**GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND ETHICAL RELATIVISM:**

**A SHADOW PANDEMIC RAVAGING NIGERIA**

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***ABSTRACT***

*Gender-Based violence (GBV) is a disturbing phenomenon prevalent in all regions of the world. GBV is seen as any harmful act that is carried out against a person’s consent and that it is as a result of socially ascribed (gender) dissimilarities between males and females. The study exposes that the fight against GBV have been unsuccessful because of several factors which includes the acceptance of such actions by some traditions and cultures therefore bringing to the fore conventional ethical relativism, in other words, cultural relativism. The study concluded that the rate of GBV in Nigeria is soaring high and the neglect to tackle it has made it turnout to be a shadow pandemic ravaging Nigeria. Consequently, the study amongst others recommends that the Nigerian National Assembly should enact new laws against GBV because its eradication can only be possible using the law as an instrument of social change.*

**Keywords:** *Gender-Based Violence, relativism, shadow pandemic, Nigeria.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Gender equality is only possible if men and women, boys and girls have equal rights, opportunities as well as the power to mould their own life’s and give back to the society. The other side of this view is gender inequality, associated with unequal power and discrimination on the basis of gender; is the root of gender-based violence (GBV). This violence is said to be one of the main reason why gender equality cannot be achieved. It must be noted that this violence is also a violation of human rights and also a global health issue that cuts across boundaries of economic wealth, religion, culture, sexual orientation and age. Many see GBV as the most pronounced or highest degree of unequal gender relations in society and an obvious violation of human rights, Sida in (Mashiri, 2013).

As the word gender has to do with either male or female so gender-based violence too, but, it is an obvious fact that this violence is predominant with the female gender. GBV is a global phenomenon but is like a shadow pandemic in Nigeria. The susceptibility of women and girls to GBV mostly sexual violence in Nigeria is profoundly spellbound in a culture in which levels of approach to power and resources in comparism to men and boys is very low (Klugman, 2017).

The issue of GBV in Nigeria is a very complex issue and this is the reason why there seems to be a rise in cases pertaining to GBV. In the southern part of Nigeria, it is predominant as a result of culture where as in the Northern part it is predominant as a result of both culture and the insurgencies currently ravaging the north-eastern part of Nigeria. One may not be out of place to say that GBV is encapsulated in the Nigerian cultures and traditions as the element of GBV could be cited even till date in these cultures. The world generally frowns at GBV but the fight against this violence is peculiar on how various nations go about it. It is as a result of this, the view of ethical relativism comes in.

Ethical relativism is the theory that there are no universally valid moral principles, that all moral principles are valid relative to culture or individual choice. That is there are two types of relativism namely conventionalism and subjectivism (Pojman, 1994). According to (Onimawo & Azelama, n.d.), relativism is opposed to the universality of morality and the universal application of moral principles. For instance, polygamy is not accepted and is seen as wrong in Europe but is right in the African traditional setting. The aim of this study is to examine gender-based violence and ethical relativism in Nigeria. The objectives are to (1) examine gender-based violence and classification of GBV (2) examine the concept of ethical relativism and types of ethical relativism. (3) Recommend to the government and populace at large on how to tackle issues of gender-based violence.

**What is Gender-Based Violence (GBV)?**

Gender-Based violence is a violation of human rights and is currently seen as pandemic ravaging many nations in the world including Nigeria. Sida defines gender-based violence as:

*Any harm or suffering that is perpetrated against a woman or girl, man or boy and that has a negative impact on the physical, sexual or psychological health, development or identity of the person. The cause of the violence is founded in gender-based power inequalities and gender-based discrimination (Okolie et al., n.d.).*

Several actors, even the UN use the term “violence against women” (VAW). A combination of VAW was brought to the fore in the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women adopted by the General Assembly in 1993. The declaration described abuse as any act of 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 deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”. The UN further explains VAW as;

*“…..a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanism by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men”.*

Since women and girls are the most susceptible to GBV, the terms GBV and VAW are usually used interchangeably. On the other hand, men and boys are also victims of GBV and women can also be the perpetrators. As stated earlier, it is clear that Sida’s definition is similar to the UNs definition of violence against women (VAW) but has a broader scope because of its inclusion of men and boys as potential survivors (Jewkes et al., 2015). This brings us to the issue of violence against men (VAM) which clearly exposes the violence that women carryout against men. Continuing Sida clearly states that GBV against women and girls is connected to gender inequalities and gender norms in which the “female and the feminine” is related with weakness, inferiority as well as victimization. Similarly, GBV against men and boys regularly builds on unalike norms for masculinity and femininity. For example, men or boys who are victims of GBV are usually as a result of punishment for not being “real men and not acting in accordance with social expectations on manhood and masculinity norms, for instance as a gay, trans bisexual and/or being identified as belonging to a low-status masculinity identity (Connell, 1998). (Arowolo, 2020), states that violence against women is not limited to only physical violence. It is far reaching and includes emotional, psychological, sexual and financial abuse.

