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## **Violence in the Family: A Preliminary Investigation and Overview of Wife Battering in Africa**

By Adewale Rotimi<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper examines wife battering in Africa although it is a world wide phenomenon. Due to the hidden nature of the problem accurate statistics on it are hard to come by. In many parts of Africa, wife battering is accepted as a part of the culture. This is reinforced by the sex role socialization of women, which encourages and emphasizes submissiveness. The victims of wife battering don't always leave the abusive environment because of lack of family and community support. Divorce is not always a viable alternative due to the stigma attached to it. Wife battering must be discouraged through legislation, general education and economic empowerment of women.

*Keywords:* wife battering, family violence, Africa

### **Introduction**

Family violence is as old as the history of mankind and it often occurs in the privacy of the home. Because a man's home is often referred to and regarded as his "castle", whatever a man does within the privacy of the home has often escaped the scrutiny of the public. As family violence occurs in all forms so does it also occur among all social classes. It is thus a worldwide phenomenon and a social problem. The kind of family violence which is addressed in this paper is that which is directed towards a woman, by an intimate partner. It must be noted that despite the high costs of family violence, every society in the world has social institutions that legitimate, obscure or deny the problem (*Population Reports vol XXVII Nov 4 1999*). It is apposite to define family violence, especially, as it is directed towards women. As observed by *Population Reports* above, Article 2 of the United Nations Declaration clarifies that the definition of violence against women should include but not be limited to acts of physical, sexual and psychological abuse in the community. These should also include spouse battering, sexual abuse of female children, dowry-related violence, rape, including martial rape and also other traditional practices which are equally harmful to women, such as female genital mutilation, sexual harassment and intimidation at work and school, women trafficking, rape at war, widowhood rites which are often degrading, and other forms of violence.

Violence against women, especially those acts perpetrated by intimate partners remains the most pervasive and yet the least recognized human abuse in the world (*Population Reports vol XXVII No 4 1999*). Around the world, at least, one woman in three has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her life time so says *Population Reports*. Knapp (2001) disclosed that when some women informants were asked whether they had ever been hit, slapped, Kicked or otherwise physically hurt by intimate partners, 38.5% admitted that they had been and nearly one third of the women admitted to have experienced at least, one physically violent episode by a current partner in the three months preceding the research. The study by Knapp also revealed that partner violence disclosure remained a difficult decision for many women for fear of partners' reaction in form of more physical abuse or abandonment.

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Another study by Ellsberg et al. (2001) based on a survey of 36 countries of the world indicated that between 10-60% of women who have ever been married have experienced at least one incident of physical violence from a current or former intimate partner.

The main focus of this paper is husband-to-wife violence, also known as wife battery or wife abuse, which occurs throughout Africa. For the purposes of this paper, wife battery is defined as violence which is perpetrated by a man upon a woman who is exercising the role of a wife in a domestic sphere (*Working toward Gender Equality, London, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1993-95*). This definition is further stretched to include any gender-based violence harm or suffering to women. Abuse may also include unusual threatening or coercion and it may include arbitrary deprivation of liberty. Abuse may occur in visible or subtle ways but the consequences are always devastating.

Abuse of women by their male partners may manifest in physical, psychological or emotional forms. Physical types may manifest in forms of raping, pushing, punching, choking, spitting on, kicking, stabling, slapping, slamming the victims against the door, throwing her on the floor, shoving her down the stairs of a building, throwing acid or hot water on the woman, whipping or even hacking the victim to death (Martin, 1978, Okemgbo, 1999). Physical abuse is the most visible of all kinds of wife battery.

Psychological abuse which, in many cases is less visible than physical abuse may occur in forms of harassment, excessive possessiveness, deprivation of economic resources (especially in cases where the woman is a full-time housewife) denial of access to family income (Okemgbo, 1999). The victim may also be subjected to constant belittling, intimidation, humiliation and so on (*Population Reports vol. XXVII No 1999*). In psychological abuse, the victims may continue to suffer the corrosive effects of abuse without being noticed by others. Another subtle form of abuse is controlling behaviour, this may manifest in forms of isolation from friends and relatives, monitoring the victim's movements and so on. The woman may also be subjected to blackmail and peddling or rumours by her male partner.

Men have often also been observed to give many reasons why they abuse their partners. They may include the followings; women not "obeying" their husbands, talking back to them not having food ready on time, failure to adequately care for the children, the home, or their husbands, questioning husbands about money on girl friends or expressing suspicions of infidelity (*Population Reports: vol XXVII No 4 1999; 6*). It may also include, failure or a woman to give her husband the coveted male children or the required number of children desired by the husband (Amos, 2001;29). Unfortunately, despite the devastating effects of wife battering, it has not seriously attracted the attention of many social scientists in Africa as a major social problem. This paper is a modest attempt at correcting this intellectual and social anomaly.

### **Studies of Wife Battery in Africa**

In Africa, general epidemiological studies on wife battery are very scarce. This is mainly because, until recently, the phenomenon did not attain the status of a social problem in a continent where poverty, political instability, religious fanaticism, corruption, high crime rate and other significant social ills compete for attention and solution.

At present, many Africans seem to accept wife beating as part and parcel of the African culture. For example, in the mid 1980s, an attempt was made to introduce

a bill against wife beating in the Kenyan Parliament (Worrau, 1984 ). It led to a very fierce debate in which, according to Worrau, the protagonists of wife beating won the debate. They argued that the phenomenon was part and parcel of the African Culture. Also, see Ilevbabor (2004). Indeed Ilevbabor asserts that some African men believe that women enjoy being beaten.

