

The role of Christianity in preventing domestic violence among Christian families among the Ikwerre people of the Niger Delta

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Abstract

One of the issues facing Christianity in recent times is the issue of domestic violence. Domestic violence has been adjudged to be responsible for some broken marriages, resulting in psychological traumas, single parenthood, divorce, remarriage and even deaths of couples and children as witnessed among the Ikwerre people of the Niger Delta. Thus, the incessant cases of domestic violence have eroded the sacredness, love and permanence of most marriages in Ikwerre. What are the causes of domestic violence? What are the effects of domestic violence among Christian families in Ikwerre? This paper examines biblical view of domestic violence and the roles Christianity can play to prevent the occurrence of domestic violence among Christian families in the area? The paper employs descriptive, evaluative and phenomenological methods and argues that domestic violence is an abuse on humankind and a menace to the progress of Christian families which should be discouraged at all cost. The paper recommends that the Churches should initiate vibrant and viable pre-marital counselling sessions for intending couples, seminars on marriage and family life for the adherents provide material support and care for victims of domestic violence and also encourage victims of domestic violence to always speak up and report any kind of abuses on them to law enforcement agencies.

Key words: Christianity, Christian families, counselling, domestic violence, single parenthood.

Introduction

In most African countries such as Nigeria, particularly the Ikwerre people of the Niger Delta, marriage institution is patriarchal in nature and as such the man is in absolute control of the home while the woman and children are required to submit to the father, son or brother as the breadwinner of the family. This Christian family system requiring total obedience of the woman and children including slaves to the man as the head and provider for the home is without doubt influenced by the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural backgrounds of the Bible which sees the man as positive, strong, dominant, intellectual etc, while the woman is regarded as weak, passive, emotional, intuitive, childish, dependent and submissive.

However, with the dawn of technological advancement and improved education for women in the 21st century, the customary role and obligation of women to be submissive in marriage to their husbands is being questioned by

modern day by feminists and liberal intellectuals. While the liberal intellectuals are opposed to women's submission in marriage, claiming that submission ought to resonate from both spouses, the conservative intellectuals are of the view that submission in marriage is the women's obligation. The contentious debate of who should submit in marriage; whether the woman or the man or even the spouses submitting to each other has triggered many marital break downs often leading to separation, divorce, marital rot, psychological traumas, single parenthood, deaths, domestic violence, separation, discord, conflicts and communication gaps in most Christian homes. In view of the above remarks, this paper examines the roles of Christianity in preventing domestic violence among Christian families in the Ikwerre communities in Niger Delta.

The Ikwerre people of North Eastern Niger Delta

Ikwerre in North Eastern Niger Delta is one of the main ethnic groups in present day Rivers State located in the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria. The geographical location of Ikwerre falls within four Local Government Areas in Rivers State, namely, Port Harcourt, Emohua, Obio/Akpor and Ikwerre Local Government Areas. Wotogbe-Weneka (143) remarks that “the Ikwerre is naturally blessed with vast expanse of land for agricultural purposes and numerous streams and creeks for fishing”. The vast expanse of land enables the cultivation of cassava (*mbalaka*), yam (*jii*), maize (*oikpa*), plantain (*okinima*), cocoyam (*ede*), three-leaf yam (*orna*), palm produce (*nkwu nungwo*) etc. The Port Harcourt area of the Ikwerre land is the domain of multinational oil companies and oil wells.

Religiously, the Ikwerre people believe in the existence of the Supreme Being. They are mostly Christians and traditional worshippers with minor Muslims. Socio-culturally, the society is predominantly patriarchal with the man as the head of the family. The man performs the vital role of a breadwinner and provides the things necessary for the upkeep and stability of the family. The man orders and demands respect from his family members including wife, children and servants. As previously stated, being a patriarchal society, greater regards and respect are accorded the men while the women are viewed as subordinates.

