

# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ONITSHA NORTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA: A SOCIO-RELIGIOUS INVESTIGATION

<sup>1</sup>Chinelo Theodora Nwaezuke  
<sup>2</sup>Godfrey Oguechuo Afannede

## **Abstract**

Domestic violence is the most prevalent violent crime against women, particularly in Onitsha North Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. Historically, dysfunctional families often reflect interpersonal conflicts where women are disproportionately affected. This reality challenges the “culture of silence” that has traditionally obscured the issue of domestic violence in the region. Data collected indicates a worrying increase in incidents such as rape, battered wives, sexual harassment, and abuse of housemaids by those expected to protect them. This study aims to provide a social and religious investigation into domestic violence against women in Onitsha North, guided by four specific purposes. Utilizing both primary and secondary research methods, along with a historical approach for data analysis, the findings reveal that high rates of domestic violence stem from factors like intolerance of differing opinions, anger mismanagement, and alcohol abuse. Given the serious implications of domestic violence on the community, urgent attention is required. It is recommended that parents foster patience and self-control in the presence of their children, as children observe and learn behavior patterns from adults. Additionally, stricter penalties for perpetrators of domestic violence are essential to safeguard women. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by advocating for effective punitive measures to reduce domestic violence, underscoring the importance of addressing its root causes in Onitsha North and Nigeria at large.

**Keywords:** Domestic, Investigation, Socio-Religious, Violence.

## **Introduction**

Onitsha, located in Anambra State, Nigeria, is part of the South-East geopolitical zone, alongside Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. This research arose from the researcher’s observations of coercive control and abuse faced by many women and young girls in Onitsha North L.G.A. Despite the lack of empirical data, interviews reveal that 80% of women have experienced violations like financial control, isolation, insults, intimidation, and physical assault. Recent patterns show an increase in physical aggression, alongside rising issues of sexual harassment, trafficking, and harmful cultural practices. Domestic violence is a pervasive yet often unrecognized human rights violation in Onitsha, reflecting a culture that accepts such abuse as normal. This silence enables enduring male dominance and neglects women's rights, further exacerbating their struggles amidst economic hardship, discrimination, and emotional trauma. The World Health Organization highlights domestic violence as a significant cause of women's murder, affecting individuals across all social and economic backgrounds. Interviews conducted reveal alarming statistics, with two out of three women in Onitsha North reporting

experiences of domestic violence. Cultural and religious beliefs often compel women to endure abuse rather than seek help. This oversight is compounded by Nigeria's discriminatory laws and systemic stigma, which protect abusers rather than victims.

In a special report conducted on December 15, 2019, by the Onitsha Welfare Units, it was observed that two out of three women in Onitsha North Local Government Area (L.G.A.) experience domestic violence within their homes. Domestic violence is a multifaceted issue impacting all social strata and encompasses physical, social, and psychological forms of abuse. In personal communication with O. Ojukwu (December 15, 2019), it was articulated that while men can also be victims of domestic violence, women typically endure the most severe forms of abuse. Ojukwu emphasized that the prevalence of domestic violence in Onitsha North L.G.A. is not only widespread but is also escalating daily; religious and cultural frameworks often compel women to accept injustices inflicted upon them by male partners.

Approximately four out of five women in Onitsha have reported experiencing some form of domestic violence. Specific cases illustrate this alarming trend: Mrs. Hope Nkemdilim, a 39-year-old trader at Ose market, was violently assaulted with a rod by her husband following accusations of infidelity, which she vehemently denied. Similarly, Mrs. Joy Eze, a resident of Omagba, was subjected to flogging with a belt by her husband for a perceived delay in serving his food. Additionally, Mrs. Ogubuiro Ifeoma suffered a stabbing to the head by her husband during a quarrel. In a particularly egregious incident, Mr. Felix Egbomuche threw his girlfriend from a five-story building located at No. 9 Obosi Street, Onitsha. This pattern of abuse reflects a global phenomenon; however, Nigeria's discriminatory laws and dismissive policies exacerbate the high incidence of domestic violence. The prevailing culture of silence, coupled with societal stigma faced by victims, impedes public denunciation of various forms of abuse, including legalized wife beating, the inheritance of wives, harmful widowhood practices, and marginalization of women's rights in customary law marriages. Furthermore, issues such as female disinheritance, female genital mutilation, trafficking of women, and son-preference syndrome reinforce the systemic oppression of women. The absence of agents capable of challenging the entrenched social prejudices and institutional frameworks means that women continue to suffer not only from physical danger but also from ridicule, fear, and social isolation. The expression 'violence against women' can mean many different things and many different terms are used to describe it. Certain terms can imply Domestic Violence; namely, physical abuse, sexual violence, rape, sexual assault and harassment. Pease (2016) notes that "each term includes some forms of violence and is subject to shifts in meaning and also has different cultural interpretations" (P.143). For example, the concept of rape within marriage may not exist within certain cultures and therefore would not fall within the scope of Domestic Violence for some people. Such violence is all too frequently excused and tolerated in communities where women are assigned an inferior role, subordinate to the male head of the family and effectively the property of their husbands.

