

## **DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: A CALL TO SAVE THE GIRL CHILD**

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### **Abstract**

In past and recent times, several events in the African society tend to suggest that the girl child has not been given fair and equitable treatment. In spite of campaigns and sensitisation programmes geared towards changing the narrative, there are obvious negative and unpalatable practices against women in society. One such negative practice is gender-based violence which constitutes a problem hence, the imperative of this study. The importance of communication in the society cannot be overemphasised. Actually, careful use of communication to champion the causes affecting women can bring about tangible outcomes. Development communication is the idea of using communication for the purpose of advancing the goals of development in society. This can only be appreciated if it is realised that development has to do with the generation of psychic mobility and changing of attitude. Sometimes, certain societal projects and programmes have failed due to a lack of or the absence of communication components in the development calculus. This article has considered development communication as a concept, defined a girl child, gender-based violence, it deployed the biological Psycho-Dynamic theory to address this discourse. The study used the qualitative method in discussing ways violence against women manifests in Nigeria and their consequences, as well as the role of development communication in the fight against gender-based violence. The study found that violence against women still persists especially, in several parts of Africa and therefore, concluded that society will indeed be a great place to live in if everyone regardless of gender, is given fair treatment. This is because the girl child over the years has not been given the right and equitable treatment that can boost her educational, political, economic and social growths in the society. To this end, the study among others, recommended that the media should devote more time and space in their reportage on issues that addresses the concerns of the girl-child and women.

**Keywords:** gender, violence, communication, development, psycho-dynamic theory

### **Introduction**

The idea of using communication for the purpose of advancing the goals of development, received a boost when it was realised that development has to do with the generation of Psychic mobility and changing of attitude (Nakpodia, 2011). It was also realised that the failures of certain development projects had been due to the absence of a communication component in the development calculus (Okotie, 2021).

Since this realisation dawned on development agencies, communication has remained an integral but indispensable part of the development process. And, this has been made manifest in the various information, education, and communication (IEC) documents that have been produced for the various development projects (Salawu, 2008). Little wonder also, that the education regulatory bodies like the National Universities Commission (NUC), the National Board for Technical Education (NABTEB), and the various schools of mass communication and journalism have incorporated development communication/communication for development in their curricula.

Therefore, since the importance of development communication cannot be overemphasised, in the development process, the thrust of this paper will be to look at development communication can be used to advocate for an end to gender-based violence which will in turn save the girl-child.

## **Who is a Girl Child?**

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines a girl as a female child; a daughter and a young woman. Women have remained an important category of the society. This importance is clearly related to their roles in the family, the economy and the society at large. In the Nigerian tradition, some cultures have been very unfair and unkind to women. They suffer all sorts of oppression and violence in the home, school, office and the society (Acholonu, 2011).

In describing the condition of the women, the United Nations Economic Community Organization for Africa (UNECA) and the Foods and Agricultural Organization (FAO) (1973) asked the following questions:

Who farms Africa/ who feeds Africa?

Who serves her sons and daughters?

Who has the least access to the tools of development?

The failure to acknowledge women's work in rural areas makes a mockery of development strategies. The life of the rural woman has always been hard. It is often cruel (p. 47).

## **Gender-Based Violence**

The United Nations Commission commenting on the status of women refers to violence against women as', "any act of gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts... whether occurring in public or private life" (Asen, 2004, p. 63). Such acts include battering, sexual abuse of female children; in-household dowry-related violence, female genital mutilation as well as other traditional practices that are harmful to women. Others include psychological/emotional violence such as the dilemma and agony of Nigerian widows as targets of sexual violence; sexual harassment against women outside the family, in offices, work places and even in the streets.

Culturally, the woman occupies a subordinate position in the home which means that she takes instructions from the man. The Nigerian society is a man's world where the woman has little or no place. She is portrayed as a subservient, socio-cultural being, inferior to the man, traditionally confined to the domestic sphere and completely shut out of the socio-political, economic and religious issues affecting the welfare of the larger society.