Domestic violence

Domestic violence describes the violence which occurs in a home setting which involves domination of a spouse or partner in an intimate relationship thereby causing physical, psychological or sexual harm to one or both party in a relationship. Ndubuisi (214), citing the United State Conference of Catholic Bishops, states that domestic violence may include any

behaviour either physical or emotional that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frightens, terrorize, coerce, force, threaten, blame, hurt, injure or wound a person. The violence may include female genital mutilation and forced marriage. He further maintains that domestic violence takes several forms which include physical, verbal, emotional, economic and religious and can happen all the time or in a while. Kunhiyop (243-244) adds that domestic violence involves the abuse of power in intimate relationships within a household. He maintains that it does not only occur between husbands and wives, but can also be carried out against children.

There is no particular sex, age limit, marital status, ethnic group, socio-economic class or religions that are meant to fall victim of this form of violence. Domestic violence can occur between husbands and wives, wives and children, nannies and infants etc. Although it is argued that the women are the most abused and that feminine violence against the masculine gender is unusual. The forms of physical hostility which amount to domestic violence includes: spanking, hitting, kicking or beating while the psychological abuse includes intimidation, constant belittling, lack of appreciation or humiliation in private and public places, besides desertion of a partner in an intimate relationship and forced sexual intercourse or any other regulatory behaviour like isolating a person from dynasty and acquaintances. Moreover, scrutinizing a partner's movements and limiting access to information or assistance all constitute psychological forms of domestic violence.

Causes of domestic violence among christian families

This section considers the causes of domestic violence among Christian families particularly among the Ikwerre people of Niger Delta. There are various factors responsible for domestic violence

among Christian families in Ikwerre. They include but not limited to the following factors highlighted below.

Patriarchal tendencies

Patriarchy could be described as a social system in which the father or eldest male of the family is head of the household, having authority over women, children and servants. Patriarchy also refers to a system of government by males; it refers to the dominance of men in social or cultural systems. The patriarchal marriage system allows the husband to exercise power over his wife and members of his home. Thus, the wife has rights and freedom only within the context of the authority of the husband (Ogunkunle, 50). As opined in the previous section, the Ikwerre people of Niger Delta is patriarchal in nature, so, the management of the family rests solely on the man, husband, brother and uncle who is seen as the provider of the essential needs of the home while the women, children and servants are required to submit wholly to the men.

Patriarchal tendency which is found in most Christian families in Ikwerre enables a man to resist any form of insubordination from the wife, children or servants. In case of any unruliness from the wife, children or members of the family, most men resort to physical or verbal violence to assert their authority over the family. Consequently, this brings about domestic violence even among Christian families.

Poverty

It was estimated that in 1992 41.8% of Nigeria's population lived on less than 1dollar per household per day. The number grew in 1996 to 46.3% and by 1999 to 65% (www.eiu.com). Kunhiyop (137-139) citing UNICEF data opines that Nigerian children born in 2005 have a life expectancy of only 44years, and that in every 1000 children born, 100 die before their first natal day. He maintains that 38%

of children under five suffer from stunted growth due to malnutrition or infectious disease and inability to secure health care services, quality education, food etc. He notes that only 48% of the population have access to safe and portable drinking water. Poverty as observed here describes the state of one being unable to provide the essentials of human needs such as clothing, shelter, health care, food, security etc. This is another cause of domestic violence among Christian families. Danfulani and Atowoju (207) assert that poverty is the condition of having insufficient resources or income. They further posit that in its most extreme form, poverty is a lack of basic human needs, such as adequate and nutritious food, clothing, housing, clean water and health services. Although the Bible admonishes that Christians should keep their lives from the love of money and be content with what they have (Hebrews 13:5), the desire by some Christian families among the Ikwerre people of Niger Delta to live flamboyant lifestyles and to have more at the expense and detriment of one's spouse irrespective of their low financial status has consistently led to domestic violence in most Christian homes. Ndubuisi (216) asserts that poverty has led to divorce and other types of crimes like prostitution, stealing, cheating which in most cases have resulted to abuse of one partner or the other. He maintains that the breadwinner of the family may likely engage in some of these social vices just to make ends meet.

