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Combating Domestic Violence Against Women in Nigeria: The Role of Library and Information Science Professionals

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Introduction

Domestic violence is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria rather, it has been in existence for a very long time. However, before now it was treated with a hush, hush attitude as it was perceived by many, including the victims and their relatives, as a normal part of domestic life. As a result, it was not considered a matter deserving of public health attention as it is today.

Sadly, even with the more open attitude towards it today especially the awareness created by print and electronic media, social media and non-governmental bodies, the rate of domestic violence in Nigeria is reported to be on the rise and this is without prejudice to the tribe, religion and social class of both victims and perpetrators.

This is corroborated by a study carried out in Nigeria that reports that 1 in every 3 respondents admitted to being a victim of domestic violence. The survey also found a nationwide increase in domestic violence in the past 3 years from 21% in 2011 to 30% in 2013. Also, in the 2012 National Crime and Safety Survey, it was demonstrated that 31% of the national sample confessed to being victims of domestic violence (CLEEN Foundation cited in Wikipedia, 2022).

Another nationwide study on domestic violence in Nigeria revealed that 78% of the participants were of the view that there is an increasing prevalence of domestic violence in Nigeria with 54% of women, 16% of children and 9% of men reporting that they had personally experienced acts of domestic violence (Project Alert & NOIPolls, 2016).

Generally speaking, domestic violence is an act of violence at the home front that involves the inflicting of physical, sexual, emotional, economic and psychological abuse by one person on

another. This includes all acts of violence irrespective of whether it is committed by a spouse against his/her spouse or parents against their children or vice versa.

However, statistical evidence shows that while women are not the only victims of domestic violence in Nigeria, they are mostly at the receiving end of domestic violence in Nigeria. As of 2016, Nigeria ranked 49th in the global country ranking on the proportion of women subjected to domestic violence in the preceding year (Index Mundi, 2019).

Given that the incidence of domestic violence against women is more reported in the literature, the focus of this paper is domestic violence against women in Nigeria. However, as an attempt is made to explore the role that Nigerian information professionals can play in combatting this menace, library professionals must be open-minded.

To that extent, the paper seeks to do the following

1. Determine what is domestic violence.
2. Highlight the various types of domestic violence against women in Nigeria.
3. Ascertain the causes of domestic violence against women in Nigeria.
4. Highlight the effects of domestic violence against women in Nigeria.
5. Determine the role of library professionals in combating domestic violence in Nigeria.

Literature Review

What is Domestic Violence?

There is no one definition for domestic violence and it might even be said that rather than talk about definitions the concentration should be on describing the term. The difficulty in defining the term is made more complex by the fact that other terms are also being used to represent it. There is also the problem of scope definition. The problem of scope definition arises from the fact that

while some researchers conceive domestic violence as an act of violence that one spouse metes out on another especially as it concerns married couples, others have tended to include in their definition, violence against children in the home, and violence within a relationship that may or may not be a marriage or heterosexual relationship. In the latter, violence that occurs among people in same-sex relationships and divorced spouses are also categorised as domestic violence. This latter view also conveys the fact that the focus of domestic violence should be on the relationship between the individuals concerned rather than the status of their habitation as it can also occur outside the confines of a shared home.

To that extent, other terms that are often used synonymously with domestic violence include intimate partner violence (IPV), domestic abuse, spousal abuse, battering, family violence, dating abuse and relationship violence (Campbell, 2002; Linos, Slopen, Subramanian, Berkman & Kawachi, 2013; UNICEF, 2000 and Kerr, Levine, & Woolard, 2007).

However, a good starting point in considering the definition of domestic violence is to ask: what is violence? Although viewed as a complex concept, violence in the context of this paper is “the use of threat or force that can result in injury, harm, deprivation or even death. It may be physical, verbal or psychological” (Council of Europe Portal, 2022).

With that as the operational definition of violence, the various definitions of domestic violence can be considered.

Domestic violence is “the intentional and persistent abuse of anyone in the home in a way that causes pain, distress or injury. It refers to any abusive treatment of one family member by another, thus violating the law of basic human rights” (Ahie, 2009). This definition includes in its operational terms “intension and persistence” and widens domestic violence to include any

violence that is meted out to any member of the family irrespective of their status in the family relationship.

