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'Some Women Are Stubborn': Power, Violence against Women and the Challenges of Religion

Although many well-meaning scholars, activists and religious leaders are comfortable with the psychological model of explanation of the abuse of women, violence against women is actually an inevitable consequence of the unequal relations of power between men and women in many societies. This paper posits that the insistence that women be subordinate to men, as prescribed by Christianity and Islam, and the seeming intolerance of violence against women by the two dominant religions in Nigeria throw up a basic contradiction, given the preservative nature of power. This position is largely informed by the analyses of data collected from semi-literate and highly literate women, highly literate men, and religious leaders through open-ended and lengthy questionnaires and in-depth interviews during fieldwork in the second half of 2004 in two state capitals, Lokoja in Kogi State, and Ibadan in Oyo State.

The interface of power and violence

Paulo Freire (1993), Michel Foucault (1980) and bell hooks (1984) offer illuminating views on the relationship between power and violence. According to hooks, 'the Western philosophical notion of hierarchical rule and coercive authority is ... the root cause of violence against women, of adult violence against children, of all violence between those who dominate and those who are dominated' (1984: 118). Foucault provides a deep and broad view of power. He alerts us to the fact that individuals see power in terms of state apparatuses alone, and individuals also believe that they do not exercise power, 'others' do (Mejiuni and

Obilade 2004: 240). Foucault argued that power is 'present in the smallest, apparently most inconsequential human interactions' (Brookfield 2001: 7). This power is exercised through the body, sexuality, family, kinship, knowledge, technology, etc. For Foucault, resistance to power is to be found at the point where power relations are exercised: 'there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight (because every power relationship implies... a strategy of struggle' (Brookfield 2001: 17).

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With respect to the preservative nature of power, hooks observes that any group in power is likely to use coercive authority to maintain itself if challenged. It is therefore not surprising that when women put up resistance to their oppression and domination by men, men visit violence on them to maintain their dominant position. In this respect, Freire states that 'violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons – not by those who are oppressed, exploited and unrecognized' (1993: 55). To maintain dominance over others, the victims of violence themselves, having imbibed the view that the powerful need to maintain their authority over the powerless through coercion, also mete out violence to others even less powerful.

Violence becomes a habit when the powerless do not resist violence in a produc-

tive way. Though macabre, the powerful then enjoy meting out violence to the powerless, especially where the environment is conducive; for instance, where the culture of silence and the culture of impunity are pervasive. This explains why men hit, rape, sexually harass and exploit women who are 'gentle', 'meek', 'good', and 'feminine', but who are socially, economically, culturally and politically less powerful than they are. This is also the reason men mete out violence to babies, children and mentally-retarded persons who trust them and/or do not have the capacity to object to their violation.

Unfortunately, violence against women as a means of preserving men's power and as a habit continues to thrive in the context of a distorted view of God and his will, and an unfair and inequitable insistence on adherence to what we have been told are God's injunctions. According to Freire (1993: 61), 'under the sway of magic and myth, the oppressed see their suffering as the will of God', adding 'as if God were the creator of this "organised disorder"'.

For lack of space, we reproduce the experiences of a few women, and the advice they give or would give to victims of violence. Also, we look at the reasons some men gave for their ability to hit women. Some of the responses throw light on the observations made thus far, and inform the paragraphs that follow.

Women's experience of violence, men's capacity to exhibit violence and advice on violence

In the study mentioned above, twenty-three out of eighty-six literate women in formal work or students, and forty out of

ninety-three semi-literate women in the informal economy or apprenticed, indicated that they had been victims of violence (rape, battery and sexual harassment) or they knew somebody who had experienced such violence.

Literate women

I have been beaten, and I know several women who have experienced all stated above. I did not do anything. People's response was that of apathy. They believed it was normal for a stubborn woman to be beaten by her husband or boyfriend, and a victim of rape and sexual harassment asked for it by the way she dressed, spoke or behaved. My advice is that women should run for their lives and seek spiritual and medical cleansing. Never report to the police as this would lead to more degradation and harassment. If a man hits a woman, then he can kill her one day, so the best solution is to give him a wide berth. Reporting to the police would only mean opening up wounds that may have healed, since most times the sympathy is with the accused not the victim. – Aanwo.