Environmental factor

The environments in which children are brought up could affect them positively or negatively. If the home is always hostile with myriads of violent activities or abuses from the head of the home or subordinates, the children brought up in such homes may tend to be violent as well. Children brought up in homes where the father consistently abuses his wife or children may likely grow up to be abusers and

bullies. This is because the psyche of the children would have been affected negatively. On this note, Ndubuisi (217) remarks that growing up in a violent or abusive household makes domestic violence to persist as a generational legacy. It is important to state that children tend to learn very fast by actively participating in the day to day activities of the homes. Hence, when the wrong seeds are sown, they are wilfully accepted as normal, and it tend to germinate faster in the life of the children.

Effects of domestic violence among christian families in Ikwerre

There are myriads of effects of domestic violence among Christian families. The effects ranges from physical injuries, spiritual depression, psychological traumas, fear, insecurity, depression, addiction to drugs, alcohol, insomnia, arrest by law enforcement agencies etc. The physical injuries include bruises, broken bones, dislocation of parts of the body, internal and external bleeding etc. Most times victims of domestic violence do not relate well with others in the society. They tend to have low self-esteem, difficulties in confiding in friends, trauma, harmful behaviour, also they partake in unnecessary taking of hard drugs, wine, smoking to normalize their emotional instability. The findings of Ndubuisi (220-221) underscore the fact that the effects of domestic violence on children are very dangerous. He remarks that domestic violence could lead to delinquency and social vices among adolescents. He also maintains that when a child is exposed to so much abuse, the child's social life could be affected negatively and some of the victims of domestic violence may get involved in rape, harassing of innocent persons and engaging in financial cheating to have enough finance required to purchase drugs and alcohol.

It is imperative to state that when an abused wife or husband decides to flee

a violent marriage, their departure from the marriage implies that the children may be brought up without the concerted efforts of the parents as the situation could lead to single parenthood due to separation or divorce. However, if the couple decides to stay and endure the violent relationship, the children could be traumatized by the home setting. This is because children learn by active participation and observation. Kunhiyop (246) notes that children who have to watch their fathers beat up their mothers often become bullies and rude in their day to day interaction with other children.

Biblical perspective on domestic violence

The scriptures do not give credence to any form of domestic violence. However, some biblical text such as Proverbs 13:24, Ephesians 5:22-23 etc have been used over the centuries by some interpreters and institutions to justify violence against women and children. Nevertheless, an interpretation of Ephesians 5:22-23 which reads "wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of his wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the saviour of the body" implies that the husband being addressed as head does not convey the idea of domination or a husband beating his family into submission. Stott (232-235) states that the misinterpretation of Ephesians 5:22-33 has fostered myriad of unjust treatment of women in most cultures and Christian homes. He maintains that those who emphasize that women are to submit to their husbands as in verse 22, fail to realize that verse 22 is preceded by verse 21. He submits that if it is the wife's duty to submit to her husband, it is also the husband's duty to submit to his wife. Moreover, he maintains that if headship means power in any sense, then it is power to care and not to crush, power to serve and not to dominate, power to facilitate self-fulfillment, not to frustrate or

destroy it. Stott also submits that apart from the wife submitting to her husband and vice versa, the husband is obligated to love his wife. The husband is to “love like Christ loved the Church” (Eph. 5:25). Christ’s love for the church is proven in His death on the cross. Reference is made here of the pre-existence of Christ and how out of His love for humanity he came down from heaven, took on a human form and died on the cross to save mankind. This implies that the husbands are to place their wives first in all things and be ready to die for them.

