

## Discourse of Silence! Exploring Gender-Based Violence at Home and Religious Settings in South Eastern Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

Violence against women has a long history but only recently has it attracted the attention of scholars and activists. Statistics shows that nearly one in four women have experienced act of covert and overt violence by someone known to them. Women are not only violated at home, but also in churches and still they are unable to voice their ordeals to church leaders. Even when the cases of violence against them were reported, church leaders ignored such complaints. This attitude and the religious environment that fosters it have left women as perpetual victims, who are incapable of expressing themselves or narrating their predicament. Relying on data drawn from Christian communities in South Eastern Nigeria, where issues of sex, sexuality and related discourses are considered as verbal taboo by women. The paper explores the legitimization of VAW at home and in religious setting in SE Nigeria using the Critical Discourse Analytical approach. This centres on the conceptualization of language as a social action. The work is anchored on van Dijk (1988, 1998, and 2001) framework to explore how social actions are constructed and deconstructed in discourse. Dominant themes emerging from the analysis are; “you are to serve him in silence and solitude” “It is part of life”, “I caused the beating” “I either do it or I’m gone”, “ Is it not just rape” “It is the devil in me”. The paper argues that the ‘sacredization’, normalization and trivialization of VAW in South eastern Nigerian especially in the religious and home setting does not make it an acceptable norm. Overall, the work argues that women are not inferior to men, and violence against women must be stopped irrespective of the setting and circumstance.

Keywords: women, gender-based violence, religion, language, south-eastern Nigeria

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### INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is a global concern that is not peculiar to Africa. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least one in every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. A United Nations Children’s Fund study (UNICEF 2000) estimated that between 20 and 50 percent of women have experienced domestic violence at some stage in their lives; while the UN Department of Public Information reports that up to 70 per cent of women experience violence in their lifetime [1] Commenting on a study of violence against Women Survey conducted in eleven countries involving the interview of 23,000 women about their experiences

with gender-based violence, Johnson et al notes that, The International Violence Against Women Study found that an average of 35 percent of the females aged 16 and above had experienced violence, with between 20 and 60 percent of this population reporting at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16 [2]. Abuse most often stems from intimate partners, family members and acquaintances. It is debilitating because it affects the woman’s body, psychology and freedom. It also has adverse effects on the woman, her family and the society at large. The 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, defined

'Gender- based violence' as "violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. [3]

This involves violence meted on women as a result of their perceived inferior status in the society. It includes physical, sexual, or psychological violence inflicted on a girl or woman because she is perceived as inferior or subordinate to a man. Violence is categorized into; domestic violence; sexual abuse, including rape and sexual abuse of children by family members; forced pregnancy; sexual slavery and traditional practices harmful to women such as preference of male child, female genital mutilation, linguistic violence, dowry-related violence, violence in times of crisis and armed conflicts. Emotional abuse, such as coercion and abusive language, child trafficking, female prostitution, marriages without the proposed bride's consent, sexual harassment and intimidation at work are other examples of violence against women.

Violence against women most often occur from intimate partners (Intimate Partner Violence - IPV). This is the commonest form of direct violence and it manifests in sexual, psychological, and physical violence against the victim, who in most cases are women. In Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the United States, 40 to 70 per cent of female murder victims were killed by their partners, according to the World Health Organization<sup>1</sup>.

The EU-wide Survey on Violence against Women conducted by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, observes that 22% of women have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence by a current or previous partner [4]. Lending credence to the above assertion, *The*

*Lutheran World Federation* notes that thirty-five countries suggest that one quarter to one-half or more of all women have been physically abused by a current or former partner or husband. It is the leading cause of injury to women that, for some, reoccurs almost every day leading, in some cases, to death [5] usually by family members or someone the victim knows. Notwithstanding the pervasive nature of its occurrence, not much attention has been given to this subject.

Gender based violence may be inflicted in private or public spaces. It may occur in a woman's bedroom as well as in the public places like her office, school, churches, mosques, shopping malls, market, and social occasions. Most domestic violence are considered private affairs and this makes victims usually reluctant to discuss or voice it and consequently information on such violence is scarce or lacking in most cases.

Gender-based violence does not involve women alone, but may sometimes occur against men. While this is correct, and all violence against any person is unacceptable, but violence by men against women is a common phenomenon [6]

It is against this backdrop that this paper will examine violence against Igbo women in selected churches in south eastern Nigeria. The paper will take a historical reflection to determine the status of Igbo women from pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial periods in order to resolve if gender based violence against Igbo women is part of their culture or a relatively recent phenomenon. It also analyzes the forms of violence perpetrated on women in churches in the South Eastern Nigeria, and explores dominant themes that emerge in violent discourses in the church and home setting, using the discourse analytical tool.