Another definition which tends to toe the same line says “domestic violence is ... a mix of physical and coercive behaviours designed to manipulate and dominate another competent adult or adolescent, to achieve compliance and dependence” (Kerr, Levine & Woolard, 2007). This definition, like the former, recognises that children too can experience domestic violence. It also introduces the element of power in the mix by highlighting that the violent partner aims to make the victim compliant and dependent.

The United Nations tends to agree with the power dynamics at play in domestic violence. In their definition, domestic violence is.... “a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner which could be physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person” (United Nations, 2000).

The definition by the United Nations also uses ‘intimate partner’ to convey the point that the parties involved in a case of domestic violence do not need to be in a marriage relationship nor do the parties have to live in the same home for the act of violence to be tagged domestic. Also, the act of domestic violence does not have to be physical as domestic violence could also be sexual, emotional, economic or psychological.

In agreement, Umweni, Uwadiae and Agbontaen-Eghafona (2009) define domestic violence as “a pattern of violent behaviour including physical, sexual and psychological attacks as well as economic coercion used against an intimate partner.”

Similarly, the UNICEF IRC cited in Dienye and Gbeneol (2009) defines domestic violence as violence that is perpetrated by intimate partners and other family members, and that is manifested through physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, economic abuse, and acts of omission.

Another definition which uses several other synonyms of domestic violence, and expands the scope of domestic violence is given by Adedayo (2014). In the author's view, domestic violence, also known as domestic abuse, spousal abuse, battering, family violence, dating abuse, and intimate partner violence (IPV), is a pattern of behaviour which involves the abuse by one partner against another in an intimate relationship such as marriage, cohabitation, dating or within the family.

Reachout Australia (2022) defines domestic violence, or family violence simply as violent, abusive or intimidating behaviour in a relationship.

In an attempt to describe the term domestic violence and to ensure that it is all-encompassing, section 18(g) of Lagos State Domestic Violence Law defines domestic violence to mean

physical abuse, sexual abuse exploitation including but not limited to rape, incest and sexual assault; starvation; emotional, verbal and psychological abuse; economic abuse and exploitation; denial of basic education; intimidation; harassment; stalking; hazardous attack including acid both with offensive or poisonous substance; damage to property; entry into the complainant's residence without consent where the parties do not share the same residence; or any controlling or abusive behaviour towards a complainant, where such conduct harms or may cause imminent harm to the safety, health or well-being of the complainant; deprivation against any person ... (cited in Morohunfola, 2021).

A similar rendering is by the South African Domestic Act 116, 1998. It is important to note also that South Africa is viewed globally as one of the countries with the highest incidents of domestic violence against women. Domestic violence is

“physical abuse; sexual abuse; emotional, verbal and psychological abuse; intimidation; economic abuse; harassment; stalking; damage to property; entry into the complainant’s residence without consent, where the parties do not share the same residence; or any other controlling or abusive behaviour toward a complainant where such conduct harms or may cause imminent harm to the safety, health or well-being of the complainant” (The South African Domestic Act 116, 1998 cited in Centreadmin, 2018).

It can be seen that although the Laws quoted above are encompassing the acts that are considered domestic violence, they nonetheless put the responsibility/burden of reporting an incident of domestic violence on the complainant who is assumedly also the victim.

In essence, if a case of domestic violence is not made against the perpetrator by the victim, action may not be taken. While this may seem plausible, it does not seem to appreciate that often the victim is so physically incapacitated by the act of domestic violence that they would not be able to make the initial complaint themselves or that the perpetrator or aggressor holds such power over the victim that they live in mortal fear of them and the consequences of reporting the incident to the authorities. Thus, the victim continues to live at the mercy of the perpetrator.

This point is succinctly captured by Umwemi, Uwadiae and Agbontae cited in Adedayo (2013) who observe that “victims of domestic violence often are reluctant to report their abuse either because of cultural influence which bothers on fear of not being well behaved, threats from the

partner or condemnation from families or community, concern about the break-up of the family, the hope that the partner will change and sometimes due to attitude displayed by medical workers.”