In Nigeria, an examination of some ethnographic materials confirm wife beating as a regular practice, Fadipe (1971) observes that among the Yorubas, wife beating was tolerated but controlled under the extended family system where couples lived in compounds which consisted of many family units. Some Yoruba proverbs confirm this;

“Opa ti a fi na iyaale ni a o fina iyawo”

(The whip which was used to beat the most senior wife is still being kept for her juniors)

“Pa mi nku nse ori kunkun si oko”

(It is only a woman who risks being beaten to death that disobeys her husband).

Apart from the examination of ethnographic materials (Proverbs, oral history, songs etc.) and occasionally encounters with the subject in newspapers, popular magazines and scholarly research, information on wife beating in Africa is rather scanty, disjointed and not comprehensive. And as mentioned earlier, wife beating is yet to be considered a serious social problem that deserves scholarly attention. It is a part and parcel of the degradation to which African women are routinely subjected.

Bowker (1985) has observed that many Third World countries, including those in Africa have very limited resources to allocate to the task of doing research on wife beating which is generally regarded as a part of the culture. Also, many African countries have not developed social indicators in which some particular social trends might be established. Indeed, victimization studies from which wife beating may be identified are not usually available. Consequently, wife beating is still a subject which is discussed in anecdotes, gossips, whispers and recently, on the pages of newspaper. Increasingly and gradually, however one comes across few scholarly works on the subject.

One of the early works on wife battery in Africa was done by Tanner (See Bowker, 1985), it focused on homicide in Uganda and concluded that during 1983, eleven percent of all homicides that occurred in Uganda did so in the context of wife beating as compared to fourteen percent in 1962 and twelve percent in 1961 respectively. Bowker also referred to an earlier study by Mushanga which concluded that wife beating increased with modernization.

More recently, in Uganda, a study carried out between 1995 and 1996 in Lira and Massaka Districts (*See Population Reports vol XVII No 4 1999:4*) among a sample of 1660 subjects ages between 20 and 44 revealed that 41% of the subjects indicated that they had been assaulted by an intimate partner in a current relationship.

Okemgbo (1999) referring to an earlier study by Reikes and others asserts that 30% of Kenyan Women reported intimate partner violence and 50% of the men interviewed reported that their mothers had also been beaten by their male partners. In another study which covered the Kissi District in Kenya over the period between 1984 and 1987, it was reported that 42% of the women surveyed indicated that they had been assaulted by their intimate partners in a current relationship (*Population Reports, Vol. XXVII No 4 1999:4*). In the same report it was indicated that, in Ethiopia, 10% of

the sample interviewed had experienced physical assaults in any relationship involving intimate male partners.

Also, Janssen Jurriet (1982) reported an earlier study which was carried out by Nortet Mylues among the Masdi, Xhosa and the Bantus of East Africa. The study examined martial relationships among these groups in East Africa. The study was also extended to the Bantus, the Zulus, the Xhosa and the Sotho of South Africa. The conclusion was that wife beating was a part and parcel of the tribal norms.

In South Africa, violence against women dates back to the pre-colonial and later apartheid periods when women, (those of colour) were employed mainly as domestic servants (Sexwale: 1993). Women were not only exploited as domestic servants, they were also sexually violated. Because colonialism encouraged and deepened gender discrimination, women were physically assaulted both as wives or domestic servants. The division of labour was under the strict control of men as husbands or fathers.

In a study reported in *Population Reports* (vol XXVII, No 4, 1999:4) and which had been carried out earlier in 1998, a survey covering Eastern Cape, Mpuma Tanga and the Northern Province, it was revealed that eleven percent, twelve percent and five percent of the samples from the three districts respectively, of the adult women surveyed had indicated that they had been assaulted in the previous twelve months by their partners. In another national survey comprising of a sample of 5077 women (whose age ranged from 15-49 years); it was revealed that sixty percent of those who had been in any relationship had experienced some kind of physical assault from intimate male partners.

Keener et al (1994) has examined domestic violence in the Middle East. A sample of 408 women was taken from Egypt and Lebanon. The researchers concluded that domestic violence occurred in conjunction with family or role stressors and was frequently associated with poor communication. They concluded that culture and gender stereotypes may also have allowed the expression of violence within martial relationships.

Godwin (1995) has also observed that the Egyptians Law of Obedience and the Law of Return were passed which first requires a woman to totally submit to her husband's authority and the second enables the police to forcibly return the abused woman if she runs away from home, even if she had fled her husband's physical abuse.

Studies also reported by *Population Reports* (vol XXVII No 4 1999:6) indicate that sixteen percent of a sample of Egyptian women reported that they had been abused by intimate partners in the previous 12 months preceeding the date of the interview. In the same issue of *Population Reports*, it was reported that a previous survey carried out in Egypt in 1996, indicated that 40% of urban females and 61% of urban males approved of wife beating if the wife neglects the children and/or the home. In the same study, it was discovered that 57% of urban females and 81% of rural females respectively approved of wife beating if the wife refuses her husband sex. Also, in the same study, it was reported that 51% of urban females and 78% of rural females respectively approved of wife beating if the woman answers back or disobeys her husband. Another study also reported in the *Population Reports* revealed the incidence to their families.

