

Sexual Violence and the Status of Women in Nigeria: A Counsellor's Insight and Reflections on Nollywood Film, *Dry* (2015)

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Abstract

Often than not, gender debates accentuate the vulnerability of the female person and dovetail into agitations for her liberation from all forms of violence and oppression that hamper her efforts towards attaining gender equality. Disappointedly, much attention is not focused on gender mainstreaming for the peaceful coexistence of both the male and the female. Consequently, the female is subjected to recurring decimals of denigrating incidences of abduction, rape, sexual exploitation, sexual harassment and other hideous atrocities that violate her rights as human. It is on this note that this work examines the multiplicities of sexual violence that female humans experience in Nigeria so as to determine the status of women in Nigeria. This paper goes a step further to reflect on Nollywood film, *Dry* in tune with the discourse on sexual violence. This study adopts the Social Learning Theory while Feminism and Gender Mainstreaming constitute the conceptual framework for this study. The objectives of this study are: i) to determine if the experiences of sexual violence classify the female person as endangered species, ii) to ascertain if Nigerian women freely exercise their human rights, and iii) to document the various shades of sexual violence experienced by females in Nigeria. The methodology for the study is qualitative in its examination of the nature of sexual violence in Nigeria in the film under study. Findings have shown that sexual violence is gradually becoming a regular occurrence in Nigeria where young girls and children experience individual rape, gang rape, incest, and sexual harassment. The study recommends gender workshops that accommodate males and females to teach the concepts of inclusiveness, co-existence and collaborative exercises to minimize sexual violence.

Background to the Study

Sexual violence is forceful and often, illegal access to the private sector of a weaker and vulnerable person by someone or group of persons stronger. Sexual violence is usually meant to attend to sexual gratification or untamed sexual desire. Sexual violence is an instrument of negative power demonstration and intimidation against the female person. Absence of consent and mutual agreement often characterize sexual violence. It involves the use of brutal force and threats in order to achieve sexual relationship with a non-consenting other. Sexual violence, more often than not, is gender-based violence, which thrives on socially created inequality among male and female genders, and the subjugation of the female person. Rape and Incest are often the loudest and, seemingly, ugliest of the list that make up acts and actions that fall under the category of sexual violence. Other acts of sexual violence include sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, indecent assault, etc. It is estimated that “eight out of ten sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the victim” (www.rainn.org).

Statement of the problem

In a society which has a festering notoriety of women denigration and intimidation, the self-worth is based upon the interpretation advanced by the all-powerful and overbearing male population, as is the case with any typical Machiavellian setting. The status of women in such a situation leaves much to be humanly desirable. Meanwhile, it seems contrary to natural conventions to see male and female who are created equal living with such abysmal disparity and disparagement that is hard to believe is possible in a modern society. For example, the incessant abductions and sexual molestation of teenage schoolgirls across the country, and the scandalous arrest and rape of prostitutes in the raid of nightclubs by law enforcement agents in Abuja, Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria, are tacit indicators of the precarious status of women and girls in Nigeria.

Also, the subject of women right has not gained its deserving central place despite the activities of women-centred organizations and agencies on human right issues. There is, therefore, the overwhelming need to fill the gap created by inequality existing between the males and females which makes society to tip out of balance, and could this study not be the best thing to do in order to close the unhealthy gender gap?

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to find out the real-time status of women in Nigeria in the face of alarming sexual violence perpetrated against the female person to the denigration of her self-worth as a creature with dignity, and which often go without (adequate) punishment by the existing laws and law officers.

In order to achieve this aim, the set objectives are to:

- i) Determine if the experiences of sexual violence classify the female person as endangered species.
- ii) Ascertain if Nigerian women freely exercise their human rights.
- iii) Document the various shades of sexual violence experienced by females in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Social Learning Theory, propounded by Albert Bandura (1972). Social Learning Theory proposes that people learn through observation, imitation and modeling after other people's behavior. According to Flynn (2013), Social Learning Theory suggests that instrumental violence can be learned vicariously when rewarding consequences are observed to be associated with the aggressive behavior of others, as this provides incentive to engage in similar behavior (as cited in Abua, 2019, p.7). This submission gives credence to the notion that acts like sexual violence can be acquired through imitation and observation. The aspect of social learning theory relevant to this study is instrumental violence which is aimed at achieving a certain goal such as rape which intent is the objectification of the female person and the creation of an environment of intimidation and superiority over her. This situation places femininity in a precarious situation as Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949) opined that for one to be a woman, she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity.