Women suffer a wide range of abuses which have become subsumed in the concept of violence against women. The Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women and Development, in Beijing in 1995 defined violence against women as "violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life. This definition is encompassing. Sexual harassment of women at work and in educational institutions are public platforms on which the issue of gender stereotype can be addressed."

According to Karanya-Diejomoh and Opong (2005), scarcity of jobs, the economic pressure of dependent children and inadequate financial support from husbands make some women vulnerable to sexual pressure at work. Sometimes, women in employment are often subjected to sexual harassment and exploitation.

Moreover, the unequal power of men and women results in sexual contact being intertwined with male manipulation for economic advantage. Women become involved in sexual liaisons to obtain all kinds of favours from gifts to career promotion. By extension, female students in secondary and tertiary institutions are subjected to sexual pressure from teachers and students.

The social problem of violence and oppression against women has been identified as a critical aspect of the women's question in both developed and underdeveloped countries of the world (Boulding, 1978; Adebajo, 1992). Violence and oppression against women according to Okpeh (2005) are those premeditated actions and activities that cause physical and social harm to a person just because of his or her gender. It covers all forms of physical, subtle, emotional, psychological and even verbal harsh treatment. Our family folk suffer in the hands of men because they are biologically the weak sex and more importantly because our social system places them in a disadvantaged position (p. 81).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical foundation of this article is the Biological Psycho-Dynamic theory. This theory explains violence against women and appears to be one of the earliest theories on violence against women. It has several dimensions and one of the dimensions contends that by nature men are stronger than women. Albert (1996) observes that the commonest answer given by violent acts by men against women is that man was created by God to be a conquering hero. He conquers what belongs to him and also “conquers” what belongs to his woman, considering the latter to be a weaker sex that has little or no power of resistance. To most men, the oppression and subordination of women is divinely inspired and is indispensable evidence of genuine masculinity (p. 109).

## **Ways Violence Against Women Manifest in Nigeria and Their Consequences**

There are many ways violence against women manifests in Nigeria. In Nigeria, traditional practices and customs adversely affect the physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing and stability of women in the following ways:

**Genital mutilation/circumcision:** This is the partial or total cutting away of the external female genitalia. This tradition is carried out under unhygienic conditions which may lead to health complications such as hemorrhage, keloids and urinary tract infections. A woman who experiences a defaced genital may become ashamed of her and suffer from low self-esteem. Such a woman may lack the courage to participate in social activities that translate to development (Albert, 1996).

**Child marriage:** This is the case where a girl is married off at an extremely young age, usually to a man many years her senior. Such child marriages are contracted before the girl attains the age of fifteen. Victims of such marriages run the risk of having vesico-vaginal or recto-vaginal fistula that is, the tearing of the walls between the vagina and the bladder or rectum, in the course of prolonged-obstructed labour or lack of access to surgical intervention in the event of child birth. Women with unrepaired fistulae constantly drip urine and faeces. Such women are usually divorced or abandoned by their husbands. They also become social outcasts. This is the fate of many young women in northern Nigeria and elsewhere where such cases are common (Albert, 1996). The education of the child spouse is marred and she becomes a social misfit.

**Widowhood practices:** These are those dangerous and humiliating customary practices against women in Nigeria especially women from the eastern part of the country. Widowhood experiences in most traditional societies result in multiple tragedies.

Sometimes the widow is subjected to unhealthy and dehumanising ritual tests of innocence over her husband’s death. Many a time she is dispossessed of her late husband’s property. She has no access to economic trees. She is socio-economically dependent and therefore cannot cater for her children. She is confined at times for one year, and her movement is restricted during her mourning period, with her hair completely shaved, she sits and sleeps on the bare floor during the period. She does not bathe nor change clothes and must maintain silent and must not call out in a loud voice during this period of confinement. She must perform the ritual cleansing. This involves going to the stream early in the morning to immerse herself in the water at the end of the moving. Her shaved hair and mourning clothes are burnt by the water side. She returns home naked. The naked walk from the stream to her house is part of the ritual cleansing. She must not receive gifts during the period of confinement. She is called names and so badly humiliated. In fact, it is a period of torture for the woman whose husband is dead. In the words of Okoye (1995) widowhood is, “the daring indignity of the impudent scum who dared not look your way before, now dangling the bait of manly chores inevitable, visualising for mental services rendered.”