Moreover, there is also the feeling of hopelessness as 53% of the respondents in the Project Alert & NOIPolls (2016) study on domestic violence in Nigeria reported that no action was taken in reported cases of domestic violence against women.

The definitions that have been highlighted have not presented domestic violence as an act against women per se even though it may be inferred. That is why some other sources prefer to use the term ‘gender-based violence.’ Gender-based violence is violence committed against women and girls. But care must be exercised because the fact that gender-based violence focuses on women and girls does not mean that it is always domestic.

As observed earlier, the focus of this paper is domestic violence as an act of physical, emotional, sexual, economic or psychological violence committed by a husband against a wife where the couple lives in a shared home.

Types of Domestic Violence in Nigeria

Clearly, the definitions of the term show that domestic violence can manifest in many forms. From literature, therefore, the types of domestic violence range from physical, sexual, verbal/emotional and economic abuse to psychological abuse. This is by no means exhaustive because domestic violence differs from country to country and even within the same country could also differ from culture to culture, religion etc.

The most common types of domestic violence in the literature are explained below.

- **Physical abuse:** Physical abuse appears to be among the most prominent of all the various types of domestic violence in Nigeria. Physical abuse is any behaviour that directly harms someone physically. This includes violence such as assault or withholding needs like food, sleep, or housing. Other forms of physical abuse include beating, slapping, punching, choking, confinement, biting, denying the partner medical care or forcing her to use drugs or alcohol. In Nigeria, women would usually face physical violence in the form of murder, slapping and kicking at the hands of their loved ones, family members, and society (No Safe Haven cited in Wikipedia, 2022; PychCentral; 2022; Collen, 2004).

In some cases, physical abuse has resulted in the death of the victim as reported on many occasions, the most recently reported case being the alleged battery of a gospel singer by her husband resulting in the death of the singer. Both the electronic, print media and social media were awash with the story (Tsar, 2022). Other documented cases of deaths of women through domestic violence include that of Titilayo Omozoje killed by her husband Akolade Arowolo in June 2011, and of Seun Mojiyagbe who was stabbed with a pair of scissors by her husband in November 2021 (This Day, 2022). The World Health Organization also reports that about 40% -70% of the murder of women is caused by domestic violence or physical abuse by intimate partners.

- **Sexual abuse:** This is another form of domestic violence which takes the form of sexual assault and rape. The 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (2018 NDHS) showed that 30% of females between 15 and 49 years have experienced sexual violence (This Day, 2022). Sadly, many cases of sexual abuse committed in marriage in Nigeria are rarely reported because of the perception that no sexual act between a husband and wife can be termed abusive.

- **Verbal and emotional abuse:** This type of abuse includes remarks, persistent insults, criticism or humiliation all aimed at destroying the woman's self-esteem.
- **Economic abuse:** Economic abuse usually takes the form of denial of access to finances and assets to the woman thereby subjecting her and/or her children to financial hardship. In most cases, the husband aims to deny the wife financial independence and to ensure that she is dependent on him even for the most basic of needs. In some cases, the couple has a common bank account but only the husband has withdrawal rights. The overriding interest of the perpetrator is total control over the victim. This form of abuse is subtle and rarely open to outsiders.
- **Psychological abuse:** Psychological abuse occurs when the aggressor intimidates, threatens or uses fear-causing behaviour towards the victim. Common examples of this form of abuse include: preventing the victim from talking to people unless they are given permission, preventing the victim from leaving the house or threatening the victim with violence or emotional blackmail for doing something the abusive partner does not agree with (Burns, Nickerson & Taylor, 2022).
- **Cultural abuse:** Cultural abuse occurs when abusers use aspects of a victim's culture, identity, or spirituality, to inflict suffering or as a means of control. Some cultural abuses include misusing the traditions, practices and expectations of the spiritual or cultural community to which the victim belongs as a means of normalising or suppressing the abusive behaviours, silencing the victim, or preventing the victim from seeking support and help (Steeped In hope, 2020).

