

# **Violence Against Women: An Impediment to Development. What Solutions?**

*By*

*Josephine Effah-Chukwuma  
Executive Director, Project Alert*

## **Introduction**

What is violence against women? What is development? Simple and straight forward, as these two concepts, may seem, it is appropriate that a presentation such as this, commences with clarifying key concepts.

Violence against women and young girls as we all know is an international issue, knowing no boundaries, be them race, class, religion, culture/tradition etc. Violence against women is any act of gender-based violence that results in, or are likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women and young girls, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or in private.

Development on the other hand, can be defined as the act of improving by expanding or enlarging or refining; process of growing; a process in which something passes by degrees to a different stage (especially a more advanced or mature stage); state in which things are improving, getting better; the result of developing. Development according to *Mohandas Gandhi*, is a constant law of life, and a man who always tries to maintain his dogmas in order to appear consistent drives himself into a false position.

## ***Violence Against Women***

Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. It can include physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse, and it cuts across boundaries of age, race, culture, wealth and geography. It takes place in the home, on the streets, in schools, the workplace, in farm fields, refugee camps, during conflicts and crises. It has many manifestations — from the most universally prevalent forms of domestic and sexual violence, to harmful traditional practices, such as male child preference, widowhood rites, female genital mutilation; abuse during pregnancy, so-called honour killings and other types of femicide.

Globally, up to six out of every ten women experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. A World Health Organization study of 24,000 women in 10 countries found that the prevalence of physical and/or sexual violence by a partner varied from

15 percent in urban Japan to 71 percent in rural Ethiopia, with most areas being in the 30–60 percent range.<sup>1</sup>

Various forms of violence against women and young girls include:

- Domestic and intimate partner development
- Sexual Violence
- Harmful Traditional Practices
- Trafficking in Women Young Girls

### **Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence**

Domestic and intimate partner violence includes physical and sexual attacks against women in the home, within the family or within an intimate relationship. Women are more at risk of experiencing violence in intimate relationships than anywhere else.

In no country in the world are women safe from this type of violence. Out of ten countries surveyed in a 2005 study by the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 50 percent of women in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Tanzania reported having been subjected to physical or sexual violence by intimate partners, with figures reaching staggering 71 percent in rural Ethiopia. Only in one country (Japan) did less than 20 percent of women report incidents of domestic violence. An earlier WHO study puts the number of women physically abused by their partners or ex-partners at 30 percent in the United Kingdom, and 22 percent in the United States <sup>2</sup>

Surveys from around the world, have pointed to the fact that half of the women who die from homicides are killed as a result of violence in the home, with their killers being either husband/boyfriend or son. A study conducted in São Paulo, Brazil, reported that 13 percent of deaths of women of reproductive age were homicides, of which 60 percent were committed by the victims' partners. In Nigeria, Project Alert in its daily monitoring of only four daily newspapers between 2005 – 2007, recorded

### **Sexual Violence**

Sexual violence against women and young girls, manifests itself in various forms. These include incest, rape, child sexual abuse, defilement of a minor, sexual harassment etc. Statistics on this form of violence is very difficult to come by and cannot be relied upon because of gross underreporting. It is estimated that worldwide, one in five women will become a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/violence\\_against\\_women](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/violence_against_women)

<sup>2</sup> [www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/violence\\_against\\_women/facts\\_figures](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/violence_against_women/facts_figures)

In Nigeria several incidences of rape, incest and defilement of minors, go unreported. Silence is the weapon used in its further perpetration. However recently, due to years of advocacy work by human rights organizations such as ours, FIDA etc, victims and their family members are speaking out, and seeking justice. Between January – June, this year, Project Alert recorded 35 cases of child sexual abuse (age of the children ranged from 3 years – 16 years) in Lagos State. 24 of these cases were reported in different newspapers, while 11 were cases reported directly to Project Alert.

### **Harmful Traditional Practices**

Harmful traditional practices are forms of violence that have been committed against women and young girls in our communities and society. They have gone on for so long, that they are considered to be accepted cultural practices, though they clearly discriminate against women/young girls, and expose them to physical and psychological harm including death. They include cultural practices that prefers male children to female children, early marriage, female genital mutilation; maltreatment/disinheritance of widows etc.

### **Trafficking in Women & Girls**

Trafficking involves the recruitment and transportation of persons, using deception, coercion and threats in order to place and keep them in a situation of forced labour, slavery or servitude. Persons are trafficked into a variety of sectors of the informal economy, including prostitution, domestic work, agriculture, the garment industry or street begging.