Conceptual Framework

Feminism is a concept that is based on various women's struggles put in place to strike a balance in the unwholesome gender disparity. Many feminist movements have shown course of action at different cultures and dispensations – all to advance the struggle for equal rights of the sexes and gender in the socio-political milieu. In my view, feminism is simply an ideology, a concept, a movement and belief aimed at achieving equality for both male and female members of the society. It sets the platform for women to resist anything that opposes their access to equality of rights, privileges and opportunities as their male counterparts. Feminism has become necessary for this study since sexual violence, which is often perpetrated on the female by the male has become a tool for denigrating women and a flagrant discrimination against her human rights. Sexual violence is an affront on the tenets of African feminism which drives for the cooperation and peaceful coexistence between both male and female by involving women in decision-making processes. This involvement of women is what Nnaemeka (1988) terms as “power sharing and complementarity;” and this is the kind of feminism that suitable for the African society (God'spresence, 2013, p. 63).

Gender Mainstreaming in this context includes promulgation of policies that accommodate both male and female, and also applies to the lives they live in the domestic space. The concept of gender mainstreaming relates to all spheres of society including the home. Parenting of the male and female as equal humans who deserve equal treatment and access to equal opportunities is a task that parents must take up toward curbing gender inequalities. There is need for a re-organization and reordering of our family structures and government policies to accommodate the peculiarities of both male and female gender with the aim of achieving equality and cooperation for the peaceful existence of same. Thus 'gender mainstreaming mean integrating a gender equality perspective at all stages and levels of policies, programmes and projects. Women and men have different needs and living conditions and circumstances, including unequal access to and control over power, resources, human rights and institutions, including the

justice system (Council of Europe, 2020, n.p). Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society in the decision-making process and access to power are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace (A Communique from the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1994).

Sexual Violence: Determining the Status of Women in Nigeria

This study on sexual violence has become paramount in determining the status of women in Nigeria in alliance with Global Gender Gap Report which noted that Nigeria ranks just slightly above average in the effort to achieve gender equality on the global gender gap ranking from 2006 to 2018 (Okeke, 2019, p. 5). Similarly, Amnesty International has revealed that on a daily basis, women are beaten and ill-treated for supposed transgressions, raped and even murdered by their family (Osaat, 2014, p. 8), thus the humiliation, powerlessness and violence women are subjected to through rape and sexual harassment call for a re-examination of the place of gender mainstreaming in the Nigerian society. It has become necessary to include the males in critical gender discourses such as sexual violence because 'sexual violence affects the lives of all women. Fear of rape shapes women's behavior from girlhood, restricting their movement and limiting their freedom' (Kessleman, McNair & Schniedewind, 2003, 445)

Sexual violation of the female body is a robbery of her dignity, rights, self-esteem, and overall self-worth. It is a betrayal of her trust reposed on the opposite sex either as a partner in a relationship, a trusted male relation, a parent, an acquaintance or a total stranger. Diverse experiences of sexual violence by females in Nigeria are indicators of the status of women in Nigeria. For example, in 2019, it was reported that the Nigerian Police raped prostitutes that were arrested in Abuja, FCT on the 27th of April of 2019. Reporting on the incidence for CNN, Bukola Adebayo stated how about 65 women were arrested and some were subjected to horrifying sexual abuse from the police who "demanded bribes in return for some of the women's release. Those who couldn't pay were forced to have sex with the officers" (Adebayo, 2019, p.1). In the same vein, Adelani Adepegba writes on this harrowing experience of these prostitutes adding that "some of the security officers who forcefully had sex with them did not use condom, while a few others reportedly used pure water sachet during the sexual assault in place of condom" (Adepegba, 2019, n.p). Shockingly, Ada Akunne, a Nollywood Actress was almost arrested that night for allegedly dressing 'provocatively.' This incidence draws the reaction of Osai Ojigbo, (Nigeria's Director, Amnesty International) who noted that 'a woman now fears to go out in the evening because she can be picked up and labeled a prostitute while shopping or jogging' (Adebayo, 2019, p.1). This particular scenario graphically illustrates the status of women in Nigeria: Being a woman is a risk. It is no longer safe to be out late at night.