Causes of Domestic Violence in Nigeria

The foregoing has attempted to not only define domestic violence but also present the types of domestic violence that are prevalent in Nigeria and elsewhere. The next logical question is what causes domestic violence?

The causes of domestic violence are varied and individual. To that extent, there is no one cause of domestic violence (PsychCentral, 2022). PsychCentral however notes that while “domestic violence is a choice on the part of the abuser, certain underlying factors might sometimes contribute to a person's propensity for abuse, including experiencing childhood trauma, holding certain belief systems about hierarchy and domination and witnessing domestic violence as a child.”

Ogunkorode (2013) has identified seven causes of domestic violence in Nigeria. While not exhaustive, they provide some insight into the causes of domestic problems in Nigeria. They include 1) cultural factors, 2) low level of education and poverty, 3) psychological factors, 4) political factors, 5) financial factors, 6) childlessness and male child syndrome and 7) religion.

1. **Cultural factors:** In Nigerian families, the man is seen as the head of the family and this confers on him a feeling of superiority and authority over his family including his wife. Some cultural norms make it taboo for a woman to challenge her husband or act without his permission in any situation. Moreover, wife-beating is perceived by some relatives as a normal part of married life and sanctions are meted out to any wife who goes against these established norms. The implication is that women in abusive relationships in most Nigerian cultures are often reluctant to report their husbands to the authorities or even seek medical help when they are physically abused. This empowers the husbands to continue the vicious cycle of abuse.

2. **Low-level education:** Low education in this case is on the part of the woman. There is no general agreement that a woman's educational status especially if she has little or no education can expose her to domestic violence. However, Ogunkorede is of the view that without much education, a woman is handicapped in terms of exposure and is more likely to be manipulated and abused by her husband. The WHO (2010) also identifies this as among the personal factors that expose women to domestic violence.
3. **Psychological factors:** In the case of psychological factors, a man's negative childhood experiences can predispose him to violence later in his life. Some of the personal traits that often lead to domestic violence are low self-esteem, inability to control stress, poor impulse control, frustration, anger etc. On the part of the woman, personal traits such as lack of resistance and conditioning to accepting and normalising violence can also predispose her to domestic violence.
4. **Political factors:** Women are relegated to the background politically in Nigeria. As a result, their voices are rarely heard in the quarters that matter. Coupled with this is the fact that there are no strong policies against domestic violence. Nwakaegho (2022) observes that "there are no laws in Nigeria specifically enacted against domestic violence to be applicable throughout the Federation and although the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) passed in 2015 protects a wide range of types of violence against women, the scope of its application is limited to the Federal Capital Territory. It is not binding on any state that wishes not to adopt it. Without enabling laws, it is difficult to get justice as promptly as possible. This is one of the reasons that domestic violence has persisted.

5. **Financial factors:** Traditionally, the man is perceived as the family breadwinner. In cases where there is a loss of employment and consequent loss of economic power, some men, in frustration turn to violence as a means of suppressing their wives and maintaining their dominance over them. Others turn to vices such as excessive drinking and drunkenness. In frustration also, women have been known to nag their husbands endlessly when they are no longer able to provide for the family. In most cases, these habits cause tension in the home and where it is not managed erupts into domestic violence.

This agrees with the findings of the study by Project Alert & NOIPolls (2016) as “an evaluation of the causes of domestic violence in Nigeria revealed that Nigerians perceive ‘economic hardship’ (42 per cent), ‘misunderstanding between couples’ (21 per cent) and ‘impatience’ (9 per cent) as the main causes of domestic violence in Nigerian homes.”

6. **Childlessness and male child syndrome:** The primary reason for the marriage relationship in Nigeria and many other African societies is the continuity of the family name through procreation. Where this expectation is not met, the woman is usually perceived as the cause. Also, even in cases where there are children in the marriage but only females, the fear of ending the family bloodline as a result of the absence of a male child from the union is a cause for domestic violence against the woman. The sad reality is that most cases of infertility and/or the absence of a male child in a marriage are attributed to the woman. Oftentimes, the man resorts to domestic violence to vent his anger and displeasure with the situation.