In Tanzania, Lagina (1994) concluded in her study of violence against women in that country that victims do not express their experiences publicly due mainly to some cultural beliefs and values. She also observed that legal and sociocultural systems work against women's rights and women as human beings. Okemgbo (1999)

reports that 21% of a sample of 876 Rwandan women who were interviewed reported that their partners had ever beaten them. Ramoneka (1994) examined the roots of violence against women in Lesotho. She also concluded that cultural values and beliefs combine to conceal the incidence of wife battery in the country. In South Africa, 38% of non-fatal injuries identified from hospital records occurred to women as a result of impersonal violence by a spouse or lover. The report was based on an earlier study by Butchard and Brown but reported by Okemgbo (opcit).

Further in South Africa, a group of female nurses was interviewed on issues concerning wife battery (*Population Reports Vol XXVII No 4 1999:27*); the female nurses generally recognized domestic violence as a serious problem. They believed however that women themselves also held certain attitudes and acted in ways that could provoke violence which might include rape. On the other hand, another group which comprised of male nurses identified a long list of reasons that would justify a man beating his wife. Their list included, the woman disobeying her husband, disrespectful attitude to husbands, neglect of household and children or childcare duties. Incidentally the male nurses believed that a man could not rape his wife! To them, wife beating was both a means of discipline and a way of expressing “love” or forgiveness!

In recent years, a few studies of wife battery have emerged from West Africa. For example, Pearce (1987) examined the perception of some people as it related to corporal punishment for wives. The study was carried out at Ile-Ife, a University town situated in Southwestern part of Nigeria. Her study revealed that 40% of her respondents believed that a husband has the right to slap his wife “if she misbehaved”, interestingly however, 71% of the respondents recognized that, ideally, the relationship between husbands and wives need not be sustained by physical violence.

Omorodion (1992) also carried out another study in Benin City, Edo State of Nigeria. her study sample contained subjects from Benin, Essan, Urhobo, Ibo and Etsako tribes. She observed that the types of injuries sustained by victims of wife abuse included facial bruises (49.18%), cuts in the mouth (34.5%) and loss of teeth (2%). She observed that during battering, doors were always locked ostensibly to prevent outside interference. Omorodion (1992) concluded that both male and female emphasized male aggressiveness and female submission. While Omordion’s study provided useful insights into wife abuse, in Nigeria, her conclusions might be called into question because most of her subjects and information came through social welfare files. Studies in other parts of the world show that such studies exclude elite families where abuse occurs especially among couples who never have contacts with either police or social welfare departments. Another study was carried out by Pearce (1992) to examine the problem of wife abuse around the university town of Ile-Ife in the Southwest part of Nigeria. She concluded that 25% of her respondents supported the use of violence to “correct” recalcitrant wives. She also discovered that it was common to exert pressure on the victims to keep their experience as “private” family affairs.

Funmilayo (1992) also studied the perception of a sample of men and women on wife battery. Fifty-two percent (52%) of her respondents believed that husbands have the right to beat their wives. Unfortunately the conclusion did not distinguish respondents along gender lines.

A few people have often expressed varied opinions on the subject of wife battery in the pages of newspapers and magazines. They include, for example an article in the *Nigerian Daily Times* of May 18, 1998 which had a screaming headline,

“Wife beating, a barbaric act”. Also in *The Guardian* of December 15<sup>th</sup> 1996, Ayesha Imam observed that 50% of all killings of women were by male family members. Another study reported in *Population Reports* (Vol. XXVII No 4 1999:4) indicated that, in a sample of 1000 female subjects 31% of adult women who had ever been involved in any relationship with intimate male partners had experienced abuse.

Okemgbo (1999) also reported that in Nigeria in 1987, a twelve-year-old girl died after having both legs amputated by her husband with an axe after she repeatedly ran away from him. Okemgbo also reported that, in February 1992, a man set his wife ablaze following an argument where the man alleged that his wife had “insulted” him and his family. Also, in Lagos, the former capital city of Nigeria, a man who claimed to be under the influence of supernatural powers butchered his wife who was nursing a nine-month-old baby while she was asleep at night (Okemgbo op cit).

It was also reported by Gbadamosi (2001; 1,2) that, in Ogun State in Nigeria, a husband slashed his wife’s throat when he discovered that the wife had been pregnant by another man. The man was eventually sentenced to death by a high court. Still in another study, which was carried out in Ghana in 1999, it was discovered that 43% of males and 33% of females respectively, who were interviewed approved of wife beating if a woman refuses her husband sex (see *Population Reports* (op cit)).

Still in Nigeria, Ogunseye (2004) reports that, in the Badagry area of Lagos, a 36 year-old man confessed to killing his wife, a mother of a two-month-old baby, for refusing him sex. The husband had smashed the head of his wife with an iron while she was asleep. Also, Awoyemi (2005) reports that, a man had cut off his wife’s head with a sharp machete. This happened two weeks after they had come back together having been separated for fifteen years.

Francis (2005) has reported how a father of four beheaded his wife whom he suspected of being responsible for his becoming impotent after they had become separated. He had been advised by a spiritualist to return to his wife in order to gain back potency but two weeks after he returned to his wife he was still impotent. He therefore murdered his wife whom he accused of being responsible for his condition.

Olugbode (2005) reports that a 37-year-old woman, a mother of five, was stabbed to death for walking out of her husband of twenty years. The estranged husband had stalked her in the market place, stabbing her on her breasts, neck and stomach, which resulted in her bleeding to death. Oyedokun (2004) in a study conducted in Ife – North Local Government Area of **Osun State** in Nigeria noted that 55.6% of the women respondents reported having been threatened with physical harassment by their partners. 62% of the women had been physically abused by their intimate partners. 55.9% of the respondents experienced forced sexual relationships with their partners and 17.2% of the respondents experience physical violence during pregnancy. 25.7% victims attempted to pacify their husbands to prevent further victimization. Only 13.7% of the victims took steps that would prevent possible future victimization.

