

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AS AN OBSTACLE TO DEVELOPMENT IN KENYA

BY: Tom G. Ondicho

Abstract

This paper focuses on domestic violence against women and highlights some of the key areas of analysis in understanding the relationship between violence and development. It is organised around a number of sub-themes, for example, manifestations and causes of violence, as indicators which depict how violence obstructs and hinders women from enjoying long, healthy and creative lives. These sub-themes are analysed within a human centred development approach.

The starting point of the paper is the recognition that men's violence against women is a developmental issue (problem), expressing the basic power relations of patriarchy by maintaining and reproducing male dominance and female subordination. It indicates that by orienting the problem of men's violence on women within a human centred theoretical perspective, we are able to see its contribution to the general development of women, and to understand why, with some crucial exceptions, women have not been full participants and beneficiaries of the development process in Kenya.

Introduction

Domestic violence against women has throughout history been a common feature of all known societies. In almost all countries and cultures women have frequently been victims of abuse by society. They have been battered, sexually abused and psychologically injured by persons with whom they should enjoy

the closest trust in places considered the safest, for example, their homes. Domestic violence is actually a world-wide problem that permeates women's lives, irrespective of their age, socio-economic status, colour, creed and/or place of residence. In essence it cuts across all states of women - rich, poor, educated, uneducated, employed, unemployed, urban, rural - and in all ethnic communities. Domestic violence is, therefore, a serious social, legal, economic and developmental issue.

This paper examines the causes, manifestations and development related consequences of violence against women and their changing roles. It also offers a conceptual framework for analysing the changing conditions under which violence exists and how it affects development.

My case study for this paper is largely derived from, although not necessarily confined to, women in rural areas. Several factors have contributed to an interest in women issues: first, women constitute half, if not more, of Kenya's human population; second, women, particularly those in rural areas, produce over 70% of the food consumed in the country; third, as mothers, women are largely responsible for rearing children and, thus, it can be said that the survival of society depends on their co-operation; fourth, is the ongoing struggle by women to free themselves from the fetters of male oppression and domination; and, finally, the recognition that individualism with which human society prides can, in fact, lead the human family to greater heights of achievement and development if all things were equal and not determined on the basis of gender.

However, in human society certain social structures

have prevented women from having access to land, labour, money, education and property equal to that of men. The structures, let us call them patriarchal, operate primarily at a practical level through the organization of production and distribution of resources, but their main tenets are supported ideologically by patriarchal values which operate at the general level as well as in the women's minds. In this article I shall address the following issues: status and position of women in traditional African societies; the manifestation and causes of the violence; and domestic violence as it affects the participation of women in the development process.

Definitions

Violence against women in the home takes various forms which include physical, sexual and psychological battering. Physical violence consists of pushing, pinching, spitting on, kicking, pulling the victim's hair, hitting, punching, choking, burning, stabbing, throwing acid or boiled water at, or shooting. Physical attack is often accompanied by, or culminates in, sexual violence, in which the victim is forced to have sexual intercourse with her assailant or take part in unwanted sexual activity. Such physical attack may also involve specific attacks on the breasts or genitals. This is equivalent to what is described as rape or sexual harassment in work places.

Mental (psychological) violence includes constant verbal abuse, harassment, excessive possessiveness, and isolation and deprivation of physical or economic resources. Thus, isolating the woman from her family and friends, restricting her access to family income, threatening her with violence, murder, suicide, divorce, intentions of taking another wife, denial of sexual contact resulting in sexual frustration and destruction of her property, are all forms of mental violence.

Domestic violence is defined so as to encompass

violence directed at a woman who is in a state of dependency in a domestic situation. This definition is wide enough to accommodate cohabittees, extended family systems, polygamy and violence occurring after the breaking of a marriage, where the spouses are divorced or separated.

In an abusive relationship, the woman may be subject of all these forms of violence - physical, sexual, mental - or she may be subject to one manifestation only. Whatever form she is subjected to, she runs the risk of physical or psychic harm since this threatens, humiliates, demoralises and lowers the self-esteem of the woman.