7. **Religious factors:** Most religions: traditional, Islamic and Christianity, teach that the husband is the head of the family, and to that extent, obedience and submission to the husband are expected. Oftentimes, this religious teaching is weaponised by some husbands against their wives who dare to act otherwise. Also, differences in religious affiliation and/or refusal of the man to allow his wife to practice her chosen faith or worship differently can be a reason for conflict and cause for domestic abuse.

Effects of Domestic Violence

There is no doubt that domestic violence has a far-reaching effect not only on the woman but also the children and society. Shalini (2019) has broadly classified the effect or consequences of domestic violence against women into two: short-term consequences or effects and long-term consequences or effects.

- **Short-Term Consequences:** Shalini (2019) includes among the short-term physical effects of domestic violence on the woman minor injuries or serious conditions which can include bruises, cuts, broken bones, or injuries to the organs and other internal parts of the body.

The author notes that because some physical injuries are difficult or impossible to see without scans, x-rays, or other tests done by a doctor or nurse (where the victim sought medical attention), they often stay undetected and can result in sickness at a later date. The long-emotional and verbal abuse might affect the woman's and the children's mood in their day-to-day activities & might also reduce their productivity.

- **Long-term Consequences:** Many women victims of domestic violence suffer many long-term health problems including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression or anxiety. This could trigger the problem of substance and drug dependency/addiction as a way of numbing the physical effect of domestic effects or as a coping mechanism.

Sexual violence can result in irreparable injury to sexual organs and a loss of self-worth. In some cases, victims commit suicide if they can see no way out of their unfortunate conditions.

Financial Effect: In many cases of domestic violence against women, the victim is financially dependent on her husband. To that extent, in addition to other challenges, they lack financial independence. With economic abuse, the victim has very little money of her own and no source of income to rely on. The loss of economic independence is reported to be among the reasons that women stay in an abusive marriage as the thought of how to take care of the children (where there are children in the marriage), the lack of specialised skills, education and training to support themselves and their children appear quite daunting (Stop Violence Against Women, cited in Alok, 2013).

This is corroborated by the Project Alert & NOIPolls 2016 study that reported that 75% of the participants in the study were of the view that female victims of domestic violence would be willing to leave their husbands if they have a means of catering for themselves and their children.

Effect on Children: Domestic violence against women also affects the children in the family causing long-lasting and unpleasant impressions on a child's vulnerable memory

(Shalini, 2019). There is also a high tendency for the children to exhibit anti-social behaviours such as increased aggressiveness, impatience, and anxiety disorders among others (Dodd cited in Alokun, 2013).

Furthermore, many perpetrators of domestic violence carry it out in the presence of their children as a means of control. The downside is that in many cases, children who witness mother assault are more likely to exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and may even become abusers later on in life thus, continuing the vicious cycle of abuse (Lehmann cited in Alokun, 2013).

The Role of library professionals in combating domestic violence in Nigeria

Having looked at the problem of domestic violence including its causes, types and effects, and considering that it is considered a public health problem, there is no doubt that all hands must be on deck for combatting domestic violence. Librarians as information professionals have a role to play in this. Benson (2016) considers librarians appropriate advocates for domestic violence victims. It is therefore important to examine how librarians can contribute to combatting domestic violence in Nigeria.

Creation of Domestic Violence Information Resources/Help Desks: Traditionally, librarians are trained as information managers. Information management is concerned with the cycle of organisational activity that includes the acquisition of information from one or more sources, and organisation, dissemination and preservation of information. Librarians in all types of libraries can build special collections on domestic violence and offer some kind of reference services. Oftentimes, victims of domestic violence do not understand that they are experiencing domestic violence and many others who do, do not know where they can find help. Westbrook and Gonzalez

cited in Benson (2016) also agree that “one of the major needs of victims of domestic violence is access to information about their situation, ways to leave their abusers, legal protections, and local resources available to them.” The resources in the libraries if properly organised by themes can be the best location for both electronic and print information resources on domestic violence.