The alarming rate of sexual violence in Nigeria has prompted Dr. Kemi Da-ibru, founder of Women, At Risk International Foundation (WARIF) to state that it destroys the future of the female. According to Ayodeji Ake, the non-governmental organization, WARIF,

has condemned the high incidence of sexual assault, rape, and human trafficking among young girls and women across Nigeria, disclosing that the country records 10,000 of the menace daily (Ake, 2017, n.p.). Women At Risk International foundation (WARIF) also noted that the prevalence of sexual abuse in Africa is highest, accounting for about 34.4%, and that as of 2004, sixty per cent of children involved in child trafficking from Africa to Europe were Nigerians (WARIF, 2020, n.p.). The report also shows that the percentage of women in Nigeria who experience domestic violence of one form or the other is placed at 30% from 2012 to 2013. The report also stated that in 2014, a National Survey that was carried out on violence against children in Nigeria had the following findings: One in four females reported experiencing sexual violence in childhood with approximately 70% reporting more than one incident of sexual violence. In the same study, it was found that 24.8% of females aged 18 to 24 experienced sexual abuse prior to age 18 of which 5.0% sought help, with only 3.5% receiving any services (WARIF, 2020, n.p.). From these findings, it is important to state categorically that sexual violence in Nigeria spans across ages and class divides.

Rape and Incest as Examples of Acts of Sexual Violence: A Counsellor's Insight

Rape and incest are instruments of subordination and propaganda against the vulnerability of the female persons. This study will give special highlights on rape and incest as examples of acts of sexual violence which hurts women dignity and psychological well-being. Mutual consent in human relationship is one vital factor that distinguishes humans from base and instinctual primates and other animals. The issue of rape and incest among humans is a dissenting decimal that has come to dismally characterize modern sexuality culture. It is an incongruent equation to see man's social advancement running side by side with barbaric practices such as rape and incest which ought to characterize lawless, stone age and backward bestial civilization. Rape and incest have been used by the male gender as lethal instruments of propaganda in their wild game of women subordination.

Rape is the act of forceful sexual encounter with someone without obtaining the person's consent: it usually adopts instrumentality of violence. Incest is a sexual relationship between people who have close familial relationship. More often than not, both rape and incest take place violently, since a more powerful or stronger person unleashes himself or herself on vulnerable and less powerful other person only to satisfy his sexual appetite. There are cases whereby rape and incest are committed in a particular or single sexual escapade. Sally Wehmeier, Colin McIntosh & Joanna Turnbull (editors) Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English; Oxford: Oxford University Press) (2006) defined rape as 'the crime of forcing somebody to have sex with you, especially using violence (p. 1202). The same dictionary described incest as 'sexual activity between two people who are very closely related in a family, for example, a brother and sister, or a father and daughter (p.753).

Incest is seen as a taboo in many ancient civilizations. This historic preclusion has been passed down to some modern societies. Over time, though, the tenacity of the laws

granting such sexual relationship as offensive, illegal and punishable have been watered down. Incestuous relationship has some myth attached to it. For instance, it is widely conceived that a child resulting from such relationship would have some congenital health issue as a result of inbreeding, coupled with the issue of hurting family trust. In many cases, experts warn that incest destroys families and hurts people's ability to trust others and form healthy relationships. So, while consensual incest does exist, "legalizing it would be too risky because it may incentivize it," says Dr. Karin Meiselman, a psychologist who specializes in treating incest cases. We also have the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act – which is a federal law that has only been domesticated in a few states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, namely Anambra State, Ebonyi State and Oyo State, etc. Rape, incest, and other forms of sexual assaults or sexual violence are abysmal crimes against the sexuality autonomy, privacy rights, freedom of choice, self-expression and dignity of the victim.