While exact data are hard to come by, estimates of the number of trafficked persons range from 500,000 to two million per year, and a few organizations have estimated that up to four million persons are trafficked every year.<sup>3</sup> Although women, men, girls and boys can become victims of trafficking, the majority of victims are female

Trafficking is in most cases a trans-border crime that affects all regions of the world: according to a 2006 UN global report on trafficking, 127 countries have been documented as countries of origin, and 137 as countries of destination. The main countries of origin are reported to be in Central and South-Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Asia, followed by West Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean

### ***VAW: An Impediment to Development***

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

---

<sup>3</sup> [www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/violence\\_against\\_women/facts\\_figures](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/violence_against_women/facts_figures)

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.

Global statistics paint a horrifying picture of the social and health consequences of violence against women. For women aged 15 to 44 years, violence is a major cause of death and disability. In a 1994 study based on World Bank data about ten selected risk factors facing women in this age group, rape and domestic violence rated higher than cancer, motor vehicle accidents, war and malaria. Moreover, several studies have revealed increasing links between violence against women and HIV/AIDS. Women who have experienced violence are at a higher risk of HIV infection: a survey among 1,366 South African women showed that women who were beaten by their partners were 48 percent more likely to be infected with HIV than those who were not.<sup>4</sup>

The economic cost of violence against women is considerable (though such studies have only emanated from developed countries)— a 2003 report by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that the costs of intimate partner violence in the United States alone exceed US\$5.8 billion per year: US\$4.1 billion are for direct medical and health care services, while productivity losses account for nearly US\$1.8 billion. Violence against women impoverishes individuals, families and communities, reducing the economic development of each nation.<sup>5</sup>

In a recent survey by the American Institute on Domestic Violence, 60 percent of senior executives said that domestic violence, which limits women's workplace participation, has an adverse effect on company productivity. The survey found that domestic violence victims lose nearly 8 million days of paid work per year — the equivalent of 32,000 full-time jobs.<sup>6</sup>

A UK study has estimated total direct and indirect costs of all domestic violence at £23 billion per year or £440 per person.<sup>7</sup>

The same applies to HIV/AIDS. More than 30 million people are today living with HIV. Globally, women now account for half of all infections. In Africa and the Caribbean, young women ages 15–24 are up to six times more likely to be HIV-positive than young men of the same age.

---

<sup>4</sup> [www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/violence\\_against\\_women/facts\\_figures](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/violence_against_women/facts_figures)

<sup>5</sup> [www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/violence\\_against\\_women/facts\\_figures](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/violence_against_women/facts_figures)

<sup>6</sup> [www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/violence\\_against\\_women/facts\\_figures](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/violence_against_women/facts_figures)

<sup>7</sup> S. Walby, *The Cost of Domestic Violence*, Women & Equality Unit, 2004, accessed online May 1, 2010, at [www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/research/cost\\_of\\_dv\\_Report\\_sept04.pdf](http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/research/cost_of_dv_Report_sept04.pdf)

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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.

Violence against women, especially the threat of physical and sexual violence, has also kept women away from active participation in politics and governance.

### ***What Solutions?***

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.

As noted by participants at the 6<sup>th</sup> Africa Development Forum in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in November 2008, there has been too much talk and signing of regional and international documents, with little or no actions. There is thus an urgent need for governments and politicians to move from rhetoric to action.

Some of the declarations include the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. Adopted in 1998 in Banjul, Gambia, the instrument is explicit about addressing violence against women. There is also the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1979. Under this facility, governments are expected to establish structures to fight violence against women. However the African continent in general, and Nigeria in particular, is still marred by widespread cases of violence against women.

---

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.jpanafrican.com/docs/vol3no3/3.3ViolenceAgainst.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Karanja, W.L (2003) "Domestic Violence and HIV Infection in Uganda". Human Rights Dialogue, Fall, Series 2, No 10.

The way forward include the following:

- Implementation of all regional and international instruments signed and ratified by Nigeria.
- Efforts should be stepped up to empower women through addressing current norms and traditional social customs that legitimize violence against them, as well as legislation and enforcement of laws that discriminate against them.
- Enforcement of already existing laws that prohibit violence against women/young girls, and has sanctions against perpetrators e.g the domestic violence law, FGM laws, widowhood laws.
- 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.
- 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.

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.