Yes, I've been beaten and sexually harassed. I braced up to the challenge. I strengthened my resolve that I am an individual with equal rights and that I would not be a weakling. For other people, it was like it is the usual thing to be beaten or sexually harassed and that there's nothing you can do about it. Their attitude was ambivalent - mixed feelings, it was neither positive nor negative 'cos they felt that the society would prefer that abused women keep their silence. Her advice was to 'assess whether you are at fault in the situation. If beaten and you don't deserve it, be bold and organize a retaliation, if sexually harassed and you were decently dressed rebuff the advance and prove your worth in a decent manner' – Itunu.

Illiterate/semi-literate women

I've been beaten and I've heard of a rape victim too. When my husband raised his fist and it pained me, I retaliated even though I was not as powerful as he was. Concerning beating, women should be patient because of their children. As for rape, I can't take it, in fact I will tell the victim to report to the authority immediately.

This is because the rape victim will not be able to face the world because of the stigma'. – Rukayat.

I have never experienced it because I am a Christian, but I've come across women who have been beaten by their husbands. I advised that they submit to their husbands as the Bible has ordained it. If a woman knows what can cause quarrel between her and the husband, she should not do it and if she has made any mistake, she should try and rectify it, even if she has to beg the husband. Since the husband is the head of the house, she has to submit herself. – Tade.

From available data, on aggregate, there was no real difference in the quality of advice given by highly literate and semi-literate women as to how female victims of violence should respond. However, more semi-literate women tended to blame women for their experience of violence, especially battery. They indicated that victims of battery were stubborn, not submissive, and lacked good character.

Literate men

Sixteen out of sixty-one literate men said they could beat a woman or would probably beat a woman. They said they would do so for the following reasons: 'if extremely provoked and that is an acceptable defence in law'; five per cent of the time because of the presidential role of man in the house and to 'check her excesses, but it will be light beating'; 'yes if the situation demands it, no if she happens to be my wife'; 'if extremely provoked. This will create fear in her to avoid confrontation'; 'it all depends on the attitude or behaviour of the woman. There are nagging women and the only language that they understand is being beaten'; 'if a woman attacks me first', and 'if she misbehaves like being involved in extra-marital affairs'.

Religious leaders on violence against women

Almost all religious leaders, through references to their sacred texts, indicated that the Almighty opposes rape and battery. However, the Muslim female religious leader in Ibadan enjoined women to emulate the example of Hadijat, the first wife of the Holy Prophet Mohammed, who still submitted to her husband despite her wealth. The Christian female leader in Ibadan said: 'The

beauty of a woman is actually in submission... female achievers actually forget that the beauty of their achievement is having a cover over their heads, and the cover is their husbands. The beauty of a woman is submitting to the authority of a husband even if the authority is a dummy'. Male Muslim religious leaders in Lokoja and the female Muslim leader in Ibadan emphasised the need for women to dress properly as the Holy Prophet had decreed, so as not to attract and distract men.

The character of women and women's experience of violence

In this study, many women had identified character as defining who they are and what they believe. No doubt the reasons women and men believe that women experience violence are implicit in the type of advice that they had given or would give to victims and potential victims of violence respectively, their reactions to others' experience of violence, and why they could possibly mete out violence.

In the pre-Islamic, pre-Christian and pre-colonial Yoruba thought system, character ('iwa') was gender-neutral (Fafunwa 1974: 21), but today, given the influence of the new religions and colonialism, women are expected to bear the burden of good character and beauty of character. But the same religions in which some women and men rooted their beliefs about what women's character ought to be (subordinate/submissive to men) have been shown by both literate men and many religious leaders in this study as being intolerant of violence towards women. The point is that if a religion prescribes the subordination of women to men, and religious leaders preach this at every available opportunity, and followers believe it, violence, whether rape or battery, then becomes the means to ensure that women abide by the injunction. We should not forget that it is the dominant voice in our society, the voice that concedes many privileges to men, that determines what it means for women to be submissive to men.