## **Traditional land Tenure System and Patterns of Inheritance:**

In many Nigerian communities, a woman can scarcely own, inherit or alienate land in either her ancestral or marital home. She has limited and temporary access to land and this of course is at the mercy of her husband, father or kinsmen. This discrimination is also extended to the inheritance of other valuable property and economic trees. In such matters, attention is normally directed to the male members of the family to the exclusion of the females.

In the parental home, the girl is treated as a temporary member. From birth, she has been sentenced to a marginalised existence. When she is received in her marital family, she is also received as a stranger and a temporary member of that family since there is a possibility of divorce. However, in the agricultural labour force, available data points to the fact that there is always a heavy pressure and burden on women to expend enormous energies to bring in food for the home. About 70 percent of agricultural output in Africa is the result of women's efforts (Oladipo, 1990). In Nigeria, women contribute greatly towards agriculture though such contributions are hardly documented. For millions of women in Nigeria, life means work.

Another point to consider in this discourse is the issue of the trafficking of girls. Cardinal (2006) observes that "it is estimated that there are upwards of 50,000 trafficked girls in Lagos alone working in brothels and as domestic servants in private homes. Besides, there are those girls who seem to have a pretty good idea of what they will be doing when they sign up to go abroad and even if they cannot fathom the level of exploitation they will be subjected to when they arrive, they willingly go. There are other girls who go out and hire their own transport, determined to get themselves abroad if no one is willing to take them smuggling themselves across the border, it is until they enter the unknown territories of the new country that their trouble begins.

In all these negative practices and traditions against the girl child as well as the women in the society. The question is, what role does communication play to save the girl child? We understand that development communication refers to all communication activities that seek to promote the production of food, income and quality social services including education and health as well as cultural values and national identity.

### **The Role of Development Communication in the Fight Against Gender-Based Violence**

In discussing the role of development communication in the fight against gender-based violence, it is pertinent to begin with the proposition of Batta (2008, p. 53) who observes that, "the performing arts can be used to create awareness, sensitize people on the problem, drum up support for remedial action, dramatize the situation and sketch what people can do about the declining maternal and child health, the deepening food insecurity, the frightening level of poverty, the widespread illiteracy, the appalling environmental condition, the deplorable human rights records, the high scale of corruption and the marked gender inequalities in Africa."

Akpan (1987) as cited in Obot (2011) explained that drama allows the playwright to select incidents from the chaos of daily life and arrange them in such a way that permits the spectator to leave the theatre enlightened. He uses components such as conflict, suspense, diction, action, compilations, catharsis and denouement to beam on the numerous aspects of human existence.

Akpan also noted that the dramatist excites emotional reactions in people by designing the theatrical act in a manner that presents people torn apart by problems and entangled in conflict. Spectators get enmeshed in a dramatic presentation through sympathy, empathy or hostility. These emotional reactions make the spectator part of the unfolding event on stage. This strategy can be very effective in the campaign against violence against women or gender-based violence. This is because the perpetrators of the violence are members of the society.

The electronic media as social communicators: The electronic media can be used to map out strategies on how to effectively reach out to the perpetrators and advocates of violence against women. This can be done by communicating with them within their environment in a bid to effect a positive change of attitude.

The media should choose suitable channels of communication to reach their target audience. For example, the media can target community elders and opinion leaders and reason with them on why such evil practices should be abolished. While doing this they should also create public awareness on the issue. They should make use of the opinion leaders to carry their campaign against these evil practices to the villages. In this regard, the message will be passed on to other groups and individuals such as the age grades, town unions, market women and other social groups. The media can achieve a lot through enlightenment programmes which could come in the form of discussions, slogans and jingles geared towards highlighting the benefits of gender fairness and the complementary ingredients inherently present in the egalitarian tradition of our people.

There should be a great effort through the media to encourage the strong points of tradition; the media must also attempt to reduce superstition and other negative traits that tend to be inhibitive to development efforts e.g. sacred forests, taboos, etc.