Understanding the manifestations of violence

I now discuss the practice of domestic violence and its manifestations in society. In traditional African societies wife-beating was almost the only form of violence that was perpetrated by a man upon a woman. There are arguments put forward to suggest that other forms of violence like rape, sexual harassment and media violence, among others, came with colonialism.

In both traditional patriarchal and matriarchal societies, wife-beating was regarded as a justifiable form of chastisement and tool of discipline. The husband had a right to chastise his wife for a breach of any precept in the husband - wife relationship, for example, for failure in her wifely duties, disorderliness, any suspicion of unfaithfulness, etc. (Ward, 1938). This was supported by prevailing beliefs held by men that women needed a periodic beating to keep them in line. The argument put forward to support this is that men use physical violence to sustain their authority over their wives. The explanation is that if some amount of violence is not inflicted on wives, even wives for whom they have affection, the wives cannot obey and respect their husbands. Force was, therefore, necessary to deter and reform women as far as

possible. The husband was expected to see that his wife obeys him and goes through her roles without question. Any man who became easy with his wife/wives was looked down upon as a weakling by the public, the reason being that other women may strive to follow the bad example of his wife/wives.

In almost all African societies what was considered harsh dealing with a wife/wives was sanctioned by popular norms and values. Excessive beating was in particular abhorred. For example, the husband must not break the skin of the woman in a beating, should not beat a wife while pregnant or kill her. At the same time, there were several fora to redress women being mistreated by their husbands.

Wife beating, albeit excessive/cruel treatment of a wife by a husband, was ground for a separation till the parents had resolved the issue. If no reconciliation was effected or the wife on return to her husband was again excessively beaten, the dispute would be placed before the council of elders.

Among the Agikuyu and among other societies, an offended woman could appeal to the council of women who would then publicly shame the husband causing him to lose his authority and respect in the community (Mass, 1986:66). If the situation became intolerable, the wife could always return to her home. The latter course was one which all parties attempted to avoid, for marriage was not a contract between two individuals, but rather represented the joining together of two families and clans. However, wife beating still continues in modern society. In essence, it has increased in severity and frequency.

According to many people in Kenya, sexual harassment in the African context is not violence and there is even no name for it in African languages. This, however, may be a new term for an old phenomenon and whether there is a name for it or not, the practice is there and indeed it is a form of violence against

women.

Many women experience sexual harassment, usually in their work place, in school and in public places. Sexual harassment traps women into situations where they are completely helpless and desperate. For example, by rejecting a man's sexual advances, the woman may lose all chances of getting a job or getting promoted once in the job. Sexual violence threatens the lives of women and those of their families (*The Tribune*, 1990: 22). Many women experience sexual harassment on a daily basis.

The portrayal of women in the media, is also a form of violence. In Kenya rarely is there an advertisement that is complete without a woman in it. The anatomy of women has been commoditized for monetary gains. The media, thus, depicts women as sex objects or attractions for consumers to purchase certain commodities. This perpetuates the submissive image women have endured. The major issue in media violence is not the presence of women in adverts, but rather, it is the way in which women are portrayed that is demeaning.

The role of the media is crucial for the development of attitudes and values and in the perpetuation of social aspirations. The editorial decisions on what constitutes "news" and how information shall be presented reflects the interests, attitudes and values of the dominant sex - the male. The media is in particular responsible for perpetuating stereo-types of women. Women are represented as housewives or sex objects and commodities. Particularly dangerous and offensive is the increasing use of images of women as the willing objects of male (sexual) violence. Further, women are presented in the media as either less intelligent or incompetent.

The language most often used by some male politicians when referring to women also needs consideration. Some of the derogatory language referring to

women constitutes "news" and, is thus, well covered in both the electronic and print medias and read by all literate ages, girls, boys, women and men in the Kenyan society. This serves to perpetuate the traditional stereotypes about women. For example, when Mulu Mutisya, one of the top ranking politicians called his fellow politician Mr. Johnstone Makau, a total political failure, who "could only be replaced with a woman" or when Shariff Nassir compared deregistered members of KANU to wayward wives (*Sunday Nation*, February 9, 1992), such obnoxious comments are demeaning and seem to ridicule women by equating them with everything bad or negative.