Occasionally some women attempt to opt out of abusive situations. Biobaku (2005) for example reports that a twenty nine year old housewife had filed for divorce in a customary court because her husband had beaten her in a market place, stripping her naked publicly in the process.

In Tanzania a popular woman’s magazine, *Sauti Ya Siti* (1992) observed that in Africa, many women are treated like property rather than as partners by their husbands. This observation is corroborated by another commentator in Nigeria who remarked that, the African culture holds that once a dowry is paid on a woman, she automatically becomes the property of the husband (Akolisa, 2002:19). The author

also asserts that in Africa, a man cannot be accused of raping his own wife. In Africa, cultural beliefs and practices continue to conceal the magnitude of wife battery. Consequently, if occasions arise when the police are invited to intervene in cases involving wife beating, they regard the case as a private and domestic affair. Also see Ilevabor (2004). As observed earlier, it is to be noted, that, until recently the social problem of wife beating has eluded the interest and attention of researchers and scholars in Africa.

### **Some sociocultural factors which are responsible for wife beating in Africa.**

There are some sociocultural factors which have combined to ensure the continued subjugation and oppression of women in Africa. Some of these factors include sex role socialization, political marginalization, lack of economic empowerment and so on. Wife beating is one of the symptoms of male oppression and female marginalization in Africa.

For analytical convenience, this paper will devote some time to an examination of sex role socialization which seems to be the pivot around which many other factors rotate. It will also examine the position of women during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial or modern times. It is hoped that this will elucidate the position of women in what appears to be the “man’s world” where many cultural practices still accommodate violence against women, particularly sex role socialization which has persisted through pre-colonial to modern periods in Africa. Sex role socialization seems to have made it possible for both perpetrators and victims of some harmful cultural practices to accept them as “normal”.

### **Sex Role Socialization**

It should be noted that the following summary speaks in quite general terms, while nonetheless acknowledging that cultural variation exists throughout the continent.

Before the arrival of the early Europeans into the African soil to introduce western education, an informal system of education which was community-based was already in existence. This system involved the socialization of the young into basic elements of the African culture. A major role of this socialization was the emphasis on respect for elders and role socialization.

According to Tsikata (1993:68) this informal education was an important part of everyday life of the growing African Child. Within this context, role relations between male and female, husbands and wives, parents and children were accorded very string emphasis. The most regular feature of this socialization process was the focus on male superiority which was expressed, emphasized and sanctioned by a number of religious cultural and political forms (Izuegbu, 1987).

As a child the female was taught to be passive, in conspicuous and emotionally dependent (Tsikata, 1993). She was also expected and encouraged to aspire only to be a good mother, wife and housekeeper. Ward (1938) asserts that girls were socialized to believe that they were inferior to boys. At about the age of six, the girl was taught that she must keep away from boys and their games because such “rough” and “tumble” behaviour was unbecoming of her.

In contrast to the girls however, the male child, very early in life was socialized to show less emotion, to be active and to demonstrate independence (Tsikala 1993). While boys were throwing stones, climbing trees, wrestling and

fighting girls were encouraged to play hide and seek (Ward, 1938). While boys were encouraged to face danger, girls were expected to flee from them.

A major ingredient of the socialization process is the constant reminder that there is no equality between men and women. According to Ward (1938) the wife may become deviant when she realizes this and she very often does not seem to regard herself as bound to carry out certain obligations, consequently, her husband must apply the rod to enforce conformity. He may also kick her, drag her around the compound, apply pepper in her eyes, deny her food or lock her up in a dark room (Ward, op cit). Usually, the nature of the offence would dictate the nature of punishment, with infidelity attracting the most severe or barbaric punishment.

The early socialization process forms the basis of adult relations and thus dictates the context of relationship between husband and wife. It has been observed among the Yoruba of the Southwestern Nigeria, for example, that the man yearns for power and the real power a man gets is when he takes a wife. This means that he has some one under his authority (Ward,1938). The woman must be perpetually "kept" in her place, Ward further asserts,

"Men believe that if some corporal punishment is not inflicted at times on wives, even wives for whom they have affection, these women will not have proper respect for them and will not obey them, the objective is to deter them from breaking the code and to reform them as far as possible"...

Ward further explains that a husband (based on his early socialization) believes that he has to sustain himself as the boss in some way. The socialization process sketched above, which has consistently emphasized the female inferiority and inequality with men has persisted from the time immemorial to the present time. It has also formed the basis of conjugal relationship in Africa. It is now apposite to examine the position of women in the precolonial times and to see how it has assisted us in understanding harmful cultural practices and violence against women.

### **Women in Precolonial Africa**

It is necessary to caution initially, that a detailed discussion of the position or status of women in the precolonial or other periods in Africa is beyond the scope of this work. However, a few examples will be highlighted to elucidate our understanding of conjugal relationship and domestic violence in Africa during this period.

It is tempting to romanticize the precolonial period in Africa as the "good old days" when women enjoyed unprecedented political powers and were almost on the same status as men. However, a deeper examination of the period also reveals that women, as wives were victims of violence which was unleashed on them through some traditional practices. For analytical convenience, this paper will examine women in the "public" and "domestic" domains.