**Classifications of Gender-Based Violence**

Violent acts regardless of whichever they are, are self-directed, combined, interpersonal and prevalently classified as; (i) physical, (ii) sexual, or (iii) psychological. Neglect and deprivation can be seen as types of psychological abuse.

1. Physical violence takes place when one involves in a physically aggressive acts such as biting, slapping, and beating or even as far as strangling. In this situation, most inflicted injuries and damages are regularly pointed as accidents. In most cases these accidents may even lead to death (Ellsberg et al., 2008).
2. Sexual violence is mainly seen as forced sex which may be through the use of physical force, intimidation and threats, forced involvement in degrading sexual activities and also acts such as the refusal to recognize the right to use contraceptives or to make decisions on ways of how to protect against sexual transmitted diseases (Krantz & Garcia-Moreno, 2005).
3. Continuing Krantz and Garcia-Moreno, psychological violence is described as preventing a woman from seeing family and friends, humiliation, economic restrictions, violence or threats against valued objects and so many other types of controlling behaviours. This type of violence is more difficult to define across cultures and nations as it can take various forms (Cohen, 2009).

Furthermore, there are various types of gender-based violence which are predominant in Nigeria. Examples of such violence are; dehumanising widowhood practices, castration and murder, female genital mutilation, child/forced marriage, rape, incest, polygamous customary law marriages, widow inheritance.

**Ethical Relativism**

Relativism is the view which is against the universality of morality as well as the universal application of moral principles. Relativism asserts that morality is an issue for every society to resolve for itself, that morality differs from one society to another, this means it is in the hands of every society to decide for itself what is morally upright as well as what is morally wrong, that various moral principles function in different societies (Ayala, 2010). Ethical relativism is the view that denies the existence of a single, universally applicable standard. Ethical relativist are of the view that the right morality is relative to one’s society; consequently, every society has its own morality, hence, an action is said to be morally right for a person if the morality of one’s society endorses such action (Velasquez, 2016). In other words, ethical relativism asserts that since there is no morality that all societies adhere to, everyone should follow the morality of his or her own society. Morality then, is just the set of common rules, habits and customs that have gotten social acceptance with time so that they seem part of the nature of things, as facts. Hence, nothing is mysterious or transcendent about these codes of behaviour because they are products of our social history (Pojman, 1994).

***Subjective Ethical Relativism***

Subjectivism is the theory which opines that when we make a moral judgement about any action, all we tend to be doing is nothing but expressing our feelings or what we think about such action. According to this theory, morality is totally subjective and is dependent on one’s inner disposition, feelings, likes and dislikes. For instance, if I say that an action is morally wrong, I am simply expressing that I dislike the action; and also if I perceive an action to be morally good, I am as well simply expressing that I am ok with such action. In other words, and action is good or right if one likes it and the other way round an action is wrong if one dislikes such action (Omoregbe, 1994). Continuing, Omoregbe states;

*Moral judgements therefore, according to this theory, are non-factual, non-cognitive; they tell us nothing about actions and give us no information about them, but simply express the attitudes and feelings of the people who make judgements. Consequently, the theory claims, moral judgement can neither be said to be true nor false since by their very nature they make no assertions about action themselves (2012)*

In summary, one will agree with the saying that “morality is in the eyes of the beholder”.

***Conventional Ethical Relativism***

Conventionalism asserts that moral principles are relative to the culture or society (Pojman, 1994). For John Ladd, he defines conventional ethical relativism this way;

*Ethical relativism is the doctrine that the moral rightness and wrongness of actions varies from society to society and that there are no absolute universal moral standards binding on all men at all times. Accordingly, it holds that whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he belongs (1973).*

Conventional ethical relativism according to Pojman, is the view that “there are no objective moral principles but that all valid moral principles are justified by virtue of their cultural acceptance, recognizes the social nature of morality” (2001). Furthermore, identifying the significance of our social environment is generating customs and beliefs, several persons believe that ethical relativism is the right ethical theory.

**Gender-Based Violence and Ethical Relativism**

The issue of gender-based violence is deeply rooted in many African countries in which Nigeria is not an exception. In the case of Nigeria just like other African countries, the issue of GBV is connected to the traditional African patriarchal society which basically determines the gender power structure (Chika, 2012). As posited by (Ifemeje, 2008), most Nigerian men are in polygamous marriages that is backed by customary law and according to custom the man exercises exclusive sexual rights and 100% loyalty from his wives. This automatically bestows upon the man the liberty or freedom to violate and even go as far as battering the wife if he feels she has not met up with the obligations or duty to him and they can come up under some other pretext however frivolous. The strong cultural and traditional forces that right from time made impossible the complete removal of GBV include the following; dehumanizing widowhood practices, castration and murder, female genital mutilation, child and/forced marriage, wife chastisement, sexual violence or rape, honour killings etc.

