in rural areas. They are faced daily with issues such as rape, abuse, underage marriage and spousal abandonment. In cases of spousal abandonment, there are no laws that oblige men to pay for childcare support. When a wife is neglected by her husband, she has to bear alone the burdens of childrearing and support as by The Guardian(2019).

In accordance with Alonge(2018), Nigeria is a country with a multicultural society that consists of hundreds of ethnic groups. Each one of these groups has its own traditional value system. At the same time, these groups share a common view that men are authoritative figures that deserve to be respected by their wives. This view led to putting the wives in a continuous subordinate position in the household to the husbands. Even if a husband is abusive, the woman is mostly blamed of not being a good wife. Twenty-three per cent of women have been victims of sexual or physical violence by an ex husband. Several cases of domestic violence are not reported.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, women in Nigeria were already victims of domestic violence. Based on (Wikipedia), domestic violence in Nigeria is evident as in several African countries and is considered a problem. Due to deep cultural beliefs in Nigeria that it is acceptable to discipline a wife and hit a woman, domestic violence is widely spread in the country.

As reported by "The Irish Times"(2005), at least two-thirds of women in the Nigeria's commercial capital Lagos suffer physical, psychological or sexual abuse mostly in the family from fathers or husbands. Nigerian women are murdered, raped and beaten on a daily basis for reasons such as visiting the family without the husband's permission or not preparing the meals on time. These crimes are mostly not reported.

According to Bazza(2009), women in Nigeria regardless of their class, age, educational level and residence place are victims of violence within the family. They are regularly beaten and tortured. Three hundred to three hundred and fifty women in Nigeria are killed annually by their husbands, boyfriends or male relatives.

Although the levels of violence within relations are high in Nigeria, wives are still urged to stay with bullying husbands as according to the Nigerian cultural perception, a woman who walks out of marriage is considered a failure and a woman who leaves her husband is not often supported by her family. Therefore, in order to keep appearances, these women continue to remain married as mentioned by Udobang(2018).

According to a study by the Nigerian Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Development together with the United Nations Population Fund Nigeria, twenty-eight per cent of Nigerian women who are between twenty-five to twenty-nine years old have experienced physical violence since they were fifteen years old and twenty-five per cent of married women were victims to violence as by Umukoro(2020).

NOIPolls(2019) stated that based on a domestic violence poll carried out in 2019, more than eighty-two per cent of Nigerians believe that domestic violence is widespread in Nigeria. Sixty-three per cent mentioned that women are the most victims of domestic violence in Nigeria.

As per Adegbey(2020), the more abuse a Nigerian woman can accept, the more virtuous she becomes by the people in her surroundings. On the other hand, Nigerian women who speak out against abuse are put back in their places. Nigerian women are unsafe in Nigeria where men and boys exercise their dominance on women and believe that women must submit to their needs. Even though rape is still underreported in Nigeria and considered a family matter, between the months of January and May 2020, more than seven hundred rape cases have been reported in Nigeria.

II. METHODS

Qualitative semi-structured interviews have been conducted individually with twelve Nigerian female migrants residing in Egypt. Eight out of the twelve participants were married while two escaped their marriage and the remaining two females were widowed. The participants were older than thirty years. During the interviews, an interpreter assisted the researcher whenever needed. Each interview lasted for thirty minutes and as the participants wished, the interviews were not recorded and notes were taken by the researcher instead.

The researcher respected the issue of confidentiality and assured the participants that their names will not be mentioned. The participants were given the opportunity to share their experiences and opinions. The impact of COVID-19 on women in Nigeria in relation to domestic violence and rape was the main interview topic.

III. RESULTS

The following analysis and discussion are in relation to the subject of the paper that is concerned with on the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable women in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, particularly related to domestic violence and rape.

➤ *The impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence against women in Nigeria*

The following questions were raised to find out the participants experiences and opinions with regard to the impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence against women in Nigeria.