Similarly, the reading in Proverbs 13:24 “Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them” (NRSV) have also been identified as a text suggesting that parents have been given the right to physically abuse their children by the use of rods. On this note Kunhiyop (246-247) observes that one must be careful when one reads this verse. He notes that in most Western cultures, the use of rod, stick or belt in discipline is related with extreme violence. However, in many African continents, it is an acceptable means of discipline, applied in moderation. On the contrary, he remarks that the thrust of proverbs 13:24 is not on the rod but on the principle of loving correction. Although the use of rod to correct children is still being debated in most African countries, it is important to state that the idea being conveyed in proverbs 13:24 is not on the physical abuse of the children but a demonstration of parental discipline out of love and care.

Interestingly, Jesus Christ, the role model of Christianity, in His earthly ministry demonstrated a right disposition to women and children even against the norm of the Jewish tradition. The account of Mark 10:16 remarks that Jesus Christ took children up in his arms, laid his hand on them, and blessed them. The text shows Jesus’ concern, love and care for children even when the society and his disciples

were antagonistic to them. Jesus taught that to demonstrate deep love, care and concern to children is in a sense a show of love to Him (Matthew 18:5-6 NRSV). In this context, abusing children would consequently also be tantamount to abusing Jesus. Equally, Apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:4 notes that fathers should not provoke their children to anger but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (NRSV). These scriptural interpretations reveal that the Bible is against any form of domestic violence. Thus, domestic violence must be strongly condemned in the Christian families since it does not depict the cardinal foundation of the Christian religion.

Violence against women: example of Ikwerre societies

In African traditional milieu, life is sacred and must not be abused. As observed by Nwafor (177), there is a feeling of a divine imperative that life must be given, life must be lived, life is to be enjoyed, life is to be whole, life is to be honorable, and life is to be long and peaceful. However, there are several instances of violence against women among the Ikwerre people of North Eastern Niger Delta; these include leadership domination or deprivation, female genital mutilation, denial of inheritance etc. An Ikwerre woman is not entitled to be leaders where there are men in any system she belongs to. For example, women are not allowed to head meetings or clubs which comprises both men and women, as they are believed to be unfit to preside over meetings where there are males. It is a known fact that when the father of the house who is also the bread winner dies, a woman is not allowed to assume leadership position in her own home. The position is rather given to any other male in the family, no matter how young he may be. The male’s only qualification is that he is a man.

In some lenient cases, the woman is only allowed a temporary leadership

opportunity when the male in the family is too young to take up the responsibilities. She is expected to surrender the position totally as soon as the boy is old enough to take over leadership. In most elder's forum, a woman is not permitted to be a member. If her husband is late she is expected to choose a male relative whom she can trust to represent her and her family in elders' meeting in the absence of her son. This is because; Ikwerre custom does not permit a woman's voice to be heard publicly except in her home. She is expected to sit down or in some cases kneel and address men in gatherings. Standing while addressing male elders is seen as a sign of insubordination and lack of respect. Her refusal to adhere to the rules of this tradition might attract some fine which she will pay mandatorily.

Female genital mutilation is deeply rooted in the culture of the Ikwerre people. Female genital mutilation is also known as female circumcision. The World Health Organization defines Female genital mutilation or circumcision as the procedure involving the partial or total removal of the external genitalia or other injury to the female organs for cultural or other non-therapeutic reasons. It includes removal of the labia minora and sticking of the labia majora leaving only a small opening for urine and menstrual flow. Genital mutilation is enforced on girl children by their mothers or female relatives in the Ikwerre societies. This according to them will prevent the promiscuity of the girl child when she becomes an adult. Weneka (52) remarks that a circumcised girl is often regarded as spiritually pure, disciplined and able to withstand all the hardships that are part of being a woman in her society. On the other hand, an uncircumcised woman is seen as unnatural and shameful by both men and women in the community and therefore unfit to marry and bear children. This is in addition to the likelihood of being unfaithful to her husband. In some parts of

Rivers State, Abua people for example, females are circumcised at puberty age as part of their puberty rites, but that does not make the operation less painful and harmful. Obviously this culture came into existence because African culture says that a woman should not be sexually active but only the man. Lasebikan (18) says that in some cultures, particularly in Nigeria years back, the bride-to-be would be circumcised a couple of weeks before her marriage. One can imagine how painful and humiliating this will be. Most times young girls who undergo this kind of unwholesome local surgery suffer from shock and infection which can sometimes lead to death. This type of culture no doubt violates human rights and also reduces the of dignity women.

