

Covid-19 Pandemic, Violence and Social Inequality in Nigeria.



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ABSTRACT: The measures to curtail the spread of COVID-19 and prevent loss of lives across the globe include; lockdown of schools, religious worship centres, business centres, and a general restriction of movement of the people. The lockdown, which involuntarily confined people to different places of abode has numerous effects on the individuals and the society. This paper seeks to examine how COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated violence and social inequality in Nigeria and attempts possible solutions to the problem. The methodology includes the review of literature and reports. The findings show that, the lockdown has resulted in heightened levels of gender-related domestic violence and social inequality in the society. The closure of all educational institutions has left many young people idle. Some of these youths have ended up engaging in immoral sexual activities with the opposite sex. Children also suffered molestation and harassment from predators. Newspaper reports reveal an increase in cases of rape in the society during this period. The lockdown has caused job losses and salary cut which have translated into a reduction in government, private companies and individuals' revenue. This situation affected many families negatively as it led to financial hardship in homes and increased misunderstandings and various forms of negative tensions and domestic violence in the society. Spousal violence, landlord-tenant violence, house-owner and house-help violence, violence on widows, boyfriend-girlfriend violence is now more commonplace in the society. Even though it is undeniable that gender-based violence had existed before the pandemic, the malaise has been greatly aggravated by this deadly disease.

KEYWORDS: Corona virus, Violence, Lockdown, Pandemic, Gender-related Violence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus outbreak constitutes a great threat to the health of people globally. It has affected all facets of human life. Apart from the health hazards, the pandemic has adversely altered the social, political, economic and educational aspects of society. Several people have experienced great losses as a result of the disease. The pandemic also aggravated the level of violence and social inequality in the society. The paper discusses Covid-19, violence and social inequality in Nigeria. The work is divided into three parts. The first aspect examines Covid-19, the second part deals with violence and Covid-19 in Nigeria, while the third aspect addresses the issue of social inequality in the Covid-19 era.

2. COVID-19 AND SYMPTOMS

Covid-19 means coronavirus disease 2019. It is a disease caused by an infection known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The origins have been traced to a food market in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The World Health Organization declared the virus as a pandemic after it spreads to more than 100 locations around the world within a very short time (Shannon, 2020). The virus is contagious. It can be transmitted from one person to another through respiratory droplets which moves through the air when one talks, sneezes or coughs (Jewell, 2020). The virus hangs in the droplets and when breath in, the virus can enter into the respiratory tract where it can develop into an infection. Symptoms of Covid-19 include shortness of breath, a cough that gets severe over time, and a low grade fever that gradually increases in temperature and fatigue. Other symptoms are sore throat, muscle pains, headache, loss of appetite and loss of smell. One is at risk of contracting the disease if there is a contact with someone who is carrying it, especially by exposure to their saliva or being near them when they have coughed, sneezed, or talked. For most people, the infection will cause mild illness. However, the aged and people with underlying ailments have a higher risk for severe complications if they contract the virus. Such underlying ailments include heart failure, hypertension, diabetes, kidney disease, sickle cell disease, obesity, coronary artery disease and a weakened immune system.

Complications from Covid-19 are irregular heart rate, cardiovascular shock, severe muscle pain, fatigue and heart attack. Presently, no medication or treatment has been approved for the cure of the virus. However, researches are being done on vaccine to combat the infection. The virus can be prevented through frequent and careful washing of hands with soap and running water;

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not touching one's eyes, face, nose and mouth, especially when hands are dirty; cleaning and disinfecting surfaces (such as door handles, toys, furniture and metal surfaces) with alcohol-based disinfectants. It also involves not shaking other people; avoiding skin to skin contact; not gathering in groups or crowded places; social distancing, that is, staying about two metres away from people; covering the mouth with a flexed elbow when coughing or sneezing; application of hand sanitizers; and wearing of face mask. When used correctly, the masks can prevent people who are not infected from contacting SARS-CoV-2 when they breathe, talk, sneeze, or cough so as to stop the spread of the virus (Iftikhar, 2020). Many governments felt the best way to prevent the spread of the virus is by declaring total lockdowns, with people only being permitted to leave their abodes to get food or medicine and to practise social distancing when they do. The reason is to ensure that people with serious illness can seek medical care, and those who are infected but have mild illness do not pass it on to anyone else (Gavi, 2020). For people who have been in touch with someone who is showing symptoms of COVID-19, most countries suggest self-isolation for a week or two in order to curtail further transmission of the virus. Lockdown comes with so many challenges. Some of the challenges include the promotion of violence and social inequality.