The violence persists because discriminatory laws condone and even legalize certain forms of violence against women. Dismissive attitudes of the police and an inaccessible justice system compound the failures of the state to protect women's rights. Violence against women in the home is generally regarded as belonging to the private sphere and therefore shielded from outside intervention. A culture of silence reinforces the stigma that the victim suffers. The researcher was opportune to visit the marriage tribunal of the Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha on different occasions. During the visit, the researcher found that a reasonable number of those seeking separation and divorce bordered on cases of the husbands' violence on their wives. For Ani Jane (personal communication, 12 December 2019), the husband was bent on killing her with bare hands and she had no option but to seek nullity before she is strangled to death. On why she kept it to herself for many years, she said, "Nobody will understand you". They will look at you as somebody who cannot manage her family including her husband and children. The research aims to shed light on the causes and consequences of domestic violence in this locality to promote awareness and social change, emphasizing the urgent need for corrective measures to protect women.

## **Phenomenology of Domestic Violence in Onitsha North L.G.A**

### **Psychological and Emotional Abuse of Women in Onitsha North and their Effects**

Psychological abuse includes all experienced trauma by the victim perpetrated through verbal abuses, acts, threats, or coercive tactics. Perpetrators use psychological abuse to control, terrorize, and denigrate their victims. It frequently occurs prior to or concurrently with physical or sexual abuse

### **Marital Rape**

A marital rape is both legally and culturally invalidated, leaving victims without recognition or adequate treatment options. The first legal reference to marital rape came in 1736 when Sir Matthew Hale, a chief justice in England, proclaimed that a husband could not be guilty of raping his wife due to their irrevocable mutual consent (Hale, 1736; Russell, 1990). This notion, known as the Lord Hale doctrine, established a common-law exemption that viewed women as property, essentially depriving them of civil identity within marriage. This perspective was further supported by Blackstone's Unity theory, which posited that the husband and wife become one legal entity, rendering any assault against a wife as a violation of property rights rather than her bodily autonomy (Green, 1990). In Nigeria, marital rape remains unrecognized as a crime, with existing laws indicating that rape can only occur outside marriage (Nwaogugu, 1990). Research indicates that marital rape affects 10–14% of married women and 40–50% of battered women in Onitsha North, often correlating with higher rates of non-sexual violence and marital dissatisfaction. Many victims are reluctant or unable to resist sexual aggression due to fear or psychological trauma, leading to significant mental health issues such as PTSD and depression. Despite the prevalence of marital rape, Nigeria has yet to criminalize it, resulting in persistent abuse. A report

by Asoegwu (2020) highlighted that among 2,000 married women in Onitsha North, 80% reported having been raped by their husbands, with 30% rationalizing their husband's actions as non-criminal. This situation underscores the urgent need for legal reforms to protect victims and combat the normalization of domestic violence.

## **Traditional and Cultural Practices Affecting the Health and Lives of Women in Onitsha North L.G.A.**

### **Female Genital Mutilation**

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), often mistakenly called female circumcision, involves the surgical removal of parts or all of the female genital organs. This harmful practice is rooted in tradition and is prevalent in many communities worldwide, often as part of rites of passage that signify a girl's transition into adulthood. It is believed that FGM controls female sexuality and ensures virginity prior to marriage, but it also leads to significant health complications and psychological trauma.

