



doi 10.5281/zenodo.7029215

Vol. 05 Issue 08 August - 2022

Manuscript ID: #0687

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN AFRICA: A CASE STUDY OF NKEREFI IN NKANU EAST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

This work focused on violence against women in Africa: A case study of Nkerefi, Nkanu East Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. The rate of gender-based violence in Nigeria has moved from an alarming state to a fatal stage. Worst still, the culture of gender-based violence is ingrained in the socio-cultural and traditional practices of many African societies. This paper examined that in Eastern Nigeria, there are various traditional rites that foster the abuse of women. Some of which are the widowhood rites and practices and female genital mutilation. The paper finds out that, women are dehumanised by society if they are found childless or are unable to give birth to male offspring. The paper, thus argues that economic factor adds to the varying reasons for gender-based violence. And that in rural-urban areas located in Enugu state, this phenomenon is obvious, as the rate of poverty encouraged abuses. Various forms of abuse include beating, assault, rape and sex without consent, economic deprivation and threats, unequal distribution of household power, and so on. Relying on both primary and secondary sources, this study further argues that gender-based violence is becoming rampant in an environment bedeviled with a high level of poverty, low literacy level, and conservative practice of ancient socio-cultural norms. This paper is historical; hence, it adopts a qualitative method of analysis. A useful piece of information was obtained from important relevant documents, reports, and an array of secondary sources.

### KEY WORDS:

Violence against Women, Nkerefi, Nkanu East, Enugu, Nigeria.



## Introduction

Violence against women refers basically to any harmful behaviour directed at women and girls because of their sex. Psychological abuse such as intimidation, humiliation, constant belittling, isolation, jealousy, coercive sex and economic abuse are forms of abuses against women. Violence against women also includes traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, wife inheritance (the practice of passing a widow and her property to dead husband's brother) and sexual abuse such as coerced sex through threat, intimidation, or physical force.

The position of women in various societies predisposes them to various acts of gender violence. The authority structure of the family favours men who take major decisions affecting the household without reference to the women. Women have no control of economic resources including their reproductive health, a situation that has wasted the potentials in them. From the foregoing, it can be said that violence gives right to sexual abuse, increase the risk of unintended pregnancy with associated pregnancy outcome, physical disability, drug and alcohol abuse, depression and emotional trauma.

The Igbo are culturally endowed, and a good grasp of their cultural anthropology and cosmology show the pride with which they uphold their distinctive way of life.<sup>i</sup> However, some of these cultural practices have been observed, according to Chukwu, to be very archaic, dangerous, and damaging to the psyche of women.<sup>ii</sup> In a similar strand Ritzer averred that women's situation was centrally that of being used, controlled, subjugated, and oppressed by men.<sup>iii</sup> Elucidating further, Ritzer concluded that women's oppression was basically by a system of patriarchy cultivated for the deliberate purpose of commandeering women to achieve the intents of the so-called power structure.<sup>iv</sup> In a related development, the erstwhile chairperson of Women Commission in Nigeria, Awe remarked: 'You know this is a patriarchal society in which men take the first place . . .',<sup>v</sup> but later argued that they would, however, resist being forced into embracing obnoxious cultural practices.

Contributing also to the plight of women as a result of patriarchy, Iwe observed that the perpetrators of these violent cultural practices against women were yet to acknowledge that the dignity of women was equal to that of men.<sup>vi</sup> He stated that the splendour of womanhood, which is based on human personality, the prerogative and quality of every human being, man or woman, is fundamentally, essentially and unquestionably equal to the dignity of man. Furthermore, he affirmed that, the truth of this statement is unassailable in spite of sex differences, for human dignity rests not on sex but on personality; and personality as such has no sex. Accepting this position therefore, there is an urgent need to change these violent cultural practices against women. This is a change Udoh asserts that cannot be achieved through muscle struggle, but simply by effective persuasion because cultural practices passed down from generation to generation are not easily discarded, but held sacrosanct.<sup>vii</sup> Thus, the general objective of this paper is to free Igbo women of Nkrefi in particular and Enugu State in general from being victims of these violent cultural encumbrances and also, to situate them amongst their kind globally.