3. VIOLENCE AND COVID-19 IN NIGERIA

Nigeria and the rest of the world have been fighting a gender based violence crimes, rooted in evil patriarchal traditional, cultural, social and religious practices. However, the crisis was aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic (UN Women, 2020). There is an increase in violence that target people, especially women and children as a result of the recent lockdowns imposed by the government in Nigeria to slow the transmission of coronavirus. Gender-based violence (GBV) against the feminine gender violates the human rights of girls and women. It also has negative effects on casualties, families, communities and societies at large. The closure of the academic institutions at all levels in the nation due to Covid-19 has exposed many girls to sexual exploitation, early pregnancy and early or forced marriage. This also means that children are unable to report abuse to a trusted teacher as there are restrictions school opening. Due to movement restrictions, many victims of violence have found themselves trapped and feeling abandoned as the law enforcers in the society are not able to perform their roles as expected, home inspection by police have been stopped, while and courts have been forced to close (Scotland, 2020). The incidences of domestic violence have also increased drastically in Nigeria. Tension of loss of human lives, loss of livelihood and other losses or sufferings have increased in communities and families. Also, incidents of suicide have been reported by people who have contracted the virus and those who could not bear the sudden and unintended consequences of this pandemic (Ekpon, 2020).

3.1 Forms of Violence

The most common acts of violence against women in Nigeria include sexual harassment such as rape, physical violence, harmful traditional practices, emotional and psychological violence and socio-economic violence (Umukoro, 2020). Rape of young girls and women is a common form of sexual harassment in Nigeria. Rape may be defined as a sexual intercourse between a man and a woman or a girl against the will or consent of the female partner (Adegbite, 2020). The Federal Bureau of Investigation of the United States of America, according to Happy (2020) described Rape as the penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with anybody, part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person without the victim consent. The Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development in Nigeria, Pauline Tallen recently disclosed during a courtesy visit to the Deputy Senate President that over three thousand six hundred (3,600) rape cases were recorded across the nation during the lockdown (Iroanusi, 2020). The Minister stated that the reports she received from the commissioners of women affairs in the thirty-six states of the federation revealed that each state recorded a minimum of hundred cases of rape during the lockdown. The daily increase in rape cases in Nigeria is alarming and worrisome. Governors across the nation declared a state of emergency on the matter and stated that they were committed to ensuring that offenders face the maximum weight of the law. Between March and May of the year 2020, the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development reported more than 80 cases of fathers allegedly raping their daughters in Anambra State alone, while eleven men were arrested for allegedly raping a 12-year-old girl in Jigawa State in the Northern part of Nigeria (Fleming and Martosko, 2020).

The sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of minors (under-aged girls) is nothing short of impunity, and is being perpetrated with such rampancy and violence (Ezeilo, 2020). The bitter consequences of this rape menace include unwanted pregnancies, abortion, loss of self-esteem, damage of body organs, emotional trauma and untimely death. Diseases such as HIV/AIDS, gonorrhoea, syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections, which leave indelible problems in the lives of the victims are also contracted through rape (Ezeilo, 2020). The punishment for rape, according to section 1 (2) of Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015 is life imprisonment. Where the perpetrator is less than fourteen years, the punishment is a maximum term of fourteen years jail term, and in other cases a minimum of twelve years jail term is given by the Act. For gang rape, the offenders are liable jointly to a minimum term of twenty years imprisonment without a fine (Uloaku, 2020). Regrettably, these laws are not strictly enforced by the Nigerian government. Also, since most perpetrators of sexual abuse are close relatives, friends and neighbours, such matters are mostly swept under carpet. Many rape cases are not reported publicly or pursued legally once elders and community

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leaders intervene. The Nigerian legal system has faced criticism for making it difficult to convict suspected rapists, and for blaming female victims of sexual assault.

The pandemic has also increased the rate of domestic violence between spouses in many homes in Nigeria. Prior to the lockdown, partners who have tendencies to be abusive were, sometimes deliberately, engaged in activities that took them outside the home for considerable lengths of time. However, with the restrictions on movements, couples were compelled to stay at home together for a longer period, creating additional tensions which subsequently led to frustration and aggressiveness (Akpan, 2020). Several people also lost their jobs. For instance, many people working in private sectors were retrenched while numerous private school proprietors were unable to pay their staff salaries for months. People engaged in daily-paid jobs, lost their means of livelihood during the period. Consequently, a lot of people were unable to provide for basic needs and other financial obligations in the home. This caused a lot of stress and anxiety which resulted in misunderstanding and violence between spouses. Women are mostly the victims of domestic violence. However, men in some cases also experience domestic violence from their wives, partners or ex-partners. Domestic violence against men can be physical, but it can also be a broad spectrum of behaviours which include: emotional, sexual, verbal, financial or mental abuse (Relationships Australia, 2020). Due to social prejudices, men find it difficult to talk about the abuse and seek help.

Hoodlums and armed robbers also seized the opportunity of the lockdown to perpetuate evil in the society. Members of robbery/cult gangs called 'Awawa boys' and 'One million boys' invaded neighbouring suburbs in Lagos and Ogun states to torture and injure the residents after stolen a huge sum of money and valuables.