Furthermore, our data showed that men perceived women as weaker vessels, fragile, not courageous, not bold, caregivers, not mentally and emotionally stable, and they considered that women are flexible and ought to be flexible. Given this view of women, it is expected, as the sacred texts prescribe, that women be subject to men who are the breadwinners, are bold, courageous, aggressive, etc.

When women question men's views and actions, and taken-for-granted positions; when they confront men who attempt to treat them like mules; when they show themselves as courageous; when they show that they are inflexible and are not sexual objects; they are deemed to be stubborn and not submissive. According to this thinking, a good woman, that is, a woman with 'character' is the one who is meek and flexible, and a bad woman is the one who is inflexible, perhaps outspoken, and defends her interests vigorously. Some of the women and men in this study believed that battery is a 'natural' consequence of stubbornness and non-submissiveness. A respondent said he could hit a woman to establish the presidential role of a man in the house and to check the woman's excesses. Another said he could hit a woman if extremely provoked, to teach her to avoid confrontation.

We take the example of a victim of battery, Aanwo, a literate female respondent. She had articulated the role of women in the private sphere of life in terms of equality with men. She had also indicated that people thought it was normal for a man to hit a stubborn woman. The truth in Nigeria today is that, amidst plenty of religiosity, women who articulate views that reflect fairness and equality with men, especially in marriage, are deemed to be stubborn and not submissive. We also note that about half of the semi-literate women and at least one literate woman said women who had been hit by their husbands were stubborn, they were not submissive, and they had bad character. This is rather unfortunate, for what this means is that some women believe that a person in 'authority' or a position of power has the right to use force to maintain that authority.

Thus, the insistence that women should be submissive to men sets the stage for men to heap violence on women, and it results in violence against women. Just the same way that an insistence that children obey parents unquestioningly,

for example, results in both women and men inflicting violence on children.

Paradoxically, a woman or a girl who has 'character', that is, a girl who is meek, gentle, and respects elders and persons in positions of 'authority', is easy prey for (habitual) sexual abusers. When these totally corrupt and unkind men abuses girls and women whom society has taught to be meek, gentle, respectful and attractive, the same society then blames the victims for being badly behaved; dressing badly and wildly; for walking around at night; not comporting themselves well; and not praying hard enough. The truth is that women who have been taught to be meek and gentle and 'good' cannot defend themselves vigorously against rape and sexual harassment while the abuse is going on, and after the experience, they are unable to talk about it because of the fear that they will be condemned as bad.

Conversely, women who have shown that they are inflexible, courageous, not sexual objects and not subordinate to men, have been victims of rape and sexual harassment because men (who are habitual sexual abusers; who lack discipline; who are aware of the pervasive culture of impunity, and the negative attitude towards rape victims and women who are not submissive in our society), want to put women in 'their place'. In cases like these, persons who would usually blame women for everything would say the rape victim had a bad attitude towards men and was haughty – otherwise she would have been able to handle the situation better.

Conclusion

Although the opposition of religious leaders to violence against women and the fact that some literate men opposed violence against women on the basis of their religious beliefs gives hope, and represents a possibility, there is a need to urge religious leaders to privilege the transformative aspects of their religions. We note for instance that contrary to the

Qur'anic injunction that places the burden of maintaining chastity on both Muslim men and women, as it requires that men and women lower their gaze, adherents of the religion (and Christians as well) make a big issue of women's 'bad' and 'wild' dressing. They then emphasise the injunction that says women should cover up their bodies. Also, instead of emphasising the biblical injunction that urges men to love their wives as Christ loves the Church, Christians emphasise the injunction that urges women to submit to their husbands.

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