Rape is also a common form of violence perpetrated on women and condoned by the general attitudes. It has been argued that no woman can be raped if she does not want it and that women ask for it by the way they dress or when a woman says no she means yes. I do not agree with the view that rape victims ask for it by the way they dress, talk, walk or smile during a period preceding a rape ordeal. This is an age - old assumption which fails to explain why girls who are as young as 10 years old are raped or how a 70 year old grandmother tempts a rapist.

Many examples exist on the manifestations of violence against women but, in short, female focused violence such as sexual harassment, rape, assault, emotional abuse, economic exploitation, torture and murder confirms the deep rooted, gender inequality in this country. I believe the causes of this violence are rooted in the patriarchal system, structured as hierarchy in which men control and confine wives using physical violence to achieve this end.

Understanding the causes of violence

Theorists argue that men are violent towards women because of some internal aberration, abnormality or defective characteristic. Such characteristics vary, but include alcoholism, a violent upbringing, mental ill-

ness and poor self-control. Others suggest that wives provoke their husbands to beat them (beating is a sign of love and foreplay before sex) or are predisposed to violence, being attracted to violent men and addicted to abuse. Further variations on this analysis based on external causes find the aetiology of wife abuse in stress, frustration and blocked goals, often resulting from unemployment or poverty which, in turn, can depend on ethnicity and social class, or on the psychological effects of violent practices or deprived culture (UN, 1990).

The second analysis suggests that violence is a result of the structure of the society itself. It suggests that violence is neither a private nor a family problem, but rather a reflection of the broad structures of gender and economic inequality. For instance, the gap between the rich and the poor, urban and rural, powerful and powerless, makes violence inherent in society. Thus, women who are at the lowest end of the power continuum always experience the greatest "volume" of violence.

The male dominant Kenyan government has continued to condone violence against women. For example, the state laws so far have been a collaborator and a perpetuator of violence against women at almost all levels. This attitude is best illustrated in the ill-fated Marriage Bill of 1968, which had sought to outlaw wife-beating. The male members of Parliament in opposition argued that wife beating was a normal customary practice and that such legal provision would amount to undue state interference in the domestic affairs of husband and wife.

Police indifference to violence against women in Kenya is well known. The police are always reluctant to arrest the offenders or where they do arrest court procedures take long periods in which the victim continues to receive threats from her husband for further violence unless she withdraws the case or fails to give evidence. The role of the police is much

more ambiguous because of the conflict in cultural attitudes and the law.

Violence against women is an issue today because it is not only an obstacle to women, but it narrows all aspects of their lives by disrupting their lives, undermining their confidence, denying them options to choose what they want, destroys their health, denies them human rights and hinders their full participation in society. Violence affects every part of the lives of women, their well-being and full participation in the development of our country. As long as violence against women exists, there will be no peace, stable environment, or educational progress. Indeed, violence against women is a total contradiction of all principles of human rights, democracy and goals of development.

Conceptualising development

Development is one of the most commonly used, but least understood concepts, in the gender lexicon. The term development means different things to different people. As Friedmann (1980:4) has observed, development is one of the more slippery terms in our tongue. It suggests an evolutionary process, it has positive connotations; in at least some of its meanings it suggests an unfolding from within. Much of the ambiguity over the use and conceptualization of the term development arises because it refers to both a process and a state, with the state of development deriving from the economic, social, and cultural processes which have caused it. At the level of the individual, this state implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being.

Human development can, therefore, be conceptualized as a process of enlarging women's choices. The most critical of these wide-ranging choices is to live a long and healthy life, to be educated and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of

living. Additional choices include political freedom, guaranteed human rights and personal self-respect. Development enables people to have all these choices.

The concept of development on which this section is promised, is going to eloquently focus on aspects of development that better indicate the real development human beings should achieve: nutrition and health services, access to knowledge, secure livelihoods, decent working conditions, security against crime and physical violence, satisfying leisure time, and participation in the economic, cultural and political activities of their communities.