From the public domain, women occupied conspicuous positions in the society. As Sudakarta (1993) has observed, women occupied such positions as queens, queen mothers chiefs and as supreme Monarchs referred to as "loved". Also, Izuegbu (1987) examines the position of Iyalode among the Yoruba. She was a person of much influence in the affairs of the community. Among the pre-Fulani Nupe in the Northern party of Nigeria the Nimwoye, sagi, wogbo were women rank holders who wielded much influence in the community. Izuegbe has also observed that during the

Ogiso period in Benin, some Mmabosetse was a woman who cared for new mothers. Gort (1997) has also focused on female traditional healers. Afonja and Aina (1995) have pointed out that during the precolonial period, women accorded much recognition in the political arena. Among the Yoruba, for example, the titles of *iya afin* (highest rank in palace administration, *ilaris* (slave officials), *iyalode* (spokesperson for women) *iyaloja* (in charge of market women) were conferred on women in the administration of the community. Among the Igbo, the *Omu* reigned over the female portion of the populace (Afonja and Aina, 1995).

While the women excelled in the public domain, the opposite could be observed in the domestic domain. Indeed, their positions in the public domain occasionally masked the negative status and the subjugation to which they were subjected as wives at home.

It is true that among the Yoruba, within the family, women enjoyed high status as mothers, sisters and daughters. Within the matrilineages women held leadership positions and exercised authority equivalent to that of men (Sudakarta: 1993). Even males would prostrate before their elders whether they were males or females. As wives however, the story was different. Most women who held leadership positions were older women who had delegated most of domestic activities to younger co-wives. It is to be observed that in the domestic arena, younger wives usually had more intensive and more intimate relationships with their husbands. Older wives whose relationship with their husband became rather diffused were free to engage in activities outside the home. Younger co-wives who enjoyed more intensive and more intimate interactions with their husband were, however always reminded that, “*opa ti a fi na iyale ni a fi na iyawo* (The whip which was used for the older wife will also be used for a younger wife)”.

It is also to be observed that no matter how highly placed a woman was, she, as a wife was not immune to occasional accusations of possession of witchcraft, especially if her husband or a member of the house died under some mysterious circumstances. Such accusations attracted extra judicial executions, usually by stoning. Also, no matter what public position a woman held, she was subjected to very disgraceful and barbaric widowhood rites if her husband died. Also, no wife was immune from trial by ordeal if any occasion warranted it. No matter how highly placed a woman was publicly, at home, as a wife she must show difference to all male members of the consanguineal family irrespective of their age. Among the Yorubas, it was costly if a wife failed to realize that, *Oko ni ori aya* (the husband is the head of the wife). Also that she is an “*eru*” (slave) to all members of the consanguineal family. It can thus be concluded that during the pre-colonial times domestic violence was accepted as a way of life.

During the colonial period the existing patriarchal structures were reinforced and reinvigorated by the colonial masters. They were reinforced mainly by some elements of Christian and Islamic teachings. As Borapai (1995) has observed the church interpreted the word of God and passed on the same to the judicial courts. It gave a subservient role to the woman.

Hinging its teachings on the story of the creation (Genesis 2:21-24) the church asserted that a woman was never created as a person of her own right but from one rib of man and so she was nothing but a part of him (Boparai, 1995). She had no identity apart from the identity of her husband. This was basis of the enactment of the unity of spouse act under the English common law which also formed the basis of legislations in many African countries. Boparai (Ibid.) observed that when marriage is viewed under statutory law, common law or Islamic law the wife was put at a great

disadvantage. Many of these discriminatory matrimonial laws which were enacted during the colonial period still exists in the law books of many African countries today only waiting to be challenged. Many of these laws give license to husbands to physically “chastise” their wives whenever they consider it necessary to do so. Because women were not involved in the law-making, and males were the architects of the laws, they reflect androcentric perceptions and values.

Economically during the colonial period, women were employed mainly as domestic workers (Tsikata, 1993). The colonial mercantilism accelerated the commercialization of the economy such that goods like textile, cotton and indigo which the women produced and traded in became surplus through the imperial trade (Tsikata op cit). According to Tsikata (1993) this led to the devaluation of women’s economic production roles. He also asserts that the colonial masters employed violence to extract surplus labour in the plantations. Women, he further observed were detained for leaving the plantations, trial by ordeal ritual murders in which women were victims became rampant. He also observed that the colonial state viewed the presence of women in towns with suspicion. According to Mama (1993) measures were taken to remove women from urban areas. Mama has further observed that the confinement of women to economically dependent roles is a condition which has made it very difficult for many women to economically dependent roles is a condition which has made it very difficult for many women to leave unbearably violent situations.

It is not surprising that the colonial masters failed to improve the status of women in Africa or prevent abusive relationships between men and women. Martin (1978) has observed that in ancient times in Europe, women were burnt at the stake for such flimsy offences as nagging, talking back to their husbands or refusing to have intercourse with them. It was only in 1878 that the matrimonial causes act was enacted which allowed women who had been abused by their husbands to seek judicial separation with maintenance (see *confronting violence commonwealth secretariat* 1992). Additional laws that would address the rights of women emerged with the women’s rights movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is necessary to now examine how women have fared in the post colonial or “modern” period.

#### *Women in the Post-colonial/modern period*

The early 1950s and 1960s witnessed what may be called a period of political independence in most of African countries. During the early period of political independence, party politics was introduced into most of the African countries. During periods of political upheavals, women became ready victims. They were wantonly raped to punish political opponents (Tsikata, 1993:22) either to revenge or to get information from them. According to Tsikata harassment of market women was common in Ghana and Nigeria. Violence was used to address the problem of prostitution and infidelity. Tsikata has further observed for example, that, in Ghana, the law stipulates that violence against women must be committed in a public place to constitute an offence. In many African countries women and children are regarded as properties by law. Indeed punishment inflicted on a wife by the husband is not subject to law courts. According to Ward (1938) a husband gets punished if he beats his wife to death, beats her when she is pregnant or breaks her bones.