#### TYPOLOGY AND SITES OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender based violence can be classified into overt and covert forms of violence

[7]. It can also be personal or institutional [8] Overt involves physical abuses, such

as battering and sexual assault, at home or in the workplace. Covert form of violence involves psychological abuse. This includes deprivation of liberty, forced marriage, and sexual harassment at home or in the workplace. Covert violence also covers the withholding of resources that a woman needs to acquire or maintain good healthcare, nutrition, shelter and education. It includes the commodifying of women in marriage rituals, sexual trafficking and exploitation and the objectification of women's body. The family is the commonest site of gender violence. It is often the site for spousal rape and battering, sexual assault, sexual abuse and/or psychological abuses.

Domestic violence also happens when women are physically confined or given out in marriage without their consent and when they are without valid reasons denied of property, wages or income that is legitimately theirs. Overt control of a woman's sex life through forced pregnancy or forced abortion also amounts to violence against women. The society/ community which consist of the family and ethnic, religious and cultural groups can also perpetuate violence by encouraging structural and power inequalities. The society justifies the behaviour of male abusers aimed at establishing control over women in the family and supports harmful traditional practices such as battering and corporal punishment. Naila Kabeer in his work observes that violence against women tends to be higher in societies and communities that associate ideas about manhood with dominance and aggression, and in which men control family wealth, family decision-making structures are highly patriarchal, and there are divorce restrictions on women [9]

Women can also experience violence in the workplace through constant harassment, victimization, sexual exploitation/ commercialization and intimidation. They are the more vulnerable sex. Governments create an environment for violence against women to flourish when they enact laws and

policies that are discriminatory or when they turn a blind eye to marital arrangements between under-aged girls and adult men. Marriage of under-aged girls remains a common practice in Northern Nigeria and some parts of Ebonyi State in South eastern Nigeria. This has given rise to cases of Vagina Vascular Fistula (VVF).

Although most violence is perpetuated by men against women, certain forms of violence are inflicted on women by other women. For instance, in traditional and even contemporary Igbo society, it is the women that enforce compliance to widowhood practices. The widow is expected to mourn her husband for about one year. Within the period she is expected to dress in mourning cloth (black or white). The hairs on her head and other private parts of her body are shaved. She is barred from receiving sympathisers, laughing, shaking hands or appearing in public places within some months of her husband's death and burial. In some cultures, she may be forced to sleep on the same bed/room with the corpse of her husband (to prove her innocence of not being responsible for her husband's death). All these practices are enforced by the older women in the community. They infringe on the woman's right, and some women have become sick and consequently lost their lives in the course of these violent acts.

Again, in the contemporary world, women tend to be uncomfortable with and jealous of other women's progress. Some women may oppress other women to ensure their own survival and security. This is often the case with the maltreatment of daughter in-laws by mother in-laws or vice versa or the maltreatment of house maids by their mistresses in order to assert authority in their matrimonial homes. However, Francine Pickup noted that women commit violence to ensure their own survival and security within a social, economic, and political context that is shaped and dominated by men [10]

Violence is closely associated with the application of power (force) in any deed in one's dealing or relationship to another [11]. This definition has extended the meaning of violence beyond the physical inflicting of harm to the psychological

impact. The concept of violence is also associated with terminologies such as domination, exploitation, coercion, intimidation, and terror. The core of the paper is on domestic or 'sexualized' violence, which poses threat to women.

#### STATUS OF WOMEN IN SOUTH EASTERN NIGERIA

The Igbo predominantly occupy the south eastern Nigeria, which is made up of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. They are also present in parts of the Delta and Rivers states of Nigeria. The name Igbo refers to both the people (speakers) and their language. Extant literature and orthodox history had classified the Igbo society, just like most African societies, as a patriarchal society, with the exception of a few communities like Abiriba, Afikpo, Edda, Ohafia, etc which practice matrilineal family relation. [12]

For instance, a woman is reduced to a commodity whose price is bided between her prospective husband and her paternal relatives during her traditional marriage rites. In Afikpo - Igbo society, a woman is figuratively referred to as a beautiful hen that the suitor has come to 'her owners' to ascertain the value of the hen of which they will be glad to be in possession of, if there is mutual agreement. Marriage negotiation involves back and forth bidding of the bride price, thereby reducing the woman to an object which can be bought and discarded with at will.