➤ *Before starting with the interview question addressed to the participants, it is important to understand the meaning of domestic violence.*

According to vora, Malathesh & Chatterjee(2020), domestic violence is defined as any act that results into physical, emotional, verbal and sexual abuse such as sexual violence, humiliation, insults and physical violence. There is a direct link between extreme events such as natural disasters and the increase in domestic violence since these events may cause stress, unemployment and loss of income. By losing the income, the male partner loses control over economic security leading him to exercise more control on his partner.

Based on Flury, Nyberg & Riecher-Rössler(2010), domestic violence is defined as physical, emotional or psychological violence exercised on another person in order to harm, control and exercise power over that person. This can be exercised by a husband, ex husband, family member, acquaintance or a friend. The concept of domestic violence involves gender- based violence and is associated with gender and power. Domestic violence can take many forms:

➤ *Physical violence*

This involves harming the other person's body such as biting, kicking and threatening with knives.

➤ *Sexual violence*

It includes any type of intimacy forced upon another person.

➤ *Emotional and psychological violence*

Emotional and psychological violence includes several forms such as offenses, isolation of the victim and humiliation aiming at limiting the victims' freedom and exercising control over them.

The interview question raised is as follows:

Question 1: Do you think that COVID-19 made the issue of domestic violence against women in Nigeria worse?

All twelve participants believed that COVID-19 worsened the issue of domestic violence against women in Nigeria. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, all participants shared that they were victims of domestic violence on the

hands of their husbands, fathers, brothers or even male relatives.

Since these women are now residing in Egypt, they shared the experiences of their relatives and friends who are residing in Nigeria during the outbreak of COVID-19. There were so many stories and all had one thing in common namely the endless suffering of women in Nigeria on a daily basis and having to put up with the domestic violence they face. Since the participants shared many stories, the researcher will only refer to some of them as follows:

One respondent shared: *"My sister is living in Nigeria with her husband and three children. She tells me how difficult the situation is especially with the outbreak of COVID-19. Her husband lost his job and she has to do some cleaning services for other households just to earn some extra money. This is very difficult especially with the outbreak of this virus, as people fear that they could be infected and not everyone allows her to enter their homes to offer domestic services. My sister told me how much she is suffering in this whole situation as since her husband lost his job, he became very angry and more aggressive towards her than he was before. Each and every single thing she does irritates him and he starts beating her for no reason at all. She tells me she can't put up with this situation any longer but there is no way to escape it."*

Another participant who is widowed expressed that before her husband died, she was daily beaten by him and mistreated for simple reasons such as going out to buy something and coming home late or the children were making noise while he was sleeping. The participant shared: *"It was very difficult for me but I kept tolerating it only for the sake of my children."* The participant added: *"I have a young daughter living in Nigeria with her husband. She tells me that the situation with the pandemic made it all worse for her. Their economic situation became worse as her husband's income is less now and she can't find any job due to this pandemic situation. They barely have something to eat daily. To add to her worse situation, her husband bullies her on a daily basis and puts his anger on her. His fear, worries and anxiety as a result of the current situation and the poor living conditions made him act like a beast towards her. Unfortunately, I can't help her because I am in another country but trust me even if I was in Nigeria, her husband will not accept my interference if I tried to talk to him and make him stop his aggressive behavior. I am a woman and he will not have any respect for me. There is nothing for me to do to protect my daughter."*

One of the participants who managed to escape her marriage shared: *"The situation for women in Nigeria is terrible. I was lucky to escape my bully husband. It was hell and no one wanted to help me from my family until the day came and I was able to free myself from all this horrible experience. I am working as a housemaid now. The salary is not very high but at least I am free and I won't be tolerating this bullying anymore. I feel sad for all my sisters back home who are tortured on the hands of their husbands and who can't escape the situation like I did because they have*

children not like me and they don't want to be separated from them. They explained to me how things turned into worse now with this entire virus spreading and the horror they face being locked down in the house with their bully husbands."