Akande (1993) has observed that in Nigeria the law allows a husband to “reasonably” chastise his wife. According to Akande the question of determining what is reasonable chastisement probably depends more on the woman’s capacity to bear the inhuman treatment without complaining than on the legality of interpretation

by the courts. Violence against women still continues unabated in the modern times. Indeed, the movement of couples to urban centers has ensured that wife abuse can continue in the privacy of homes where neighbours are strangers to each other. Professional women may suffer physical and emotional abuse for a long time without reporting it as such may constitute an embarrassment to them and their family. Western education has indeed, in some cases aggravated wife abuse because of legislations, which continue to ensure the subjugation of women.

In many African countries, widowhood rites, female genital mutilation, girl child marriage, human trafficking, wife abuse and other acts of violence constitute the day to day reality of living. Today, there are many African women who are professionals and politicians yet in the privacy of their homes, their statuses as “mothers” and wives make them victims of domestic violence. Unfortunately, despite the violence they experience in the family, many of them fail to seek alternatives.

### **Why the Abused Wife Stays**

The literature on wife battery is replete with reasons why victims stay in abusive relationships despite clear and overwhelming evidences that such an environment is seriously detrimental to the victims’ physical, mental and emotional well-being.

A woman might remain in an abusive relationship for purely economic reasons. She may be unskilled, semi skilled or unemployed as in the case of a fulltime housewife. If she has been a housewife for a long time, it may be very difficult for her to venture into the labour market. Also fear of hunger, fear of raising children on her own etc (Ilevbabor, 2004). Her self esteem and self-confidence might have been crippled as a result of many years of battering. This may affect her self-confidence and it may also affect her ability to go out and seek gainful employment.

Donaldson (1997) has also observed that in the case of South Africa, lobolo (bridewealth) may reduce her options of leaving an unsatisfactory marital relationship, because, the transfer of cattle or cash payment legitimizes her husband’s right to their children. Without the transfer of lobolo, she can leave but not with her children.

Another reason why women remain in an abusive relationship might be cultural. Benton (1986) for example points out that attitudes towards sex role may influence the victim's self image with both culture and religion shaping these attitudes. Benton further observes that Christianity assigns a secondary status to a woman and enjoins her to obey her husband as she does God. Consequently, appeal to higher loyalties may constitute a choice between living with a violent husband of facing eternal damnation for violating marriage vows (Benton op cit). As mentioned earlier, in families where heavy bride price has been paid to secure a wife, the victim's family may insist that she continues to stay with her abusive husband, so that divorce or separation, which may necessitate the refund of the bride price, does not occur.

The identity of the victim as someone's wife or lover may be so important to her as to form the basis of her own identity or self definition as a woman. Indeed, in many parts of Africa marriage identity is so important to women that even when they become professionals and earn corresponding titles, they still prefix their professional titles with the "vital" title of "Mrs". Thus, we have Professor (Mrs), Dr (Mrs), Chief (Mrs) and so on. As observed by Akolisa (2002) many women jostle to get the appellation, "Mrs" at the cost of personal happiness, self-dignity and even, material wealth. So important is the appellation that, even after legal divorce has been effected, women still hold on to them very tenaciously.

Further comments by Akande (1993) reveal that most African Women have been socialized to believe that a woman is not complete without a man and that marriage and child bearing constitute her main sources of satisfaction. In a similar vein, Moughalu (1999) study of professional women in the University city of Ibe-Ife and Lagos Nigeria respectively revealed that, 99.2% of the professional women who were interviewed indicated that the most important thing in a woman's life is family happiness.

The professional women who were studied by Moughalu (1999) also cautioned that a woman should not get a divorce no matter how bad the family situation is. According to the respondents, if a woman is "patient" everything will be alright. 100% of the professional women who were interviewed said "no" to divorce, no matter how bad the family situation is. Akolisa (2002) seems to have captured the typical view of many Nigerian women when she asserts,

“... agreed, man is the glory of the woman and an unmarried woman, no matter her accomplishments is like a queen without a crown”.

Even in the most abusive relationship which may threaten the life of the woman, she would prefer to hold on tenaciously to the marriage, because, the society does not expect a woman to remain without a husband.

As observed by Ilevbabor (2004), divorces suffer stigmatization. Following the importance, which is attached to marriage, is that which is attached to childbearing. Because of the centrality of children to marriage in Africa, an abused wife may continue to endure her victimization because she does not want to part with her children.

As Okpaise (1988) has pointed out in the case of Nigeria, an abused wife may be reluctant to leave her children because of the potential emotional damage which such an action may have on the children. Many women don't want their children to be victims of broken homes. Some African cultures also expect that once a woman has had children for a man, she is duty bound to stay with the man no matter what her experience is. Benton (1986) also observes that the decision on the part of the victim, not to leave might be influenced by the thought that, in case she leaves more violence might be visited on the children. This is particularly so in cases where both the wife and children are victims of abuse.

The abused wife may also remain in the abusive relationship for psychosocial reasons. She may develop a feeling of helplessness and powerlessness. As Benton (1986) has observed, she may blame herself for her abusive condition and thus fail to share her experience with other people. In many African countries, there are no shelters for abusive women and no social networks to offer support for them to escape the abusive environment. Friends and families are likely to encourage her to continue to endure her victimization hoping that things "get better", many times they never do.