Patriarchy reposes power on male members of the society and it is evident in their language use, which sometimes can be adverse towards their female members. The domination of women by men is a global phenomenon that is not only prevalent in Nigeria. In south eastern Nigeria, the domination starts right from birth, as the male child is preferred and he is seen as a form of security to the mother in her marriage. The boy child is cultured to believe that he is superior to his female siblings, as he receives preferential treatment right from birth to adulthood. The husband still perceived as the king and lord over his wife, who continues to be at the man's beck and call. The male is bred to believe that he deserves dignity and respect while the girl child is cultured into a woman who remains to be directed and pressed into the service of men. Mary Amba Oduyoye notes that the culture we live in is structured and designed by men, as such, the culture ensures there is the total dependence of women on men for their viability in the community [13] Women are usually construed as objects of pleasure to be bought, owned and discarded with at will by the men. They are commodified and depend on men for their viability and visibility in society.

However, the subjugation of women was not always the norm in Igbo society. In pre-colonial Igbo society, women were not really kings but they were diviners, healers, goddesses like *'eze mmiri'*, queen mothers, goddesses and priestesses - *'eze nwanyi'*. These women exercised spiritual, social and economic powers and control of the communities just like their male counterparts. In Afikpo, such women were called *'Omezue nwanyi'* (who has concluded and completed all the traditional rites and rituals). It is the highest traditional title, and only attained by just few men. A small number of women who have attained certain ages and statuses (social, spiritual and economic status) can also be conferred with such titles after fulfilling the traditional obligations.

These roles are gradually being eroded with the advent of Christianity as many women are no longer willing to perform the associated rites deemed as demonic. This brought about a decline in the status, operation and limits of women. The advent of Christianity with its western culture and religion demonized most religious institutions with the introduction of an "approachable male

Christian God [14], which replaced the goddesses who were intermediaries between the people and the supreme God. The repercussion resulted in a more decline in the power and influence of women in the society.

Another major cause of the shift in the status of women was the advent of British colonialism and the introduction of anti-women colonial policies, which promoted patriachism in Nigerian politics. The colonial policy considered "only men to be active in the public sphere and earn a living to support their families [15]. Men were therefore trained in educational assistance programmes under the colonial administration; and thereafter recruited into colonial civil service and merchant houses. The practice empowered African men and gave them undue advantage over the females. This resulted in the in the promotion of patriachism which diminished the status of women.

The restructuring of the African traditional economies and their linkage with the international capitalist economic system, was another anti-women colonial policy. The Nigerian economy was transformed to producer of primary or cash crops exported to Europe as cheap raw materials. African men emerged as producers and exporters of the crops while women were in charge of home management and the production of food crops [16]. This boosted the economic base of the men to the financial

disadvantage of the women. This is partly the reason why the post-colonial Nigerian political landscaped was dominated by men who were economically well-off and devoid of women. Women were therefore portrayed as second-class citizens whose role was to assist the competent men. They are told what to do and how to do them; how to dress, speak, sit and behave; when to be seen and when to speak. These subtle societal impositions have to a great extent crept into the subconscious mind and affected their perception of themselves, and the society's perception of them.

It is pertinent to note that although many female-supporting traditional institutions and practices have been eroded, the *Umuada Igbo* (daughters of the land) still exercise strong influence in their communities [17]. This is one traditional institution that had not been eroded by the incursion of Christianity. The influence of these women led to the outbreak of the women protest against the imposition of the obnoxious British colonial policies on women in 1929, popularly known as the Aba Women riot. Notwithstanding this age long marginalization, the tide of women subjugation is gradually changing in Igbo society. However, it is still visible in most churches in South-eastern Nigeria, where men are still using the instrumentality of religion to subdue women and to keep them in the background.

#### DATA COLLECTION AND INTERPRETATION

The primary data for this study was collected over a period of five years when the researcher worked as a marriage councillor in two churches located in South-eastern Nigeria. The data was specifically drawn from 8 satellite churches, with 4 derived from each of the two mainline congregations. 12 women were drawn from each of the 8 congregations thereby constituting a target population of 96 women. They were interviewed orally using the structured and unstructured methods which were tape recorded. The researcher sought to find out from the

participants what they qualify as violence. Responses showed that most of them never considered violence like spousal beating, spousal rape, and deprivation of a woman's income as violence. Most women interviewed were reluctant at first to admit that they were constantly violated but opened up when the researcher told them that she (researcher) was also caught up in the web and suffered the same ordeal like them. They were even more cooperative when they were spoken to in their mother tongue. Respondents were however reassured of confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used in

their representation. The women felt a lot of relieve narrating their experiences to their fellow Christian woman, but however warned that their views should

not be disclosed to their violating husbands for fear of receiving worse treatment like beating or being thrown out of the matrimonial home.

#### VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN IGBO LAND

Chauvinism and patriarchy legitimize subjugation of women by the powerful members of the society (men). "It socializes women to remain 'silent' and in most cases promotes social inequalities between men and women"<sup>ii</sup>. Patriarchy and chauvinism are the foundation that promotes violence against women. Men consistently perpetuate violence against the women and the society exonerates them. Unfortunately, this violence are normalized and trivialized by religious bodies and the society.

Most cases of violence against women are usually considered socially tolerable and consequently are under reported in spite of their widespread nature and effect on the victims. Generally, the social stigmatization associated with rape makes it almost impossible for women to speak up when they have been raped. Women, for fear of stigmatization, are reluctant to report such incidents to either the law enforcement agencies because the society always blames them for such violence. Men are rarely blamed for their inability to control themselves or for inflicting violence on the women. Cases of rape are blamed on women, who are often told that they were attacked because they dressed seductively. The worse is spousal rape, which is usually treated with a wave of hand. One of the respondents recounts, "You dare not deny your body from the man, whether sick or not. If you ever do and people hear about it they'll ask you; 'Are you not happy that he still finds your body attractive. You better sit up; after all, they are many fishes in the ocean".

When women are beaten by their husbands, they are blamed by their husband, other women or even the police, for infuriating their husbands, which earned them the beating. So the police who are suppose to protect them also join

in perpetrating violence against them. Onyeka, a 32 year old mother of four, noted; " every woman receives beating from the husband. It's only that they don't go about saying it. No man will beat a woman (I mean his wife) without a reason. It is meant to correct us. The bible says that he who the father loves, he chastises. I know that my husband loves me and will not hurt me. It is the devil in us women that keep pushing us to disobey our husbands. Sometimes, we need the slap for the devil to let go of us". In this case, spousal beating has been normalized as a way of life and Women are reluctant to speak up and some even deny that they were beaten, or have suffered out of shame or fear of stigmatization. Most women prefer to remain silence or put up a front in the face of violent abuses as speaking out may complicate matters or even lead to their divorce. There is a general notion that every woman goes through similar ordeal. In Igbo society, when a woman is getting married, she is consistently admonished that; *di bu ndidi* "marriage/husband is patience" that is, you require a lot of patience to be in a marriage. As a result of this sort of advice many women are cultured to expect ill-treatment from their husband and they buy into the notion that every woman experiences same but endures silently. Domestic violence is perceived by most Igbo women as one of the crosses they must carry. It is perceived by most women that just as it is normal for a woman to conceive and bear a child, they must also experience and tolerate ill-treatment from their husband. In fact, to most of them what qualifies as violence is considered routine and a normal way of life. UNIFEM Information Kit states that "Women are denied voices within their homes are constantly exposed to the threat of rape and sexual abuse by older family members and



strangers, and constantly harassed for sexual favours by men in authority. Government institutions are unwilling to accept domestic violence as a crime, while religious and traditional ideologies lend weight to the false belief that women are inferior to men and so should be controlled. Women are left alone within a culture of shame taboo and silence [18] this has contributed to the recurring violation of women.

Women in Igbo land go into marriage preconditioned to accept and cope with spousal abuse and subjugation. Single parenthood, separation and divorce are stigmatised in Igbo culture. In churches, single, widowed, separated, divorced and unwedded women are treated as social outcasts and denied leadership positions or membership of some Christian societies by the church. In Igbo culture, being married takes precedence over a woman's well being. This idea is encapsulated in a popular Igbo proverb:

*Di bu ugwu nwanyi* - "man/marriage is a woman's honour". This implies that a woman is without honour if she is unmarried irrespective of her social status, wealth and education in the society. Women clamour to get married and remain in marriage even when they are abused, and some women have lost their lives in the process.

Religious leaders skilfully deploy doctrinal references, terminologies and exegeses to manipulate their listeners, especially women, to keep silent even when abused. Most women accept the abuse as part of the culture and a normal way of life, and therefore, perpetually keep silent. Uche Azikiwe and Nkiru Ohia [19] observe that the Igbo people's deep religiosity have contributed to the high level of sexual abuse in churches in South Eastern Nigeria. Igbo women are afraid of being single. Single women are generally scorned by the society.

#### VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE CHURCHES

Violence against women is sometimes justified under the cloak of culture and religion. This is because every aspect of African life has a religious interpretation to it. [20] Oduyoye notes that the frequency of church, mosque and shrine attendance is a pointer to the people's high level dependence on religion, and their lives and activities revolve around their religious beliefs. Oduyoye succinctly notes that "Africans are incurably religious". [21]

Due to this high level of religiosity, the socially privileged men utilize the instrumentality of religion to abuse and subjugate the women folk. This is usually religiously justified by these men who often say that the bible commands the woman to be submissive to the husband. Of utmost concern is that even when women are abused they are made to believe that they deserve violence and therefore should not talk about or speak against it. Kunbi Labeodan observes that, "abuse is often wrapped in beliefs about the role of men and the place of women in a divine ordered universe. An abused wife

sometimes believes that it is her duty to suffer, to turn the other cheek, to forgive her abuser because the marriage takes precedence over her own well being"[22]. People tend to shy away from critiquing religious issues as a result of the sacredity and reverence attached to their religion, religious leaders and religious practices. In most African societies religious principles are almost incontestable as God's principles. For instance, if a woman is raped, she is pressured to die in silence due to the social stigma that may follow if she discusses her experience or lets anyone know about her ordeal. The society and system seem to be against her and sometimes are structured to blame and taunt her. Even the law enforcement agents blame her for inciting rape by flaunting her body. The church convinces her to keep silent because such issues should not be heard among brethren. When some bold and assertive ones make attempts to discuss it, such issues are trivialized, misunderstood and misrepresented. She is saddled with

questions like, "Is it not just rape? Did he do any other thing to you?" Religious communities are viewed as a sacrosanct and abuses against woman are covered

and justified under the guise of religion because the men are often in position of power in these churches

#### WOMEN AND THEIR BURDENS: THE CHURCH AS THE RECOURSE

African women are visibly more religious than men. Women constitute the majority population of religious adherents (especially in churches in Nigeria), unfortunately the men dominate and they are at the head of religious administration. They are the leaders while the women, though more numerous and active, have the secondary role of helping the men to in fulfil their missions and goals.

Christian women are compelled to stay with their abusive husbands without complaining, pray for them and love them and believe they might win them over to Christ with their humility and submissiveness. Women are expected to tolerate beating and other abusive treatments and often blame themselves for the ill-treatment. For instance, if her husband is having an extramarital affair she is blamed by her husband and fellow women for not giving her husband comfort of which another woman willingly provided. She also blames herself even when there is no money to feed the family. If the children or husband gets sick, she is blamed for her carelessness. If the husband dies in the process she is subjected into untold hardship for being responsible for the husband's death. When a woman dies out of intimate partner's violence, she is still blamed and scorned with expressions like: *O bu anughu ihie gburue* (it is her

stubbornness that killed her). The woman is always blamed. As a result of this, they are reluctant to talk about the abuses they experience, but instead internalise it and develop coping mechanisms that ultimately exacerbate and perpetuate the problem. . *Di bu ndidi* --- husband/marriage demands patience/ endurance. Once you are married, it is expected that you wear a cloak of patience.

Most churches in South-eastern Nigeria have a predominant population of women and children worshippers. This is because the society imposes much pressure on the woman who for want of the solution to their chains of problems patronise these churches in their quest for divine intervention to their plights. Even when a woman is married, she is blamed for being responsible for every breakdown in marriage, infertility, sexes of the baby and spousal death. Due to these hash societal expectations, stigmatization and other societal ills, women tend to patronise spiritualists for spiritual help to their intractable catalogue of problems. Unfortunately in a bid to get the problems solved, sometimes they get more complicated and compounded. For instance, some women have been involved in sexual escapades with some randy pastors, church workers, rape and even being charmed by some spiritualists or witch doctors due to their wealth and good look.

#### CONCLUSION

Findings from this study clearly show that in the religious sphere, certain violence against women are not considered as violence and consequently are justified as intended to tame feminine excesses or to dominate the women in obedience to biblical injunction. Violence against women in churches have been trivialized and made insignificant. Again, most women, especially the uneducated ones generally live in fear of

their husbands, the church and society. They are afraid of being divorced by their spouses and the attendant stigmatization and exclusion by the church. Some will prefer to remain silent and accept the ill-treatment a normal marital experience. Being dependant to their husbands, they are afraid of losing the financial support from them. The few financially capable women nonetheless stay with their abusive spouses, pay the bills and keep



the home just for peace to reign in the household. Religion is meant to provide succour and liberation for the down-trodden, but unfortunately it is utilized as one of the instruments to oppress women, with little or no recourse to the liberating potential of religion, as contained in the Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration - "Religion, thought, conscience and belief may and can contribute to fulfilling women's and men's moral, ethical and spiritual needs and to realizing their full potential in society". [21] Most world religions

promise succour to adherents, but some men hide under the cloak of religion to perpetrate violence and abuse against women. They legitimize and justify such act by influencing the women to acquiesce in their own subjugation and ill-treatment and to uphold the religious ideologies that underlie them.

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