One participant said: *"Domestic violence in Nigeria is endless and it became out of control with the outbreak of the coronavirus and the lockdown measures. My sister was beaten by her husband during the lockdown. He broke her arm and teeth and left her lying on the floor helpless. She couldn't even go to a doctor as everything was under a lockdown. She had to bear all this pain and suffering without anyone to assist her."*

The participants' responses are in line with what was mentioned by Taub(2020) that due to the movement restrictions and home isolation to stop the spread of the COVID-19, in addition to the difficulty of reaching support networks, abusers became more powerful and domestic violence victims are unable to escape or get help.

The participants' responses are also in conformity with what was stated by the Human Rights Watch Human Rights Watch(2020) that Dubravka Šimonović, the UN special rapporteur expressed in a statement in March 2020 that domestic violence against women may be increased due to the efforts related to dealing with the current pandemic crisis. As reported by the Human Rights Watch, due to the lockdowns, stress and difficult living conditions together with malfunctions in community support systems such as the inability of providing appropriate access for victims to safe shelters, the rates of domestic violence would increase and limit the victims' abilities to escape their abusers.

The participants' responses in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence against women in Nigeria and the way it increased domestic violence conform with what was mentioned by Olokode(2020) that the pandemic increased the rates of domestic violence in Nigeria since the lockdown and as reported by the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team, the team has received within only a couple of days after the lockdown twice the number of domestic violence complaints. Due to the partial lockdown and the underdeveloped social services sector, it became difficult for the women who witness domestic violence to seek shelter.

The responses are also in compliance with what was mentioned by Young & Aref-Adib(2020) that the number of domestic violence reported cases showed an increase of two-hundred and ninety-seven per cent in April 2020 in the three states that were under full lockdown by the government, namely Lagos state, Ogun state and the Federal Capital Territory. As for Benue, Ebonyi and Cross River states that were under less strict lockdown, the number of domestic violence reported cases increased only by fifty-three per cent in March and April 2020. On the other hand, all the country's resources have been directed towards dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Court proceedings have been postponed and as a result restraining orders to

protect the domestic violence victims have not been issued. Police officers working in the family and support units were also directed towards enforcing the lockdown and this resulted into reducing their capacity in responding to any domestic violence calls.

What the participants mentioned is also in line with what was expressed by Tajmee(2020)that the abusers took advantage of the social-distancing and quarantine measures and several women were entrapped at home with these abusers.

➤ *The impact of COVID-19 on rape in Nigeria*

Rape is defined as the penetration of any part of the victim's body as expressed by Easta(1992). As defined by (Merriam-Webster) dictionary, it is an unlawful sexual intercourse carried out under threat or by force against a person's will. In accordance with (Barstow), rape has been in several jurisdictions under sexual assault and its cause was considered for a long time as an unrestrained sexual desire. This has changed and its cause is considered now a pathological assertion of power over a victim.

As bythe (European Institute for Gender Equality), rape is a violation of women's human rights (UN General Assembly Resolution 48/104 based on the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights); a form of torture (practice of the European Court of Human Rights, based on the European Convention on Human Rights); a war crime (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court) and a form of gender-based discrimination against women (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation No 19).

The interview question raised is as follows:

Question 2: Do you think that COVID-19 increased the number of raped women in Nigeria?

The participants believed that COVID-19 increased the number of women getting raped in Nigeria that was already an issue before.

One participant shared: *"Unfortunately the Nigerian culture that gives the rights for men to practice dominance and full control over women encourages rape. Several women in my country have been raped and the situation got worse with the spread of the virus."*

The response of this participant is in line with what was mentioned by Isiaka(2020) that a culture of rape exists in Nigeria and it is difficult for victims to hold their abusers accountable. As reported by the United Nations, one in four girls and women before the age of eighteen experienced rape and/or have been sexually assaulted in Nigeria. At the same time there are less than eighty recorded rape convictions in Nigeria.

Her response is also in conformity with what was expressed by Oon(2020) that Nigeria has a culture of rape

tolerated for decades in silence where women were treated as sex objects.