There is a growing body of evidence that women are still only marginal beneficiaries of development and policy goals (Sivard, 1985:5). In spite of this, there are still large gaps in our knowledge of the dimensions and effects of domestic violence against women in the development process itself. Lack of statistical data is one of several problems in seeking to map out the dimensions of the issue. Nonetheless, I shall try to briefly explore some of the salient features to demonstrate how violence as a form of control affects women's participation in the development process.

Human development and violence :A contradiction

The issue of human development and violence can be viewed as being contradictory. This is because in spite of the significant progress made towards human development by the Kenyan government in the last three decades, particularly in relation to life expectancy, education and health, one has to be cautious and look carefully at the breakdown of statistics by gender. To examine these indicators from a cross-cultural gender perspective it is painful: nowhere do females enjoy the same standards as males and, in some areas, gaps are intrinsically gendered to the disadvantage of females. As the U.N. Human Development Report states, "Women fare less well than

men. As children they have less access to education and sometimes to food and health care. As adults they receive less education and training, work longer hours for lower incomes and have few property rights or none" (UN, 1990:31).

Looking at gender and development from a human-centred approach remains difficult because few statistics are disaggregated according to gender. Nevertheless, from the conceptualization of development as "a process of enlarging people's choices", it is clear that much needs to be done to increase women's life options. Fundamental to development for women must be increasing their self-confidence and their ability to participate in all aspects of society. Violence against women appears to me as a direct contradiction to these development goals. It disrupts women's lives and denies them options. It undermines women's confidence and sense of self-esteem at every level, physically and psychologically, and it destroys women's health, denies them their human rights, and undermines their full participation in society. Where domestic violence keeps a woman from participating in a development project, force is used to deprive her earnings, or fear of sexual assaults prevents her from taking a job or attending a public function.

Violence against women particularly hinders the human development of women themselves. Violence as a form of control limits their ability to pursue options on almost every area of life from home to schools, workplaces, and most public spheres. This violence also results in all types of physical injuries from cuts to bruises and broken bones, and from brain damage to homicide ("femicide"). The repetition of a pattern of aggression can turn a woman into a fearful and confused person, who lacks confidence, experiences feelings of helplessness, and has difficulty making decisions on her own. Her work performance suffers, she is frequently absent and may risk losing her job and, in the worst of cases, a woman may find her

situation so intolerable, she turns that aggression against herself and commits suicide (Bradley, 1990:3).

Female dependency and violence

The socially constructed dependency of women on men is key to understanding women's vulnerability to violence. This dependency is frequently economic, and is a result of various layers of discrimination. Much of the woman's work is unpaid labour at home and in the fields, and is not valued by society nor calculated as part of the productive work of a nation (GNP). Those women who work in paid jobs often work long hours in lower status jobs, with fewer benefits and less security than men. Female dependency extends to other areas as well, psychologically, socially and culturally. Women are trained to believe that their value is attached to the men in their lives - fathers, brothers, husbands and sons - and are often ostracized if they displease or disobey these men. Women are educated to see their self-esteem as attached to the satisfaction of the needs and desires of others and, thus, are encouraged to blame themselves as inadequate or bad when men beat them (Ondicho, 1993). This socialization process is reinforced by cultures where a woman is constantly diminished, her sexuality rendered a commodity, her work and characteristics devalued, her identity shaped by an environment that reduces her to her most biological function and, yet, where she is still blamed for causing or deserving the abuse of men towards her.

Women's socio-economic and psychological dependency makes it difficult for them to leave situations of domestic violence or sexual harassment. Often, both in rural and urban settings, it is physically impossible as women literally have no place to go, or the means to get away and live alone and their children, and there are no services available for them. Other factors like women's poor earning power, and their financial and legal dependency on the husband, render them pow-

erless against male violence. Women who are economically dependent on their husbands are particularly in a more vulnerable position. For instance, a house wife who has children tends to tolerate the abuse/violence because she cannot manage to take care of the children alone. She has no choice but to tolerate an inhuman practice that down-grades her dignity and status.