The victim may come to develop strong emotional ties to her batterer. Benton (1986) compares this relationship to that which exists between cult members and their leaders. Benton refers to this phenomenon as "traumatic bonding" .As the batterer becomes aware of this situation, he employs the use of isolation, fear arousal and guilt to control his victims and thus ensures that they are perpetually locked in the battering condition.

When the abuse has continued for some time, the victim begins to lose her self-esteem (Benton 1986, and Aguilar and Nightingale, 1994). She begins to see her

victimization as a result of personal failure and she internalizes the verbal humiliations received from her abuser both as a true reflection of herself and as a personal humiliation. To the victim, a failed marriage is also an indication of a personal failure in life to attain the goals and the ideals, which the larger society has set for her -the goal of a happy marriage (Benton op cit). As a survival mechanism, the victim may ignore or even deny violence, thereby failing to effect a change in her situation and thus stays trapped in the abusive relationship she continues to experience the devastating consequences of her victimization. Some of these are sketched below.

### **Some Consequences of Wife Battery**

The consequences of wife battery could be rather devastating not only for the individual victims but also for the society as a whole.

Those women who are abused suffer both physically and emotionally. For example, data from many parts of the world, including those from Africa reveal that physical attacks sometimes leads to death or permanent disfigurement. The United States department of Health and Human Services (1983) assert, for example that about 25% of all murders in the United States take place within the family. The same source reveals that between 20-25 % have suffered violence regularly.

In some African countries, it is common to read in the newspapers; accounts of how some enraged husbands beat their wives to death. Recent reports from Nigeria also confirm this. See Francis (2005), Awoyemi (2005) and Ogunseye (2004). A monograph from the National clearing house on Domestic Violence in the United States of America (1985) list some health problems suffered by some victims of domestic violence. They include, miscarriages, premature deliveries, therapeutic abortion, attempted abortion just to mention a few. Other less severe ones may include frequent headaches, bowel disorders, painful intercourse, muscle pains and so on.

Battered women also comprise a significant number of those women referred to the psychiatric emergency facilities and they are overrepresented among female alcoholics, drug abusers and those with mental illness. They are twelve times more likely to attempt suicide than women who have not experienced battering (Commonwealth Secretariat 1993-94). Because of the attendant feeling of helplessness experienced by the victims, they may sometimes start to think of themselves as "sick". Physical violence may also be suffered by those who may try to intervene when husbands are in the process of beating their wives.

Violence or a threat of violence limits a woman's ability to negotiate safer sex with her partner (Knapp 2001). Fear of violence may also discourage a woman from receiving HIV counseling and testing. It may consequently discourage a woman from telling her partner about test results.

Incidentally, women are not the only ones that suffer the consequences of domestic violence. It may also adversely affect children. As pointed out by Denton (Texas USA) Chronicle, (151 June 1983), when children watch their fathers beat their mothers, the message being subtly conveyed to them is that violence is an acceptable form of conflict resolution within the family. Little girls may perceive violence as a part of marriage, just like having babies, or washing the dishes. The study referred to above observed that 85% of men who committed violent crimes in Texas came from abusive family backgrounds The observation is also corroborated by Martin (1978) and Shwartz (1989) who suggested a close link between abusive families and individual violent behaviours. Abusive families are usually spawning grounds for violence. Consequently children who were brought up in such environments may

grow up to unleash terror on the larger society. Thus, serial killers, rapists, hired assassins, bank robbers sometimes belong to this category of individuals.

Lastly, wife abuse constitutes a gross violation of women's rights. It hinders women's participation in public life (Population Reports Vol XXVII No 4 1999). It also undermines the economic well being of societies. It reduces women's productivity and drives up costs, especially medical care costs (Population Reports, op cit). It hinders a country's economic development as abusive women cannot fully participate in the labour market. Days of absenteeism due to injuries, anxieties at work at the thought of returning to abusive homes will prevent full participation of abused women in the labour force.

### **Discussion**

It is rather encouraging that, attempts to draw attention to the problem of violence against women as a serious social problem have ceased to be lonely voices in the wilderness. This is attested to by series of international conventions and local legislations which now make wife battery a criminal offence. For example, the United Nations General Assembly passed the declaration of the Elimination of Violence against Women in 1993 (Population Reports XXVII 1999:5). This was done through Resolution 48/104(444). Also in 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women, which took place in Beijing, China, advocated ending gender violence as a priority. In 1994 the Commission on Human Rights appointed the first special Rapporteur on violence against women and empowered her to investigate cases of abuse of human rights (Population Reports, op cit). These campaigns were designed to draw attention to the issue of violence against women. Finally, in 1999, the United Nations Population Fund declared violence against women a public health problem.

Efforts have already been noticed at individual national levels. In 2000, a non government organization (NGO), Global Rights Alternative reported that a Nigerian envoy in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was recalled by the Nigerian President for maltreating his wife. It was reported by Agbambu (2000:6) that the Minister of Women Affairs and women had either been killed or brutalized by their partners.

Also in the *Nigerian Tribune* of November, 29<sup>th</sup> 2002, it was reported that the Ondo State House of Assembly (in Nigeria) passed the Bill of Harmful Traditional Practices affecting the health of women and children. It prescribed various penalties for wife beating and child abuse.

Unfortunately, despite the international conventions and local legislation that attempt to fight the scourge of wife abuse, Amos (2001:29) maintains that many women still lack access to information.