Awareness Campaigns: Librarians can organise domestic violence awareness. These could be carried out by local chapters of the Nigerian Library Association. This can be featured as one of the annual library week programmes. Rather than the traditional way whereby librarians gather in halls to mark the week, they can invite women groups to the event. They can also print bulletins providing information on domestic violence. This can be disseminated at Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, antenatal clinics, women groups in churches and mosques and even market women groups. Part of the information to be provided on such fliers includes how to understand the early signs of domestic violence, and how to get help. Understanding the first signs of domestic violence as well as where to get help is usually the first step towards seeking help on domestic violence. To be maximally effective, these bulletins should also be translated into the predominant language of the locality.

Participation in External Campaigns: Individual librarians can participate in already existing anti-domestic violence campaigns usually organised by non-governmental organisations to mark anti-violence days. So, while library groups and associations can play a role, individual librarians also can get involved. Engaging in such already existing external campaigns can also be a source of training that can empower library professionals to become more knowledgeable to help victims.

Advocacy: Individual or group advocacy is another way of combating domestic violence against women. Advocacy is an activity by an individual or group that aims to influence decisions within

political, economic, and social institutions. This can include many activities that a person or organisation undertakes including media campaigns, public speaking, commissioning and publishing research. Also included is stakeholder lobbying (Wikipedia, 2022). Given that there is no generally applicable legislation on domestic violence in Nigeria, this will be a step in the right direction.

Outreaches: This is another way to get involved in combatting domestic violence. Individual librarians or a group of librarians can come together and form an anti-domestic violence group. The United Nations has designated November 25 as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Awareness programmes can be organised on this day and taken to secondary schools. Prevention, it is said, is better than cure. Taking such programmes to secondary schools will not only alert students to the dangers of domestic violence, but will also provide information to students who are living with the problem. The information they get may be what they need to liberate not only their mothers but also themselves from the stranglehold of domestic violence. It will also prepare them for future relationships by equipping them with the information they need to avoid getting into abusive relationships or enduring one.

Content creation: The opportunities offered by social media make it possible for people to become ‘influencers’ on practically anything or any subject. With passion, it is possible to nurture and grow a formidable page on domestic violence on Facebook and other platforms. With good content creation, the page can become a go-to resource for anyone who needs information on domestic violence. Content can take the form of drama on all aspects of domestic violence or podcasts in the local language. If well managed, the feedback from visitors to the page can provide the opportunity to direct them to resources on domestic violence such as legal aid, medical aid,

counselling etc. that will help them address the problem. However, to be effective in this, librarians should be properly grounded and have vast information on domestic violence.

Empowerment: Librarians can provide educational assistance in the form of adult education classes for women in domestic violence given that the literature reveals that a good number of domestic violence women victims have low educational attainment. Librarians can also assist by equipping these women with skills that will enable them to produce marketable items and earn some income.

This is important as the literature reveals that most women experiencing domestic violence have low education and, in most cases, lack economic power. The result is that they are dependent on their abusive spouse for decision-making and sustenance for themselves and their children. It is also reported that fear of the unknown is one of the major reasons that most victims of domestic violence are reluctant to leave. This is worse when children are involved as the victim sees no hope of taking care of her children without the abusive spouse's support. Educational and economic empowerment can be a lifesaver for these victims as it will enable them to not only make decisions that are in their best interest but also enable them to earn some income to support themselves and their children.

Conclusion

This paper examined the problem of domestic violence against women in Nigeria to determine the role that library professionals can play in combatting the public health menace. The paper considered some definitions of the concept of domestic violence as contained in the literature. Also, the types of domestic violence against women in Nigeria were highlighted. This ranges from

physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological to economic abuses. Some causes of domestic violence were examined as well as the effects of domestic violence on the victim and/or her children. Finally, the roles that libraries and librarians can play in combating domestic violence were discussed. This includes the provision of domestic violence information resources, awareness campaigns, participation in existing campaigns, advocacy, outreaches, content creation on social media and empowerment.

Finally, it is important to note that whatever role library professionals seek to play in combating domestic violence, some type of training is imperative. This point is important because appropriate training will enable them to be able to “identify where women or their children may be experiencing or are at risk of family violence (Councils Preventing Violence Against Women, 2016). It will also equip [them] with the knowledge and confidence to make a referral to an appropriate service” if they cannot intervene directly.

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