A recent study on the experiences of battered women in Nairobi reveals that in urban settings where it may be easier for women to leave abusive relationships, they (women) experience harsh and extreme difficulties in finding alternative accommodation, are afraid to lose whatever false image of a good married wife they want to project, and fear the social stigma attached to divorce (Ondicho, 1993). Thus, violence itself makes women become even more dependent, since it undermines their self-esteem and their capacity to take action diminishes.

Effects on her family and children

Domestic violence against women has serious physical, emotional and psychological effects on the individual woman, her children and family, and the society in general. Apart from the negative effects on the individual woman involved, family violence can also affect the husband negatively in the long run: he loses the love and respect of his wife and children, and he might also lose his family altogether. Further, it can also be hazardous to other family members who attempt to intervene. They risk being hurt or killed or killing the abuser themselves.

Violence against women also affects the development and well-being of children and families. Apart from the physical injury that the child may suffer, children from violent homes suffer significantly more from behavioural problems and lack greater social

competence than children from non-violent homes (Jaffe *et al.*, 1986). Where violence leads to the woman leaving the home, children are adversely affected psychologically, socially and economically, with some even ending up as delinquents, criminals, vagrants, and so on. Since children's socialization starts at home, when they witness their father abusing their mother or when they themselves are abused, there is a greater likelihood that they will establish violent families of their own.

Further, children from violent homes run the risk of being injured or even killed by the abuser if they become involved in a violent incident, either by chance or if they attempt to protect the mother. On the other hand, in an attempt to protect their mother, children may inadvertently injure or kill the abuser (father). Thus, it is clear that family violence has negative implications for the stability of marriage, the quality of family life, and the health and socialization of children. In such settings the woman is offered limited chances for progress and development which, in turn, has profound impact on the development of society as a whole, since its female members are prevented from exercising their fundamental rights and creative potential.

It has been argued that the best way to reduce infant mortality is through educating women. Buvinic and Yudelman (1989) underline the high social dividend that comes with female literacy, as demonstrated by low infant mortality rates, better family nutrition, reduced fertility and lower population growth. Improving women's self-confidence through education and by diminishing violence is, therefore, an investment that can have long lasting positive effects on children and the future of a nation.

Health and violence

Health is usually recognized as an important development. One of the clearest facts about violence is that

it is detrimental to the woman's physical and mental health, including women's very survival. The conduct frequently results in severe physical injury, at times culminating in death. Moreover, the syndrome leads to multiple medical and psychological sequelae for the women, especially when violence leads to unsuccessful pregnancies. This not only maims and debilitates women, but also causes them a higher level of anxiety, depression and somatic complaints. Such women are usually fatigued and numb, and often lack the energy to do more than minimal household chores and child-care. This, therefore, denies society the full creative potential, talents and participation of women in the development process.

Violence can even force some of the best educated women to leave their country, thereby contributing to the brain drain and the loss of highly skilled women from the development process. Women who stay often comply with the subordinate role that society assigns them and may be reluctant to be promoted for fear of upsetting their husbands. As Bradley reports threats of violence control women's minds as do acts of violence making women act as their own jailors (1990:5). This means that a woman makes her choices not on what she wants to do or is best for her, but what she thinks her husband will allow her to do.

The AIDS crisis has also cast the unequal gender in a new light. In Kenya, where the AIDS epidemic has reached staggering proportions, women are experiencing the effects of male control in multiple ways. Deeply entrenched attitudes and traditions justify men's easy access to women's bodies and lead to the transmission of the virus via rape, incest and other forms of covered sex. Thus, AIDS expands the deadly impact of violence against women.

Violence against women is "an overwhelming moral, economic, and public health burden that society cannot bear" or afford to ignore if meaningful development is to be realised, be it human, social, cultural,

economic or political. Since mortality and survival are influenced by social action and public policy, development clearly must take more account of women's needs in this area. This can only be possible by building women's self-confidence and empowering them economically as a means of countering their vulnerability to violence.