FGM violates numerous international human rights laws, including the right to health as outlined in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. While the origins of FGM are unclear, historical records indicate that practices resembling FGM have existed since ancient times, well before the emergence of major religions like Christianity and Islam. The age at which FGM is performed varies, occurring in infants, children between 7 and 10 years old, and sometimes even during adulthood, particularly at marriage. In Onitsha North, recent discussions with community members revealed a consensus among local women that FGM is detrimental and ineffective in curbing sexual urges. They emphasize the significant health risks associated with FGM, arguing that it should not be normalized as a cultural practice, especially for infants. Overall, there is a growing recognition of the need to end FGM and protect the health and rights of women and girls.

### **Child Selection**

Son-preference and its implications for the status of the girl-child form one of the principal discriminatory acts which has far-reaching implications for women. The preference accorded to the boy-child over the girl-child is evident in the son-preference. This practice denies the girl-child good health, education, recreation, economic opportunity and the right to choose her partner. Her rights as stipulated under articles 2, 6, 12, 19, 24, 27 and 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child are violated. Son-preference refers to a whole range of values and attitudes which are manifested in many different practices, the common feature of which is a preference for the male child, often with concomitant daughter neglect. It may mean that a female child is disadvantaged from birth; it may determine the quality and quantity of parental care and the extent of investment on her development; and it may lead to acute discrimination, particularly in settings where resources are scarce.

### **Early/Forced Marriage**

Early marriage is another serious problem which some girls, as opposed to boys, must face. The practice of giving away girls for marriage at the age of 11, 12 or 13, after which they must start producing children, is prevalent among certain ethnic groups in Nigeria. Though it has been drastically reduced in the region under study, it is important to mention it due to the seriousness of the issue and its relationship with the girl-child saga. Child marriage robs a girl of her childhood-time necessary to develop physically, emotionally and psychologically. In fact, early marriage inflicts great emotional stress as the young woman is removed from her parents' home to that of her husband and in-laws. Her husband, who will invariably be many years her senior, will have little in common with a young teenager. It is with this strange man that she has to develop an intimate emotional and physical relationship. She is obliged to have intercourse, although physically she might not be fully developed. Girls from communities where early marriages occur are also victims of son-preferential treatment and will probably be malnourished, and consequently have stunted physical growth. Neglect of and discrimination against daughters, particularly in societies with strong son-preference, also contribute to early marriage of girls. It has been generally recognized at United Nations seminars on traditional practices affecting women and children, and on the basis of research, that early marriage devalues women in some societies and that the practice continues as a result of son preference. In some Northern part of Nigeria, girls as young as a few months old are promised to male suitors for marriage. Girls are fattened up, groomed, adorned with jewels and kept in seclusion to make them attractive so that they can be married off to the highest bidder.

### **Patriarchy/Levirate**

Patriarchy is widely defined by feminists as the unequal distribution of power between men and women in society. Engels (1884) characterized it as the earliest system of domination and a significant setback for women. The Royal Academy of the Spanish Language defines patriarchy as a social structure where authority is wielded by a male family head, influencing even distant relatives.

In Nigeria, levirate marriages operate under three legal frameworks: Islamic (Maliki law), civil statutory law, and customary law. In the Northern states, marriages are typically governed by Islamic law, while Southern states follow statutory law; however, customary law often supersedes formal laws in personal matters (Orji, 2002; Ewelukwa, 2002). Levirate marriage allows a family member to inherit a widow when her husband passes away, rendering her a form of property belonging to the deceased's family. This practice has been described as degrading and detrimental, contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria (UN, 2004).

Levirate marriage is prevalent among the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa-Fulani, particularly in rural areas (Bamgbose, 2002). However, greater education and economic independence among women have been linked to a decline in such practices (Ewelukwa, 2002). The treatment of Igbo widows has reportedly improved, granting them more autonomy in deciding whether to remarry or live independently, despite traditional

pressures. A report from the Widows Development Organization noted that while levirate marriages are most common among the Igbo, they are less frequent among the Yoruba and least among the Hausa, who generally enjoy more legal protections due to Islamic guidelines.