Another participant added: *"Rape cases in Nigeria are increasing with the spread of COVID-19. I heard from my family and relatives that every day now women they know have been subjected to rape. Before the virus not many women did report these cases so imagine after the outbreak of the virus and the lockdown and strict health measures, who would assist these women?."*

One participant shared how her cousin was brutally raped during the lockdown by a family member. She didn't even dare to stand up for herself and report this or share it with the males in the family as nobody would listen to her.

This participant's response is consistent with what was mentioned by Oon(2020) that in relation to rape, a culture of silence exists. Women were oppressed and the ones who dared to speak about being rape victims were condemned.

Another participant expressed that every day in her neighborhood as her sister informed her, there are girls and women raped even more than before with the spread of COVID-19. She mentioned that these women share their sorrow and what happened to them only with other women.

One participant mentioned: *"It is true that COVID-19 and the lockdown measures increased the number of rape cases but the problem is far more than that. Women who dare to speak up and share what they have been through to their families are discouraged. Family members particularly the males always put the blame on the women and prevent them from reporting the rape incidents in order not to bring shame to themselves or their families."*

From all the above-mentioned, it is clear that COVID-19 contributed in the increase of numbers of women being raped in Nigeria.

The participants' responses also confirm what was mentioned by Tajmee(2020)that COVID-19 has heightened Nigeria's rape crisis and contributed to magnifying the rape issue.

The responses also confirm what was expressed by Ayanda(2020)that since the Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020, there has been an alarming increase in reported cases of rape of women and girls.

They are also in consonance with Sonke Gender Justice(2020)that with 3600 reported rape cases since the beginning of COVID-19 lockdown, it is clear that Nigeria has experienced a dramatic escalation in rape cases.

What the participants mentioned is in agreement with what was expressed by Oon(2020) that during the months of April and May 2020 in the Covid-19 lockdown period, one hundred and fifty-six cases of sexual and gender-based violence in Nigeria have been reported to the Women's Aid Collective.

As reported by Reuters(2020), the Nigerian Minister of Women Affairs Pauline Tallen called in June 2020 for action and law enforcement on the alarming increase in rapes during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

The participants' responses in relation to domestic violence and rape in Nigeria are in line with what was reported by Eyewitness News(2020) that Nigeria's police stated in June that Nigeria witnessed a sharp increase in cases of rape and domestic abuse of women during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

From all the aforementioned, it is clear that COVID-19 has a negative impact on vulnerable women in Nigeria in relation to domestic violence and rape as it has contributed to the increase of both domestic violence and rape due to the lockdown and quarantine measures that had to be applied in order to reduce the coronavirus pandemic spread in the country.

IV. CONCLUSION

Domestic violence and rape are serious issues that women witness in Nigeria. They reflect the serious social and psychological problem that exists in the Nigerian society and traditions that empower men against women. With the COVID-19 outbreak, the situation escalated and became even worse.

At the time while the world is busy fighting COVID-19 and all available resources are used and directed towards this fight, developing countries particularly the ones that witness a high degree of gender inequality namely Nigeria where gender inequality is evident in various forms such as domestic violence and rape of women, special care and attention should be given to these vulnerable groups. More protection should be offered to women from any forms of domestic violence.

Despite of the existence of COVID-19, more awareness campaigns that abide by the required safety regulations to reduce the spread of the pandemic should be created to empower women and encourage them to report cases of domestic violence and rape.

Support groups, channels and institutions that already provide support to domestic violence and rape victims should be provided with the means that enable them to continue their work during the pandemic crisis. National plans should also be developed to limit the social impacts of the COVID-19 and immediately interfere to protect women from all forms of abuses, domestic violence and rape. Authorities are also required to interfere to address the issue of the increased number of domestic violence and rape amid COVID-19 and target their efforts towards the protection of women. At the same time laws must be reformed to end all forms of violence against women. It should be treated as a collective responsibility of the government, all governmental authorities and non-governmental institutions. They should all cooperate and work together with one

common purpose that is to put an end to issues of domestic violence and rape in the Nigerian society.

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