As mentioned earlier, contradictions exist in how women are perceived as mothers, sisters or wives. Different roles generate diverse societal reactions and treatment of women. This is reflected when one examines some ethnographic materials (songs, proverbs, aphorisms and so on). Among the Yoruba of the Southerwestern Nigeria, for example, a woman is looked down upon as a wife. Yet, as a mother or a sister, she is extolled and idolized. As a woman, or more appropriately, a wife the following proverbs reflect negative imageries:

Women as wives – are seen negatively

Obirin o se finu han

(Women cannot be trusted)

Obirin o moore

(Women are ingrates)

Bi mo laya hi o lewa ma ghe sile tori omo  
(If my wife is ugly, I will keep her because of her children)  
Women as Mothers are seen negatively  
Orisa hi iya kosi  
(There is no deity like mother)  
She is the only one worthy of adoration (Oluwole, 1997)  
Iya ni wura baba ni digi  
(Mother is gold, father is just a looking glass)

According to Izuegbu (1987) the Ibos of South-Eastern Nigeria also have "sweet" words for mothers and daughters.

Nnebuisi  
(Mother is first)  
Nneka                      Nneamaka  
(Mother is more)      (Mother is so sweet)  
Women as daughters are seen positively  
Ada  
(First daughter, A priceless jewel)  
Ada ju nli o boa  
(Should the first daughter refuse her super no one else will eat)

According to Izuegbu, the Ibos also assert, that, "Di bu ogo" (A husband is a woman's glory). In the late 1970s, a very popular "highlife" song titled. "sweet mother" topped the charts for a long time. Whenever the record was played, people sang the song with so much gusto and emotion. These contradictory perceptions of women as mothers daughters and wives respectively also means that the same man who will probably not tolerate any physical attacks on his mother by his father, or, on his daughter by her husband, will not hesitate to visit the same violence on his own wife if he considers it "necessary" as a way of "correcting" her.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to survey the incidence of wife abuse in Africa as one of those practices (both traditional and reconfigured through the colonial and postcolonial periods) which have conspired to put women at a disadvantage in a marital relationship. Unfortunately and ironically, women have been willing tools in advocating those cultural practices that subjugate them. These they do as major agents of socialization. For some men, according to Igbokwe (2002:35) the desire to preserve tradition is double matched with the desire to continue to enjoy unlimited practices and services of a culture that subdues women and girls. She asserts,

“As often as it pleases them they vociferously denounce the various conventions that promote women's equality with men as challenging the foundations of social and moral relations in Africa”.

According to Igbokwe (2002:35) the overwhelming importance attached to compliance to cultural norms and prescriptions have manifested in gender based violence where brave women and girls daring to challenge the culture have been victims, leading to loss of life of women and even the violators themselves. Igbokwe queries,

“What do you call a tradition that encourages the dispossession of the possessions that she had painstakingly amassed with her spouse? What about a tradition that adulates the male child and forces a woman who has probably had about six or seven girls to continue to seek after the all important male child? These she does even at the detriment of her health, otherwise she may face the consequences of losing her marriage. What do you call a culture that also measures a woman's self importance only by virtue of marriage and ability to have children?”

To the above, this writer would like to add: What do you call a culture which idolizes "Mothers and daughters but vilifies wives?" Igbokwe asserts that both the oppressor and the oppressed are trapped in a vicious static situation of inhibited growth and torment.

For the development agenda not to remain skewed, incomplete and unable to produce the desired results, men and women must build a democratic society founded on the principles of justice, equality and fairness (Igbokwe 2002). This will mean the elimination of those harmful cultural practices. It should be noted that recently the Center for Gender Studies at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife undertook a country-wide survey on those cultural practices which are harmful to women. For more effective ways of controlling or preventing wife battery some of the recommendations below are necessary.

### **Recommendations**

The present disparity in education between boys and girls in many African countries must be discouraged. At present, more boys than girls are educated. When women are educated, they stand better chances of being aware of and asserting their rights. It is also true that an educated woman who can assert her rights will find it easier to leave an abusive situation, because she can exist independently without being her husband's appendage.

It is necessary to affect reforms in many African countries, which will address the problem of wife battery. This crime must be excluded from the general crime category of assault and battery. Rather, wife battery should constitute a separate offence category by itself.

The police must be trained to effectively manage cases involving family violence. The laws must be changed to encourage the police to desist from treating family violence, especially wife abuse as a private family affair. Wife abuse cases must attract legal, sanctions.

Nurses, doctors and allied medical personnel must learn how to distinguish traumas that originated from domestic violence from those that occur by accident. For example, cases of puffy eyes, black eyes, broken jaws, tooth loss and so on must be critically probed to ensure that they were not brought about by partner victimization. Such cases, if finally detected must be referred to appropriate quarters; police, counseling agencies and so on.

African countries must be reminded again and again about those Charters that address the rights of women. Incidentally, majority of African countries are signatories to these Charters which emphasize equality of human beings. Examples of such Charters are: the 1948 Universal Declaration of Rights, the Beijing Conference 1996, which enjoined governments to enforce legislations against domestic violence (paragraphs 113- 131) so also did the Nairobi Conference of 1985, just to mention a few.

In Africa, scholars must coordinate and intensify research efforts and exchange information, to raise the problem of wife battery to the status of a major social problem. Wife battery jeopardizes the health, the unity and the very survival of the family. This situation continues to threaten and undermine the foundation of the society; the phenomenon can only continue to be ignored to the society's peril.

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