On the other hand, rape is universally adjudged inhuman, because of the violence involved, and the non-consensual pattern of the act which, according to the dictates of legal system of most civilized nations of the world, classify rape as a criminal act. Nigeria's Inspector General of Police, Kayode Adeolu Egbetokun (PhD) expresses his displeasure at the issue of rape in these words: "We must educate the populace about consent, respect, and healthy relationship. By promoting a culture of respect, dignity, and equality, we can prevent instances of rape and defilement from occurring. Ending rape and defilement requires concerted effort from all sectors of society. It requires us to speak out against injustice, support and protect survivors, and work towards a future where every individual is free from the threat of sexual harassment and violence. Together we can create a world where rape and defilement are curbed, and our women and child girls and boys can live their lives free from fear, intimidation, and harassment" (Ireporteronline, March 17, 2024)

Case studies of sexual violence (Rape, Indecent Assault and Incest) in Nigeria

i) Vera Uwaila Omozuwa, a 22-year-old, 100 level microbiology student of the university of Benin died after she was brutally raped while studying inside a church in Benin, Edo state, South-South of Nigeria. In 2020, during the covid-19 pandemic, Vera found solace in her church, a parish of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, close to her house, at Ikpoba Hill, Benin City where she was studying regularly. Unfortunately, she met her untimely death when she was gang-raped and murdered in the church. Reporting for CNN, Bukola Adebayo noted that Vera "was found dead, lying half-naked in a pool of blood at the church where she had been a member of the church choir for many years" (Adebayo, 2020 n.p.). Although, the culprits deny raping her, autopsy/forensic indications point to her being raped. Sadly, the report stated that this horrifying occurrence was referred to as "inhumane sexual assault rather than rape and that Osai Ojigho, Director, Amnesty International Nigeria observed that "rape is considered a stigma in most Nigerian families" hence it is not called as such, thus "it shows how police are unwilling to even investigate rape cases and will rather probe murder allegations. Both are heinous crimes, and none should be dismissed for the other" (Adebayo, 2020)

Vera's case is a pointer to the precarious status of women in Nigeria which as observed by Ojigho that “no matter where you are in Nigeria, in the north or south, in the city or rural, Christian or Muslim, every woman and girl is at risk of rape. Nowhere is safe or immune to this violent crime against women” (Adebayo, 2020)

ii) Comfort Uche-Ume, a female student in JSS3 at Isieke Community Secondary School, in Abia State, who had just finished writing her Junior West African Examination was a victim of a 3-man squad gang rape perpetrated by Ndubuisi Nwogu, Chinaza Ufomadu and Francis Onwoboro on Friday, 4th July, 2015. Bereft of any requisite consolation from her mother who felt that her rape resulted from her refusal to pay heed to her advice not to walk alone at night, she hung herself on a guava tree that was beside their house on Tuesday 7th July. This sad development caused the rapists to be declared wanted by the Umuahia Police Command (Reporter@Naijapals.com, Nigerpals Network, Saturday, 11th July, 2015)

iii) At Imiringi, Bayelsa state, 12-year-old Queen, an SSI student was raped severally by her father, Bamekpa, which resulted to pregnancy and crude abortion that altered her body system and resulted to the cessation of her menses. This incestuous rape led to his arrest and detention at Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the state police command. Queen who called for the arrest and imprisonment of her father narrated that her father would beat and forcefully rape her if she refused his advances and would threaten to kill her if she told anybody. This incident, which resulted to her pregnancy, caused her stepmother to quit the marriage. Queen thus calls for the arrest and prosecution of her father. However, another victim of Bamekpa's sexual escapade, a 27-year old Joy, who claimed she was serially raped by him between ages six and seven also pleaded with the police to prosecute the matter diligently (Odiegwu, 2016, *The Nation*).

iv) Odita Sunday reports in the *Guardian Newspaper* of Thursday 12, 2019 about a step-father, Yarima Yakubu, who, together with five other men, gang-raped a 9-year old girl who is a Primary 2 pupil of Bindigari Primary School in Damaturu, Yobe State. This unfortunate incidence happened seven years after the victim lost her biological father to death. The mother of the 9-year old victim reported that her daughter later came down with HIV positive as a result of the rape, and that she could no longer continue with her schooling (Sunday, 2019, p. 12).