***Dehumanizing Widowhood Practices***

Nigeria as a country has diverse cultures and under the Nigerian customary law, widows especially those of the Igbo speaking areas are forced into harsh social, cultural and economic sanctions. Generally, in the Igbo speaking areas, the widows are usually the prime suspects when their husbands pass on even when the cause of death is obvious from medical reports and are forced to go through rituals to prove themselves from the complicity in the death. Some cultures even go as far as requesting that the women drink the water that is used to bath the corpse of their dead husband, consequently, compounding the psychological trauma of bereavement (Chika, 2012). Continuing, other dehumanizing rite that widows pass through are;

1. Mandatory cutting off of the hair which includes the pubic hair.
2. Only sleeping and sitting on the floor all through the time frame of mourning.
3. Jumping over the corpse of their husbands.
4. Frequent cry out as a mark of respect for the departed and consequently also forced imprisonment within their homes (Chika, 2012).

These practices are deeply rooted in some Nigerian cultures more especially the Igbo culture of the south-eastern part of Nigeria.

**Castration and Murder**

The act of castration and murder is usually linked to violence against men (VAM). Over the years females have always been the victims of violence not until recently the table turned around. These issues are not really recorded because they come in different forms and many men or boys are ashamed of reporting because they feel they are issues the public should not hear of. Most of these violence comes in form of domestic violence against men. According to (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), it is a rare finding and this rarity has relegated it to a point of minimal importance; furthermore, (Taft et al., 2001) in their view concluded that even though male victims of domestic violence exist, male victims of other forms of male violence are more prevalent. The cases of VAM that are usually exposed are issues that has to do with castration and murder. For instance, the case of Biliyamin Bello and Otike Odibi in Nigeria who among many men paid the ultimate price in marriage having their lives taken by their love ones. The both cases where touching especially the case of Odibi who was stabbed by his wife and his manhood cut off in the most pathetic way brings to the mind the horror of domestic violence against men.

***Female Genital Mutilation***

According to (Garner, 2004), female genital mutilation (FGM) is “violent damage caused to the outer sex organ of the female gender by excising parts of the organ, or causing substantial damage” and is been seen as a process that is associated with partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or injury to the female genital organs for cultural or non-therapeutic reasons. This traditional harmful practice comes with agonizing pains and is said to be predominant in Nigeria (Chika, 2012). This process is usually carried out by a traditional herbalist in an environment which is mostly unhygienic and most times with unsterilized instruments; this can lead to infection and transfer of sexually transmitted diseases. According to (Chika, 2012), the ones who usually fall prey are infant girls and pregnant women. Continuing, it cuts across cultural and religious boundaries. Several frivolous and inaccurate arguments have been put forward in defence of these traditional harmful practices, advocates claiming that it: restricts female promiscuity; prevents against still birth; improves male sexual performance; and keeps female virginity as this process they say destroys the women’s sexual libido or appetite (Chika, 2012).

***Child and/or Forced Marriage***

The practice of child and/or forced marriage is predominant everywhere in the world, especially in Africa and South Asia. Consequently, this contradicts the peace and security of any country because it is a form of sexual violence and women right violation, since young girls are usually forced into the marriage and into sexual relations (Perry & Whitehead, 2016). In Nigeria, this practice is viral more especially in the northern part. Some families marry out their daughters early as a way of gaining economic security and status for the entire family Mboho and Raphael in (Perry & Whitehead, 2016) reported by UN (2002), several African countries going through conflict, where there is high possibility of young girls being kidnapped, consequently marrying them out at a tender age is seen as a way to secure their protection.

***Sexual Violence or Rape***

According to Mboho and Raphael, women are at more risk of violence from their intimate partners than from other persons, sexual violence by non-partners is something that is common in many settings. The in-dept study of the Secretary General (2006) posits that: “sexual violence by “non partners” means violence by a relative, neighbour, friend, acquaintance and so on. Issues of sexual violence in Africa brings about shame for women as well as their families. Records on rape gotten from the police record are notoriously unreliable because of significant under reporting (UN, 2006). In Nigeria, the society, legal system, and community attitudes adds to the trauma been experienced by rape survivors and this happens mostly because those involved in this or the perpetuators are not brought to book. It is also important to note that the male gender also experience sexual violence or rape but the indexes for such case are said to be low and underreported.

***Honour Killings***

Rape victims is some Nigerian communities as well as women suspected of involving in premarital sex and women alleged of adultery have been killed by their family members because the violation of the woman’s purity is perceived as a disgrace to the families honour. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that the annual worldwide number of “honour killing” victims may be as high as 500 women (Organization, 2004).