Cost of violence to the society

The social costs of violence against women are enormous, ranging from stigmatization of the individual family and social isolation to temporary or chronic dependency of women on support groups or the abuser. The economic costs of the conduct to the community are vast. Beyond such calculable costs like the costs in human suffering, the ultimate cost of violence against women is the perpetuation of the societal structure that keeps women inferior and subordinate to men politically, socially and economically.

It is almost impossible to quantify the total costs of the problem given the limited specific information reported on the extent of such violence. However, it is clear that violence against women deprives society of the full participation of women in all aspects of development. As Lori Heise (1989:12) states: "Violence undermines widely held goals for economic development". Developmental problems such as high fertility, deforestation, hunger and malnutrition, illiteracy, poverty, and so on, cannot be solved without women's full participation. Yet women cannot lend their labour or creative ideas fully when they are burdened with the physical and psychological scars of violence. The loss of time resulting from violence involves not only victims, but also the work time of the police, and others in the legal, medical and social services.

Even when women continue their involvement in

development projects concern about problems caused by violence often diverts their energies from pursuing other goals. For instance, women miss meetings because of the fear of beatings, sexual harassment or physical disability due to injuries inflicted on them or because they are taking care of another abused woman or their children. Some women decline public visibility to shame over their injuries since society's "blame the victim" attitude does not create an environment sympathetic to them.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it has been shown that though there are no complete statistics on the extent of domestic violence against women and its effects on the development process, it is still a glaring problem in Kenya. Marital violence is an age-old practice which has defied the process of social change. It is part of the dynamics of many family situations, women being assaulted, raped, murdered, threatened and humiliated within their homes by men to whom they have committed themselves.

In sum, violent acts against women, attack their dignity as human beings and leave them vulnerable and fearful. Conditioned to undervalue their skills and abilities and paralysed by real fears of violence and retribution, women are marginalized in society and forced out of the decision making process which shapes and determines the development of their communities.

The violent acts range from battery, incest, assault and rape. Also included along this continuum are limited employment opportunities for women, the lack of access to education, women's social isolation and sexual harassment. Such acts place women in a state of dependence on men, and this is reinforced by the belief fostered in society that men are superior and women inferior. The manifestations and causes of the violence simply alter their forms according to the social, cultural, economic and historical realities in

which they occur. This, in turn, limits women's participation in or capacity to benefit from the development process. Countering violence against women is then, not only eliminating an obstacle to the development of women, it is also actively unleashing the potential creativity of women to contribute to the development of their families, their communities and their nations.

Cited References

- Bradley, C. (1990) *Wife-beating in Papua New Guinea: Situation Report*. Boroko: UNDP.
- Buvinic, M. and S.W. Yudelman (1989) *Women, poverty and progress in the Third World*. New York: Foreign Policy Association.
- Friedmann, J. (1980) An alternative development? In J. Friedmann, T. Wheelwright and J. Connel (Eds.). *Development strategies in the eighties: Monograph No.1*, pp.4-11. Sydney Development Studies Colloquium, Department of Town and Country Planning, University of Sydney.
- Heise, L. (1989) Crimes in gender. *World Watch*, 4:12-21.
- Jaffe, P., L. Wilson and D.A. Wolfe (1986) Promoting changes in attitudes and understanding of conflict resolution among child witnesses of family violence. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* 18:356.

MILA (N.S.) Vol. 2

**Mass, M.(1986) Women groups in Kiambu. *Research Report No.26*. Leiden:
African Study Centre.**

**Ondicho T.G.(1993) *Battered women: A socio-legal perspective of their experiences in Nairobi*: Unpl. M.A. Thesis,
Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi.**

**Sivard, R.L.(1985) *Women - A world survey*.
Washington, D.C.: World Priorities.**

The Tribune (1990) *Violence against women: Invisible barriers to development*. New York: IWTC Publication No.46

United Nations 1990, *United Nations Development Program: Human Development Report*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**Ward, E.(1938) *The Yoruba husband & wife code*.
Unpl. Ph.D. Dissertation, Catholic University of America..**