The paper is divided into five parts. The first part is introduction. This is followed by the theoretical framework on which the work derives its analysis. The third discusses the brief history of Nkrefi, their geographical location and migration. The penultimate section is an analysis of Women and Domestic Violence in Nkrefi. The last part is the conclusion. The argument tends to suggest that the rate of violence against women in Eastern Nigeria in general and Nkrefi in particular is alarming. As a matter of fact one might say that it has left the alarming state to a fatal stage. The work argues that Igbo culture and customs has justified abuse on women in Nkrefi. This paper exposes the underlying factors that make violence against women a prominent force in the social vices structure.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical conception of this work is based on the Liberal Feminist theory. To view the influence of these social factors, we have to utilize the Liberal Feminist theory. According to Ahmed et al, until the advent of the feminist movement and a new scholarship of feminist model around Violence against Women, the abuse of women by men was seen to be largely rooted in biological sex differences<sup>viii</sup>

The Feminist theory uses the conflict approach to examine the reinforcement of gender roles and inequalities, highlighting the role of patriarchy in maintaining the oppression of women.<sup>ix</sup> There are four broad types of

Feminism – Radical, Marxist, Liberal, and Postmodern. Liberal Feminism, however, offers the most suitable framework for the understanding and explanation of violence against women in Nigeria. According to the Liberal Feminist theory, neither men nor women benefit from gender discrimination as both of them are harmed, and that explanation for gender inequality lies in societal culture and values rather than its structures and institutions. In this vein, socialization into gender roles produces rigid expectations of men and women.<sup>x</sup>

The theory is derived from the liberal political philosophy in the enlightenment period which centred on the core ideas of equality, freedom, universal rights and democracy.<sup>xi</sup> Unlike Radical Feminists therefore, Liberal Feminists do not advocate revolutionary changes in a democratic setting as a solution to the problem of gender discrimination. Instead, they advocate certain changes such as legislations and reforms within the existing political structure in order to foster equal opportunities for males and females in every ramification. The key idea is to bring women full force into the development process – through increased participation and improved share in resource distribution, employment and income – and to bring dramatic improvements in their living conditions.<sup>xii</sup>

Viewing the phenomenon of violence against women in Africa and Nkerefi in particular through the lens of the liberal feminist theory, it can be clearly seen that violence against women is high in the country because many cultural values and religious practices directly and indirectly cause it. Mshelia asserted that, in attempts to preserve girls' virginity for their future husbands, many parents subject their female children to some violent and harmful practices such as genital mutilation and child marriage.<sup>xiii</sup> Girls usually graduate from such abuse in their families of orientation into another cycle of abuse in families of procreation. - The root cause of the phenomenon can be understood to be patriarchy. Nkerefi is a patriarchal society where males are regarded as the dominant group and females as their subordinate. This value fosters belief in men's entitlement to the services, obedience, loyalty and subservience of women. It is in attempt to exercise their culturally given authority in relationship that men seek to control women through variety of means some of which constitute violence psychologically, physically and otherwise. There is an increasing evidence to suggest that marital violence revolves around cultural definitions of appropriate sex roles and partners' expectations of each other's roles, particularly those related to wife obedience and domestic services. In many occasions, the failure of the women to satisfy their partners' expectations of their roles results in incidents of violence against them. The women's heavy economic dependence on their husbands, encouraged by the cultural expectation of men being the breadwinners of their families has continued to aid the perpetuation of this pattern.

While the feminist theory is criticised on the ground that it exaggerates male power and implies that all men exercise the same degree of authority over women, it still offers the most relevant explanatory and predictive basis in the light of violence against women in Nigeria and beyond. As Bailey rightly said, the theory has been instrumental in fuelling the significant legal, educational and policy initiatives of women's rights movements which have improved the plight of women in diverse contexts.<sup>xiv</sup> Also, in a study on assessing the compatibility and applicability of the Liberal Feminist theory in Ethiopian context, Enyew and Mihrete asserted that the solutions to gender inequality offered by liberal feminist is gradually reducing stereotypes and prejudices as well as customary and other practices that perpetuate gender discriminations in Ethiopia, and that Ethiopian government is also promoting equality of opportunities between men and women in different aspects such as education, voting and employment.<sup>xv</sup>