v) In 2019, the Vice Chancellor of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University (COOU), Prof. Greg Nwakoby set up a five-man panel to investigate allegations of sex-for-grade racketeering going on in the University orchestrated by current and ex-female students of the Institution who had fingered six male lecturers in different departments as culpable (*The Guardian*, 2019, p. 48). Little wonder that the University of Port Harcourt launched a Sexual Harassment Policy on 29th October, 2019 to checkmate the excesses of randy lecturers who compel female students to give sex in exchange for higher grades. In his opening remark, the Chairman, Professor Don M. Baridam, the 6th Vice Chancellor of the University noted that 'we are discussing sexual harassment on the campus of

Nigerian Universities today, because of the systemic failure of a few morally depraved lecturers and administrators in our midst, who only see women as mere sex objects suitable only for their sadistic gratification (Sexual Harassment Policy, 2019, p. 11).

Analysis of the Film *Dry* (2015, Stephanie Linus)

Dry tells the story of child marriage where a thirteen-year-old female, Halima (Zubaida Ibrahim Fagge) is married off to a sixty-year-old man, Sani (Tijani Faraga). This is typical of a poor and uneducated Northern Nigerian family where child marriage is prevalent. Her old husband subjects her to sexual violence as he constantly rapes her. Her pregnancy and delivery result to Vesicovaginal Fistula (VVF) bringing about her abandonment by her husband and stigmatization and discrimination by the society. Conversely, upon her visit to Nigeria, Dr Zara Robinson (Stephanie Okereke), a young Nigerian female, finds Halima in this precarious state and made all efforts to save her. Dr Zara who also suffered trafficking, sexual violation and abuse (rape) as a child was fortunate to have some interventions through adoption by a British physician who took her abroad (United Kingdom) and got trained as a gynecologist. However, the traumatic experience of abuse, trafficking and rape would for a long time traumatize Dr Zara and prevent her from returning to Nigeria, her homeland as the bitter experience led to her being infected with obstetric fistula resulting to her abandonment until she was adopted. This is a disease that is prevalent in the Northern part of Nigeria as evident in the film. However, circumstances forced her to return to Nigeria upon learning about the failing health status of her mother and the existence of her child from the traumatic rape escapades. Her return to the Northern Nigeria brings about the realization of the prevalence of the obstetric fistula amongst young women (resulting from early child birth) which her own daughter, Halima dies from. This painful loss birthed a school and hospital in Katsina in honour of her late daughter, Halima, to cater for the education and healthcare of women.

This film paints a graphic picture of the horrific experiences of young northern women. Obviously, not every woman is lucky like Zara, while some suffer the fate of Halima who dies; others merely struggle to live with the disease. This painful experience, resulting from sexual violence on the female gender jeopardizes the feminist agenda towards attain gender equality. In line with the concepts of feminism and gender mainstreaming, this film graphically exemplifies the dilemma of females in a patriarchal society where their rights and privileges are lacking in terms of decision making on sexual interests and partners. Thus, government policies on gender mainstreaming need strengthening and monitoring for proper implementations to the benefit of the female as well as the male.

The social learning theory reveals how people can learn through imitations and observations. It is not totally out of place to state that issues of sexual violence are learned from similar occurrences in society. Additionally, the powerful influence of the silver screen (cinema) cannot also be totally ruled out. It is important to note that the film medium plays a dual role of a) mirroring the society to replay what is in existence; b) serves as a tool or medium of influence as it represents and showcases events and

narratives of our daily lives via the moving images that we watch. The social learning theory also reveals rape and incest as instrumental violence aimed at objectifying the women as for male's sexual gratification. Thus, sexual violence serves as an instrument of male superiority and subjugation of the female person/victim. The female, unfortunately, is an endangered species who needs the protection of the state through deliberate policies that lay emphasis on gender mainstreaming and women's human rights.

Findings from this study has shown that females of all ages suffer sexual violence in Nigeria and “whether in the form of rape, domestic violence, or childhood sexual abuse, violence against women represents an abuse of power in a misogynist culture” (Kesselman, McNair & Schniedewind, 2003, pp. 444). It is therefore, of paramount importance that issues regarding the male and female gender should be mainstreamed and given required equal attention so as to improve the status of the Nigerian woman.