Just as pointed out earlier, conventionalism as a type of ethical relativism is synonymous with the term cultural relativism. Looking at the position of cultural relativism which makes us to understand that an action is right if the culture of that society permits it, then, one can conclude that all these practices discussed above have no moral issues since the culture and customary law of these societies permits or sees nothing wrong with such actions and this is the main reason why the eradication of these violence is very difficult or near impossible.

**Gender-Based Violence as a Shadow Pandemic Ravaging Nigeria**

The issue of Gender-Based violence is a global issue that is predominant in so many countries especially in Africa. Nigeria is not an exception as it is seen as one of the epicentres of these violence in Africa and the world at large. Just as has been pointed out in this study there are several harmful traditional practices that are carried out mainly against women and girls in Nigeria; and some of these practices are backed by customary laws that are supposedly to guide the actions or activities of such societies. In many countries where these violence are prevalent, the government and the society at large as a result of clamour have gone back to the drawing board to upturn such laws and traditions that permits any kind of GBV against women and girls. The international community also have frowned at these practices and consequently come up with some international laws that negates such practices. Examples of such are the international instruments on women rights and the resolution 48/104 of 1993 on the declaration on the Elimination of violence against women by the UN general Assembly. The Nigerian situation is a pathetic one and this is because even when laws are made by law maker’s people still carry out some of these inhumane acts and walk out of it freely without any persecution. The rate of GBV in Nigeria rather than reducing is increasing exponentially on a daily bases and there is an urgent need to look deeply into these issues because one does not know who the next victim would be. For instance, cases of child and/or forced marriage are increasing more in the northern part of Nigeria especially with the current insurgency caused by terrorist groups and bandits. There is as well an increasing number of cases of sexual violence in the south-south region of Nigeria, more especially in Akwa Ibom State. These issues have been bordering for so many years in Nigeria and the government at the federal, state and local level has done nothing serious about this and consequently resulting to an increase of the number of cases of GBV in the country. In other words, the neglect of the government on issues of GBV has resulted to an increase in these cases and consequently, I am of the opinion that it can be seen as a “shadow pandemic” ravaging Nigeria. Just as the word shadow means a dark area produced by a body coming between rays of light and a surface, so GBV could be seen as a shadow pandemic that is prevalent in every part of Nigeria as a result of the neglect of government. Currently, there are clamours by human rights organizations and NGO’s on the high rate of this shadow pandemic and the need for a quick response and action from the government in order to curb this pandemic before it gets out of hand because we do not know who the next victim would be.

**CONCLUSION**

The case of GBV in Nigeria have over the years increased drastically and is said to have reached the crescendo. Several cases of GBV are reported on weekly bases and it is quite difficult for victims to get justice. The study exposed that though the victims of this violence are both male/men or female/women but women and girls are more of the victims. The study also exposed the classification of GBV which includes sexual violence, physical and psychological abuse and also the traditional or cultural practices such as dehumanizing widowhood practices, castration and murder, female genital mutilation, child and/or forced marriage, sexual violence or rape, honour killings and so on, all this making it difficult for the eradication of GBV. Furthermore, although the factors are legion, but the term conventionalism (cultural relativism) as an off short of ethical relativism was used to back the reason why the fight against GBV in Nigeria is yet to be successful. The study concludes that the neglect by government and law enforcement agencies have all contributed to the increasing cases of GBV and consequently, turning out to be a shadow pandemic ravaging Nigeria. Based on the findings, the study recommends;

1. The Ministry of Women Affairs in collaboration with NGO’s should organize awareness campaigns and sensitize the populace with information’s such as hotlines and locations of NGO’s that will be helpful and provisions within the Nigerian law that addresses issues of GBV.
2. The Nigerian National Assembly should do away with laws and codes that are obsolete. For instance, the Section 138 of the Evidence Act makes it near impossible to prove cases of rape whereas section 353 & 360 of Criminal Code clearly shows gender inequality; hence, it will be proper for the National Assembly to adopt and also enact laws that accord with the current trends and realities of our time because the eradication of GBV can only be possible using the law as an instrument of social change.
3. The government should put as part of the curriculum of schools at all levels the issue of GBV so the populace can have the awareness in the classroom as well.
4. The government at state levels in order to curb this pandemic of monumental consequences should ensure the domestication of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015 without further delay.

Notes: 1) The cases of gender-based violence reported in Nigeria all tilt towards violence against women, thus making the figure of violence against men insignificant. 2) In the northern part of Nigeria Governors have come together to agree on enacting the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2005 in their various states to curb this pandemic of monumental consequences. 3) Issues of Gender-Based Violence are underreported because most victims are ashamed of reporting since getting justice is near impossible

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