### **A Brief History of Nkerefi**

Nkerefi is a clan<sup>xvi</sup> in Nkanu East Local Government Area of Enugu State in South Eastern Nigeria. It comprises of four autonomous communities namely: Imeoha Nkerefi, Ohuani Amofu Nkerefi, Ishienu Amofu Nkerefi, and Enuogu Nkerefi.<sup>xvii</sup> The pre-colonial history of Nkerefi was essentially that of the migration and fusion of people and rise and full of kindred and villages.<sup>xviii</sup> Various people and claims point to the fact that Nkerefi people are the descendants of Ezeokeuna – a cattle rearer from Edemberri.<sup>xix</sup> According to archival reports, “the people of Nkerefi being descendant of Ezeokeuna of Ezza at one time used to make periodic sacrifice at their ancestor's shrine at Ezza, but however, this custom has ceased for many years”.<sup>xx</sup>

Nkerefí traced her origin from Ezzakuna (Ezeoke-una) the founder of Ezza, whose father UnaOkpotoOkumeze came from Afikpo group of the Igbo history.<sup>xxi</sup> These people have been organized into something like vassal state by their possession of a common dialect (language) and culture, but in reality, there is no Nkerefí state or race. The word Nkerefí refers more to the dialect and occupation than people.<sup>xxii</sup> One particular legend and oral school of thought state that when ‘EzeokeUna’ the father of Nkerefí saw that his son – EzeokeUna Junior (Ogbonnaa) has matured into manhood, he gave him few cows and some yams to start his own life and maintain his family.<sup>xxiii</sup> He received the paternal gifts and blessings from his father, and moved southwards in search of settlement and livelihood. He had acquired the art of cattle rearing and farming from his parents. As he moved, his cattle (Efi) multiplied and he started selling some through trade by barter (exchange of goods for goods), and people were happy with him for his clemency, industry and enterprise.<sup>xxiv</sup> Whenever a visitor said that he was going to the home of EzeokeUna, people were confused it was going to be the home of Ezeoke or his father, they called him EzeokeUna – ‘Nke-na-ere- efi’ which means cattle seller or dealer. This was the genesis of the name Nkerefí.<sup>xxv</sup>

Further evidence to show Ezeokuna of EzekohaEzza in the farther of Nkerefí are: that at the burial of Ezeokona, ChukwumaIghudu of Obuno was among the representatives from Nkerefí that participated and that Ezeokona was buried in a house with three doors each facing and directed to Ezza, Nkerefí and Onicha. The above three towns are brothers with Ezza as eldest and Onicha as the youngest. Nkerefí then spread and constituted segments of other communities such as Atani in Ogbaru Local Government Area of Anambra State, some others in part of Ukwuani in present Delta State and Anambra State.

## Notable Forms of Violence against Women in Nkerefí

### Widowhood Discrimination (WD)

A woman becomes a widow (*isimkpe*) when her husband dies. As a result, she is addressed as Nwanyiisimkpe (a woman without a head: the deceased husband being the head), and this labelling justifies her widowhood status. at her husband’s death, the rites of passage associated with widowhood practices begins. For example, the ritual practices accorded the dead vary according to the status of the male deceased, but culture demands, irrespective of the status of the deceased, that the wife goes into traumatic waiting immediately, beating her chest, flinging around her arms and falling down, and only to get up to repeat the cycle again and again until other women surround her immediately and restrain her and force her to sit down on the ground where they sit around her to commiserate with her. Among the Igbo, and indeed the Nkerefí, this kind of bitter wailing is expected to go on until the deceased is buried. Substantiating this observation, the wife is expected to enact a wail or two every morning between the hours of 5.00 am and 6.00am for upwards of four days and more. In addition, Basden further averred that she was also compulsorily expected to wail every morning of a feast day and recount to the hearing of her neighbours what her husband usually did for her on an occasion such as this<sup>xxvi</sup>.

Widows were not allowed to take their baths, change their cloths, brush their teeth, wash their hands, clothes, or even wash the plates used in serving them food. It was also observed that, widows were sent out to the stream at midnight to have their baths for funeral purification. Aside these, washing and bathing during this period call for punishment of the widows because they were assumed to be beautifying themselves (*ichiomma*); they were expected to have only one set of black-mourning dress (*akwamkpe*), which they must wear whenever they were in public. These observations showed that widows were harshly treated and unfairly labelled.

### Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Female genital mutilation (FGM) has been variously defined. According to Chukwu, it is “an un-necessary gruesome and crude surgery that involves partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to female genitalia organs of women as a pre-requisite to earn respect, and recognition in Igboland”. During the makeshift surgical procedure, or the ritualistic sexual mutilation, sharp objects such as razors and knives, which are most often than not sterilised, are used by non-medical practitioners in the home or other non-clinical setting to cut young women (removing the sensitive little soft knob at the front of the vaginal) in the name of initiating them into womanhood. However, on the relevance of the surgery, the Focus Group Discussants (FGD) noted that, the reasons traditionally advanced for the ritualistic sexual mutilation are, namely, that the exercise de-

sensitises the clitoris by reducing libido and curbing sexual promiscuity; it ensures cleanliness, prevents immorality, keeps babies alive during birth, and also prevents an overgrowth of the clitoris. This is part of violence against women in Nkerefefi and indeed Igboland.

Thus, the Inter-Africa Committee (IAC), voluntary organisation founded in 1984 has also been concerned with the promotion of grassroots programmes to eradicate Female Genital Mutilation and other harmful traditional practices against women because of the attendant health consequences inherent in the exercise. Six years after its formation, the Inter-Africa Committee (IAC) in 1990 at a meeting held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, adopted the terminology Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) rather than its earlier terminology: Women Circumcision. However, most recently, the terminology, female genital mutilation has changed to Female Genital Cutting (FGC). This embellishment does not remove the fact that, the damages inherent in the practice are enormous and irreparable, if not fatal, in his assessment, Davies, asserted that, more than eighty million women in Africa and around the world had undergone the practice, and many more are expected to do same to be accorded respect in their respective rural communities.<sup>xxvii</sup> But following the harrowing experience of the unhealthy exercise, for instance, women of Ebonyi State extraction in Diaspora have rejected overtures to return home to contribute substantially in the development of their rural communities because of the fear of being ridicule.

### **Wife Battery (Domestic Violence)**

Wife battery is anti-human rights. Therefore, wife battery contradicts Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which runs thus: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”.<sup>xxviii</sup> Battery, according to the Advanced Dictionary (1988), is a term in law which involves the unlawful beating of another person or any threatening touch to another person’s clothes or body. The definition connotes great force or intensity; the use of exercise physical force that ultimately results to injury to that (person or animal) which the great force is being applied upon. Battery against women constitutes an oddity because women are the direct targets, even though the entire society indirectly shares in its effects in the long run. Almost every day, women are slapped, kicked, beaten, humiliated, threatened, sexually abused and even murdered by their partner. Accepting the foregoing, it may be argued that women were the sole victims of battery by stating the following, it may be argued that women were the sole victims of battery by stating the following to buttress their position: 1. Women are not battering their husbands in epidemic proportions. 2. Women are not regularly beating up their men and leaving them – crouched, huddled, sobbing and injured (or worse) on the kitchen floor. 3. Men are not fleeing their homes. 4. Men are not the spouses who live in terror. The conclusion was self-explicit: women obviously the main victims of battery. In the same vein subjecting a wife to battery in order to earn the approval of male relations as an effective disciplinarian and head of the house is sickening.

In the history of humanity, man had been known to lord it over the woman with power and authority as he used tradition as the camouflage to help perpetuate his misdeeds even in the faces of national and international initiatives on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. In addition, the practice of wife beating is not just hidden and invisible, but hard to tackle because many traditional and transitional cultures have a blind-spot about it. This, in turn, made it difficult for the intensity of the problem to be known in order to ascertain how much effort to put towards addressing the problem. Amongst the Igbo, battery against women is not seen as ‘a problem’ but ‘anormal’ social occurrence. Many women who faced battery were reluctant to let even the closest person know, and even when their experiences were those of severe pains, they would simply wear guise that all was well, all for the purpose of concealing their bitter and heart-rending experiences.

### **Girl Child Marriage**

Marriage is the beginning of a legitimate family. In essence, marriage is a universal institution that contributes considerably to holding of the Igbo society together and providing continuity and stability to it. Olanunmi, defined marriage as, “A socially approved sexual and economic relationship between two or more persons that are assumed to be permanent and include mutual rights and obligations.”<sup>xxix</sup> This definition highlights amongst others, one fundamental aspect; it provides the regulation of sex and childbearing. From this perspective, marriage is the vehicle through which legitimate reproduction is sanctioned. Marriage is, thus, for reproduction, and childbearing is seen as an indicator of the attainment of ‘married woman’ status. For reproduction to occur the girl child was given out at a very young age, she was not allowed to mature fully to understand her desires



and goals in life before being forced into marriage. In addition, the discussants in the Focus Group submitted that in the Igbo traditional societies that when young girls were given out in marriage at very young ages, often before or during the process of puberty, they were delivered of healthy children. But Chukwu observed that the consequences of early child marriage were tragic because most of them felt frustrated and worthless after being diagnosed with Vesico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF).<sup>xxx</sup> From this perspective, it is obvious that early child marriage is fundamentally as assault on women. Vesico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF) is a direct pathological communication between the urinary bladder and the vagina resulting in the uncontrolled leakage of urine into the vagina from the bladder.