4. COVID-19 AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Social inequality is commonly related to unequal allocation of resources within the society in a such way that widen the gap between the poor and the rich (Makinde, 2020). The present pandemic has exposed the high level of social inequality among the citizens of Nigerian society. The coronavirus outbreak forced many schools globally to adjust their system of education to online teaching. In developing countries like Nigeria, a large number of children without remote-learning access have been left behind (Etang, 2020). Many families are unable to afford the cost of data and other facilities such as mobile phones or laptops that are needed for online teaching. The situation has widened the gap between the rich and the poor in the society. While many children in the rural areas and in poor households do not have the basic tools to adequately participate in online learning during COVID-19 pandemic, others in affluent homes do, and they will likely benefit from sustained academic engagement, in whatever form it is delivered (Tyson, 2020).

Many jobs also transited to the use of information technology as many companies directed their staff to work from home. Individuals without or limited internet connections will experience difficulties to cope with the changes in technology, especially in attending video-conferencing and virtual activities, while those with access will cope with the new situation. In the case level of education and employment, educated and highly skilled workers are more likely to get employment with the possibility of working remotely, while unskilled or workers with low skills are more likely to experience job losses or decrease in working hours. Coronavirus pandemic affected many businesses negatively. Self-employed workers such as artisans, hairdressers, commercial drivers, domestic workers and people in small scale businesses in different parts of the country experienced hardship and serious financial problems as a result of the pandemic. Many of them complained that they did not receive any financial assistance or palliatives from the government. Some were unable to afford three square meals and other necessities for their family members. While some low-income workers were afraid of contracting Covid-19 and therefore remained indoors, most felt compelled to continue working for fear of losing income, jobs and the ability to feed their families (Du, King and Chanchani, 2020). In fact, some taxi drivers and *Okada* riders flouted the rules and regulations guiding the lockdown and curfew by working during the total lockdown. Unlike government workers who received their salaries regularly inspite of the fact that they were not able to go to work, the self-employed workers' income was adversely affected by the coronavirus.

Many families in Nigeria and Africa lacked the resources to abide by the pandemic guidelines. Du, King and Chanchani, (2020) notes that, social distancing is a necessity to contain the spread of the pandemic, but people must have adequate social safety nets to implement the social distancing. However, this is not the reality across cities in Asia, Latin America and Africa as many people, specifically more than a billion people live in slums and dense neighbourhoods where they survive by sharing access to basic services such as sanitation, water and energy on a daily basis. In local areas and cities, larger percentage of employment is informal sector. (Du, King and Chanchani, 2020)

The above truth applies to many families in the Nigerian society. A vast number of people live in slums and informal settlements in the northern, eastern, southern and western parts of the country. Such individuals lack adequate space and also share basic necessities with other people. Also, regular hand washing will not be possible for people that lack access to running water in their homes. Lack of social amenities and basic necessities of life make it extremely difficult for some people to abide by the rules and other guidelines for the prevention of the virus. Access to healthcare services has been severely affected by Covid-19. The health

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system has mainly focused on treating coronavirus positive cases, hence it became a bit difficult for individuals with other illnesses, including the elderly who require treatment, to access health facilities and medication (Bahueta, 2020). The pandemic has widened inequalities in accessing healthcare services and health status of various groups of people.

5. CONCLUSION

The paper maintains that prior to the pandemic, domestic violence, sexual abuse and social inequality were common problems in Nigerian society. However, the widespread loss of jobs, tensions, uncertainties, anxieties, emotional and psychological problems occasioned by the coronavirus pandemic have increased the incidence of domestic violence in the society. It is also argued that the ongoing pandemic has revealed social inequality in the area of education, health care, information technology, job opportunities and social amenities in the country. In order to eradicate the problems of violence and social inequality, victims are encouraged to speak up and report cases of harassments, sexual abuse and molestation to the appropriate law enforcement agencies. The government should also administer appropriate laws and punishments to the violators. It is important for the government to provide social amenities and basic necessities such as pipe-borne water, good and affordable healthcare services and education for the people of the society. All these will go a long way in addressing the problems of social inequality in Nigeria.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Government should enforce the Child Rights' Law and Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Law in Nigeria. Violators of such laws are to be punished accordingly. It is important to change the perspective and orientation of people on rape and all forms of domestic violence. People are to be encouraged to speak up and report rape, sexual abuse and other cases of domestic violence. The society should avoid stigmatization of rape victims. The Nigerian government should sensitize people through a regular nationwide television programme on the strict penalties that await the perpetrators of domestic violence and where to report domestic violence crimes. Parents are to expose their children and wards to good sex education and how to prevent themselves from sexual abuse. It is also important that sex education is included in the school curriculum at all levels as COVID-19 restrictions are gradually being relaxed and children are returning back to school. Governments should support community leaders and NGOs that are in the informal sector and other high risk areas, for monitoring, supervision and to disseminate key health messages. In addition, the Nigerian government should provide basic infrastructures and social amenities such as pipe-borne water and health facilities to people in both the rural and urban communities.

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