### **Disinheritance of Female Children and Child Trafficking**

Nigeria endorsed the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the 1984 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Both Conventions were ratified in 1989; and in 1990 Nigeria was signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child which it actually ratified in 1991 without reservations. Despite the numerous conventions and international human rights agreements that Nigeria is signatory to, the Nigerian girl-child is still faced with cultural limitations that hinder her from full enjoyment of her rights. Many of these instruments are yet to be enforced in Nigeria. For instance, customary laws in Nigeria have been a great challenge to the girl-child or women in general. The Nigerian Constitution recognizes both customary and statutory laws; it has been difficult therefore to reconcile the two, especially on the issue of child marriage. Also, the issue of religion has not helped matters. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. The country has always been cautious especially when dealing with issues that bother on religious beliefs so as to avoid encroaching on the rights of individuals. For instance, there is unfounded belief in the North that Muslim women are not to be allowed to acquire Western education as this could lead them to rebel against their husbands, which is unacceptable in Islamic tenets. With these dominant religious and traditional beliefs in Nigeria, the Nigerian girl-child has continued to experience different kinds of discrimination, and challenges due to the fact that 'she is a girl.' Primarily, the Nigerian girl-child has been limited in many ways by the so-called 'culture.'

### **The Impact of Christian Religion on Domestic Violence**

Christianity often reinforces traditional gender roles, granting husbands authority to make binding decisions for their wives and children, and encouraging wives to accept this authority. Such beliefs may inadvertently contribute to domestic violence by implying that men have a right to act violently against women. Victims of domestic violence frequently grapple with suffering and seek to understand its causes. They may erroneously attribute their suffering to divine punishment based on past behaviors, such as premarital relations, fostering a superstitious rationale that shifts responsibility away from the abuser. For instance, a victim might believe her abuse is a consequence of her perceived sins, viewing God as a stern judge inflicting retribution rather than as a loving deity.

Some individuals rationalize their suffering as part of God's will or plan, which can portray God as harsh or arbitrary, contradicting the compassionate image presented in

biblical teachings. The distinction between voluntary and involuntary suffering is critical; while some, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., may endure suffering for a greater cause, involuntary suffering—such as that experienced in abusive relationships—is never justified or chosen. Victims may cling to the hope that enduring abuse will transform their abuser, but this belief is often unrealistic and can perpetuate the cycle of violence. Ultimately, acknowledging the true source of suffering is essential for healing and accountability.

### **Recommendations:**

**Community Awareness Programs:** Launch educational campaigns to raise awareness about domestic violence as a human rights violation, irrespective of cultural or religious justifications. Collaborate with local NGOs and community leaders to enhance outreach.

**Engagement with Religious Leaders:** Partner with religious leaders to challenge myths that support domestic violence. Establish dialogue platforms for reinterpreting religious texts that are often misused to justify such violence.

**Support Services:** Create and promote accessible support services for victims, including hotlines, counseling centers, and safe houses that are culturally sensitive to the needs of women in Onitsha North.

**Policy Advocacy:** Advocate for stronger legal protections against domestic violence. Engage with policymakers to incorporate socio-religious perspectives into relevant legislation.

**Educational Integration:** Integrate domestic violence education into school curricula, emphasizing respect, consent, and healthy relationships. This approach aims to shift attitudes among the youth regarding gender-based violence.

**Research and Data Collection:** Promote ongoing research to monitor domestic violence trends and assess intervention effectiveness. Create a local database for domestic violence cases to inform strategy development.

**Culturally Relevant Interventions:** Develop culturally appropriate interventions that respect local customs while advancing women's rights, potentially utilizing traditional conflict resolution methods.

**Empowerment Initiatives:** Implement programs that enhance women's economic independence and social standing, thereby reducing their vulnerability to domestic violence through skills training and microfinance opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

An effective response to violence must be multi-sectorial, addressing the immediate practical needs of women experiencing abuse, and providing long-term follow up and

assistance. It should also focus on changing those cultural norms, attitude and legal provisions that promote the unacceptance of violence against women, and undermine women's enjoyment of their full human rights and freedom. Domestic Violence against women is a serious social problem that needs urgent attention as it affects the social wellbeing of the locality directly or indirectly. The effects on children cannot be over emphasized and also needs exigent attention as children are the leaders of tomorrow. An educated child today will be a good leader tomorrow while untrained child today will bring heartache and shame to the parents and the society and also increases the rate of Domestic Violence against women. The effects of Domestic Violence can be devastating and long lasting especially on children and adolescents. Children are often principal victims of Domestic Violence. Witnessing abuse and living in an environment where someone else, usually a care giver is a victim of abuse, can be psychologically devastating for a child.

<sup>1</sup>**Chinelo Theodora Nwaezuke**

Department of Religion and Human Relations  
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University

<sup>2</sup>**Godfrey Oguechuo Afannede**

Department of Religion and Human Relations  
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University



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