## Rape

Women are often the victims of rape, which is usually perpetrated by men known to them; the rate of reporting, prosecution and convictions for rape varies considerably in different jurisdictions, and reflects to some extent the society's attitude to such crimes. It is considered the most underreported violent crime. Following a rape, a victim may face violence or threats of violence from the rapist, and in many cultures, from the victims own family and relative.

Violence or intimidation of the victim may be perpetrated by the rapist or by friends and relatives as a way of preventing it. In many cultures, from the victims of the rapist, as a way of preventing the victims from reporting the rape, or punishing them for reporting it. Or of forcing them to withdraw the complaint or it may be perpetrated by the relatives of the victim as a punishment for "bringing shame" to the family.

Highly valued and considered mandatory before marriage. In some extreme cases, rape victims are killed in honour killings. Victims may also be forced by their families to marry the rapist in order to restore family's "honour". In Lebanon, the campaign against Lebanese rap law article 522 was launched in December 2016 to abolish the article that permitted a rapist to escape prison by marrying his victim. In some countries, rape is not reported or properly recorded by the police because of the consequences on the victim and the stigma attached to it.

Marital or spousal rape was once widely condoned or ignored by law, and is now widely considered an unacceptable violence against women and repurchased by international conventions and increasingly criminalised. Still, in many countries, spouse rape either remains legal, or is illegal but widely tolerated and accepted as a husband prerogative. The criminalisation of spouse rape is resent, hanging occurred during the past few decades. Traditional understanding and views of marriage, rape, sexuality, gender roles and self-determination have started to be challenged in most western countries during the 1960's and 1970's, which led to the subsequent criminalisation of marital rape during the following decades. With a few notable expectations, it was during the last 30 years when most laws against marital rape have been enacted. Some countries in Scandinavia and in former communist bloc of Europe made spousal rape illegal before 1970, but most western countries criminalised it only in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>xxxi</sup> in many parts of the of the world the laws against marital rape are very new, having been enacted in the 2000s in Canada, marital rape was made illegal, in 1983, which several legal changes were made including changing the rape status to sexual assault, and making gender laws neutral. In Ireland spousal rape was outlawed in 1990 in US, the criminalisation of marital rape started in the mid-1970s and in 1993 North Carolina became the last state to make marital rape illegal.

The relationship between some religious (Christianity and Islam), and marital rape is controversial. The Bible at 1 Corinthians 7:35 explains that one has a 'conjugal duty' to have sexual relations with one's spouse, (in sharp opposition to sex outside marriage, which is considered a sin) and states, "the wife does not have authority over her body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his body but the wife does. Do not deprive one another some conservative religious figures interpret this reflecting to possibility of marital rape. Islam makes reference to sexual relations in marriage too, notably Allah's apostle said, 'if a husband calls his wife to his bed (to have sexual relations) and she refuses and causes him to sleep in anger, the angels will curse her till morning and several comments on the issue of marital rape made by Muslim religious leaders have been criticised.

## Conclusion

Many dynamic changes have ushered in improvements in the conditions of women worldwide, especially in the sub-African region.<sup>xxxii</sup> But the Igbo ethnic group of south-east Nigeria and Nkrefi in particular is not yet sufficiently aware of the extent to which her cultural practices have displaced, dislodged, and marginalized women. Consequent upon this, the surest way out of these cultural practices, this paper concludes, is empowerment through critical education, access to credit facilities and enlightenment in order for Nkrefi women to acquire intellectual mind power to free themselves from these shackles of old times. The paper also concludes that man-women relationship in Igbo society should be characterized by the fundamental appreciation of each other's obligations and opportunities and, should therefore not be allowed to lead to any form of enslavement. In essence, women should take positive steps toward improving and transforming their minds, the most fundamental and vital aspect of social engineering and the husbanding of human resources.

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