The fact that death is real and is an inevitable end for every living being makes widowhood real as well. The surviving spouse usually goes through psychological trauma for the loss of a husband or wife. In the case of widowhood, it is usually the widow and not the widower who suffers. As Lasebikan (18) observes, in Africa some widows are oppressed, suppressed, afflicted, neglected and insulted. In many African communities, the death of husbands is always linked to his wife who is seen as the prime suspect. But when a woman dies, no one suspects the widower. The moment the announcement of a deceased husband is made, all sorts of accusations are leveled against the woman by the family of the late husband. Various kinds of ritual oaths are compulsorily forced on the widow to observe while in the case of the widower he goes scot-free (Iwuoha 115-116). Martey (130, 133) notes that widowhood in Africa opens up the reality of violence against women. He maintains that throughout most African continents, women who undergo widowhood rites are maltreated, tortured or disgraced and it does not matter whether

the widow is a Christian or non-Christian, literate or non literate.

The Role of christianity in preventing domestic violence

In the light of the above discussion, Christian religion has a role to play to prevent the occurrence of domestic violence among Christian families. The Church through their biblical teachings should consistently emphasize the equality of all human beings, discouraging any forms of domination of women or children. Christians must uphold the dignity of every person whether male or female as demonstrated by Jesus (Mark 12: 31) and Paul (Galatians 5:28). Besides, emphasis must be made that God instituted marriage so that man and woman might complement one another and share in the creative work through the procreation of children and not for wilful battering of one's spouse. For the actualization of this purpose, Christianity must have a balanced theological view in their hermeneutical interpretation especially as it regards gender inequality. It must be sustained always that in a Christian marriage, all barriers on the path of the couples that would not allow them to operate as full children of God, or that are oppressive to them and make them less human must be jettisoned.

In a bid to prevent domestic violence Christianity should initiate and maintain vibrant and viable premarital counselling sessions for intending couples, this should be aimed at inculcating the principles of the Christian marriage. This is in addition to post marital seminars and symposia for married couples which should be aimed at re-emphasizing the sacredness, permanence and dignity of christian marriage and de-emphasizing any forms of abuse especially from christian families. Through seminars, symposiums, conferences etc, the christian religions should emphasize the need for christian couple to be open to each other (Genesis

2:25) and also try as much as they could to live within their available financial means. Furthermore, the christian religion should initiate food banks in their various organizations to help cater for christian families who are poor to have access to food and other basic necessities of life. The motive of the food banks should be for every christian family who is not able to provide food for their family and are regularly abused to have at least food on their table and not go hungry always.

The christian religion must be proactive and active in preventing the menace of domestic violence among christian families by encouraging their members to speak up and by acting decisively where necessary. They must educate their members to report cases inimical to their well-being to church authorities and other appropriate authorities such as law enforcement agencies.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the meaning, causes and the effects of domestic violence as well as examined the role of Christianity in preventing domestic violence among Christian families in Ikwerre land. The paper has pointed out that the Bible does not permit domestic violence but rather advocate love, peace and mutual respect among members of the family. The paper maintains that culture and traditions, economic factors such as poverty as well as erroneous interpretation and understanding of some biblical passages are catalysts of domestic violence. Thus, in order to prevent the occurrence of domestic violence among Christian families, the Churches should initiate a well conceptualized and viable pre-marital counselling sessions for intending couples, seminars on marriage and family life for their adherents and also encourage couples to speak up and report any kind of abuse against them to the law enforcement agencies.

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