According to Ruth Opara (2017), the World health Organization is noted to have reported that more than two million women in sub-Sahara Africa, the Arab region, Latin America, Asia, as well as the Caribbean, live with the obstetric fistula disease; and new cases ranging from fifty to a hundred thousand emerge every year. In her analysis of the film *Dry*, she observed that, the film did not only address the issues of obstetric fistula, but also “contributes to contemporary feminist discourse by addressing issues such as child abuse, child marriage, child trafficking, domestic violence, polygamy, gender inequality, and resistance in Northern Nigeria” (Opara, 2017, p.263). Opara's exhaustive explanation of the subject matters raised by Stephanie Linus in her film *Dry*, succinctly throws light on the precarious status of women in Nigeria with regards to the theme of sexual violence under study. This development raises concern over the status of women in Nigeria as it puts them in a subordinate status because 'rape is a powerful expression of women's subordinate status' (Kesselman, McNair & Schniedewind, 2003, pp. 446).

Conclusion

This study has shown that sexual violence is a multi-dimensional issue which dehumanizes women and frustrates the fight for gender equality. The study has earlier pointed out that sexual violence against women in Nigeria impinges on their fundamental human rights and thereby making them an endangered species. The concepts of feminism and gender mainstreaming were aligned to the discourse on sexual violence and the status of the Nigerian woman to show that the female in Nigeria is an endangered species. The analysis of the film *Dry* is an eye opener to how low the modern society has gone to debase itself through a systemic but brutal denigration of women to the utter disgrace of humanity in general, because an injury to one is an injury to all. Thus, there is an urgent need for the females to be treated as human deserving of their human rights, as their male counterparts. There is therefore an urgent call for the concerns and demands of the female be considered along with the male so as to attain gender equality and be mainstreamed into all socio-cultural deliberations.

The Social learning theory has guided this study to indicate that these acts of sexual violence are not just only learned through imitations and observations but also influenced through stereotypes and repetitions of such acts in films/cinema. It also indicated that the female person suffers instrumental violence as an object of male sexual gratification, intimidation, and denigration of her status, rights and personhood. The study also highlighted that sexual violence against the female members of the society is really on the rise in Nigeria. The paper also pinpointed that gender mainstreaming is a way to go, and advocates for government to promulgate policies which would accommodate both male and female Nigerians on equal terms towards participating in everyday matters of life, including rights and responsibilities. It is hoped that findings from this research will help create awareness on the status of women in Nigeria and spark up conversations on measures to foster peaceful coexistence between males and females in the Nigerian society and create a platform to sensitize women on their rights against sexual violence. The study concludes that sexual violence in its multi-dimensions dehumanizes women and frustrates the fight for gender equality.

Discussion of Findings and Recommendations

Results of the research have shown that sexual violence is progressively becoming a regular occurrence in Nigeria where young girls and children experience rape, gang rape, incest, and sexual harassment on campuses of our tertiary institutions. It is evident that sexual violence is on the increase in Nigeria, largely because perpetrators are not adequately punished to serve as a deterrent to others who would be nursing the same or similar crime, since many learn to involve in acts of sexual violence for self-gratification and with a desire to objectify women.

Also, the narratives on women's right have not been accorded its right of place in the society, in spite of several concerted efforts made by women and feminist organizations on the issue of women rights - which are human rights - especially rights against sexual violence. It is hoped that the findings of this work will help to create awareness on the status of women in Nigeria. It is the interest of this study that more attention be given to discourses on gender mainstreaming so as to address the aggression and violence that emanate from the misconstrued notion about the female person as a repository of sexual gratification.

This paper, therefore, recommends gender workshops that accommodate both male and female persons, especially youths in a singular platform to teach the concepts of inclusiveness, coexistence and collaborative exercises to minimize sexual violence against females and engender interactions and understanding among male and female genders. The paper advocates stringent measures by the Nigerian government on perpetrators of sexual violence, and to strengthen policies on gender mainstreaming to attain gender equality for a peaceful coexistence of both male and female members of our society.

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