## **Review of Related Studies**

In a published article by Obot (2011) entitled “The mass media in de-commodification of women and children,” the author used agenda-setting and social responsibility theories as the framework for the study. The author observed that the media have served among others, to create public awareness of the rights of trafficked women and children. It was concluded that the mass media can be of immense help in informing the people about the risks involved in moving to other places, especially foreign countries on the premise and promise of getting better opportunities. It was further concluded that human trafficking was not just immigration, socio-cultural and economic problem; it is also a communication problem.

Furthermore, in an exploratory study conducted by Acholonu (2011) and entitled: “Eradicating violent cultures against women in Nigeria: the role of the electronic media” with socio-cultural theoretical formulation and Biological Psycho-Dynamic theories, some violent practices and traditions against women in Nigeria and Africa as a whole, were elaborately explained. The article suggested that one of the ways of reducing violence against women could be through empowerment-women-empowerment has been globally recognized as the surest way of counteracting harmful traditional practices that lower women’s social status. It was concluded, among other things that, the path to gender justice is strewn with all kinds of cultural, political and even legislative hurdles. Also, all the unfair treatment against women should be given wider publicity by the media for justice to prevail.

## **Methodology**

The qualitative descriptive method was adopted for this study as could be seen in the essays used by the researcher to explain data gathered from relevant studies. Specifically, primary data for the study came from journal articles previously published on the subject of the research. They were sourced from the internet and available onsite library resources. Beyond this, the researchers also conducted interviews with some community members to ascertain the prevalence of gender-based violence and some communication experts who are involved in the advocacy efforts against gender-based violence.

## **Findings**

The study found out that domestic violence is still prevalent in many homes in some parts of the African society. Moreover, a lot of women suffer starvation, deprivation, depression and oppression from their spouses. Many of them parade scars from injuries inflicted on them by their husbands yet the society does not do much to condemn and even punish such violent husbands for the inhumane treatment meted on their wives. This finding is in line with the views of Asen (2004, p. 63) who noted that violent acts against women include battering, sexual abuse of female children; in-household dowry-related violence, female genital mutilation as well as other traditional practices that are harmful to women. Others include psychological/emotional violence such as the dilemma and agony of Nigerian widows as targets of sexual violence; sexual harassment against women outside the family, in offices, work places and even in the streets.

There is no doubt that the media is the watchdog of society and should mirror the ills that are prevalent in society. However, many mass media in Africa exist mostly for profit motive and concentrate more on advertisements as such do not devote so much attention to social problems in their reportage. This findings could benefit from the position of Batta (2008, p. 53) who stated that performing arts can be used to create awareness, sensitize people on the problem, drum up support for remedial action, dramatize the situation and sketch what people can do about the declining maternal and child health, the deepening food insecurity, the frightening level of poverty, the widespread illiteracy, the appalling environmental condition, the deplorable human rights records, the high scale of corruption and the marked gender inequalities in Africa.

Also, Obot (2011) added that the mass media can be of immense help in informing the people about the risks involved in moving to other places, especially foreign countries on the premise and promise of getting better opportunities.

## Conclusion/Recommendations

The society will indeed be a great place to live in if all the people are given fair treatment. The girl child, over the years has not been given the right and equitable treatment that can boost her educational, political, economic and social growths in the society. The media as the watch dog of the society should be deployed to help fight this unfair treatment of the girl child. The media can be used to keep people thinking about development, to make them recognize and accept the need for development, to mobilize and make them pre-disposed toward development. This is where development communication would be seen as being a veritable tool in saving the girl child from societal violence and other harmful abuses. The following recommendations are given as ways of eradicating gender-based violence against women and the girl-child.

- i. The media as a watchdog of the society should allocate more and prominent space and broadcast time in their reportage of social issues especially, on those that concern the girl-child and women.
- ii. The girl-child should be given a fair treatment and should be valued and appreciated in the society as their male counterparts.
- iii. The media should make sure that they set agenda where issues of development takes a centre stage in their day-to-day programmes.
- iv. The media should encourage traditions that are people friendly and deemphasise the ones that are barbaric and harmful to the women and girl-child.

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