



GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND COVID-19: THE ROLES OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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Abstract

Purpose: *The purpose of this paper is to examine the role the public library can play to curb the menace of Gender-Based Violence in our community. Coronavirus 2019 (COVID 19) pandemic has brought about much concern in the world today and drastic measures have been taken to curb the pandemic. Such measures include; isolation, proper hygiene, social distancing and staying at home. There is rightfully major concern regarding the staying at home measure in many developing countries where there is tremendous increase in Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Nigeria has long been facing gender-based violence crisis as 30% of women and girls aged 15-49 have experienced sexual abuse. As the government began imposing lockdowns to fight COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria has witnessed a rise in reports of gender-based violence because victims who are usually women are now exposed to their abusers for long periods of time and they are cut off from social and institutional support.*

Design/Methodology/Approach: *This study therefore adopted conceptual approach. It examines an overview of COVID 19, the concept of Gender-Based Violence, forms of GBV, ways COVID 19 worsen the risks of GBV and the roles public libraries can play to curb the menace of this violence in our communities.*

Implication: *In an effort to prevent GBV, public libraries can partner with other professional bodies like health sectors to orient parents of the challenges of life coupled with the responsibility of taking care of their female children and how all can be balanced without any form of abuse or violence.*

Originality/Value: *It was recommended that public libraries should ensure the continuous provision of information to the community members thereby increasing their awareness on the risk of violence against women during this pandemic and the need to keep in touch and support women subjected to violence, and to have information about where help for survivors is available.*

Keywords: *Gender-Based Violence, Covid-19, Public Libraries, Pandemics*

Paper Type: *Conceptual*

Introduction

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) increases during every type of emergency, whether economic crises, conflict or disease outbreaks. Pre-existing toxic social norms and gender inequalities, economic and social stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with restricted movements and social isolation measures have led to an exponential increase in GBV. Many women are in 'lockdown' at home with their abusers while being cut off from normal support services. IFRC (2018) made it clear that Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) increases during emergencies of which COVID-19 is no different.

Worldwide preliminary evidence from the impacts of the pandemic show that SGBV is rising rapidly, and that access to services and modes of delivery of services for victims/survivors of this type of violence are changing quickly due to measures to contain the virus at the international, national and local levels (Fraser, 2020).

Violence against women remains a major global public health and women's health threat during emergencies. Violence against women is highly prevalent. Intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence. Globally, 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or

sexual violence by any perpetrator in their lifetime. Most of this is intimate partner violence. Violence against women tends to increase during every type of emergency, including epidemics. Women who are displaced, refugees, and living in conflict-affected areas are particularly vulnerable. There has been an increase in domestic violence cases since the COVID-19 outbreak (Godlin, 2020). According to WHO (2020), the number of domestic violence cases reported worldwide has tripled in February 2020, compared to the same period the previous year. The health impacts of violence, particularly intimate partner/domestic violence on women and their children are significant. Violence against women can result in injuries and serious physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health problems, including sexually transmitted infections, HIV, and unplanned pregnancies.

There is already an unsettling amount of information on GBV occurring against the backdrop of the COVID-19 outbreak. It is also becoming increasingly clear that many of the measures deemed necessary to control the spread of the disease are not only increasing GBV-related risks and violence against women and girls, but also limiting survivors' ability to distance themselves from their abusers as well as reducing their ability to access external support. In addition, it is clear from previous epidemics that during health crises, women typically take on additional physical, psychological and time burdens as caregivers. As such, it is critical that all actors involved in efforts to respond to COVID-19 – across all sectors – take GBV into account within their programme planning and implementation (UNICEF, 2020).

Statistics of the COVID-19 spread across the world shows that lockdown has become a major challenge in the sense that women who ordinarily go to work in the morning and come back in the evening are now being locked down with an abuser they have been living with and have been trying as much as possible to avoid. In Nigeria, the Domestic Violence Referral Centre in Lagos reported about a 35 percent increase. According to a study jointly commissioned by the Women's Affairs Ministry and the United Nations Population Fund

(UNPFA), 28% of all the women between the age of 25 to 29 in Nigeria had faced some form of physical abuse since they had turned 15. The study also found that 44% of divorced, separated or widowed women reported experiencing violence since age 15, while 25% of married women or those living with their spouses have experienced violence. The imposition of the lockdown has only worsened this already existing crisis and the number has escalated three times. This sharp increase in SGBV is not, however, an exclusively Nigerian phenomenon. This has also been recorded in countries across the world and so far governments have been unable to come up with appropriate responses (Usigbe, 2020)

An Overview of Covid-19

The coronavirus began in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. Residents who lived in Wuhan had some link to a large seafood and live animal market, which suggests that the mode of transmission of coronavirus was from animal to person. The virus has been named "SARS-CoV-2" and the disease it causes has been named "coronavirus disease 2019" (abbreviated "Covid-19"). The first known patient of Coronavirus started experiencing symptoms in Wuhan, China on 1 December 2019. Since then, there have been over 19 million reported cases around the world. (Ozili, 2020).

On Feb 27, 2020, the first official case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was announced. The patient was an Italian citizen, who had recently arrived in Lagos from Europe and who, a few days later, tested positive for the disease. In Ogun state, a neighboring state to Lagos, another patient was identified and was discovered to have been in contact with the first patient. Since then, the situation has developed with more cases occurring, regardless of measures initiated by the state and federal government to combat the virus and return to normalcy (Kalu, 2020). As of August 7, there were 45,687 confirmed cases, 32,637 recoveries, and 936 deaths (NCDC, 2020).

On March, 9, 2020, the Nigerian President in a proactive measure to curtail the spread of this virus declared national border closures, State of emergency in the health sector was ordered and cessation of all movements in the FCT, Lagos State and Ogun State for an initial period

of 14 days. Relatedly, other states of the federation taking cue, initiated partial lockdowns with each closing their respective borders. During this period, businesses, markets, religious centers, schools and other public institutions and spaces are to be on temporal shut down. All forms of corporate, social and religious gatherings were prohibited, howbeit; strict adherence to social distancing is expected in exclusive cases. (Agusi, Ijoma, Nnochin, Njoku-Achu, Nwosuh and Meseko, 2020)

In restricting movement and encouraging social-cum-physical distancing, the lock-down having its positives also has its fair share of negative feedback. Cases of domestic violence have increased during the lockdown in India. It was reported that the National Commission for Women registered a total of 257 complaints including 69 domestic violence complaints by the women in one week (from March 23 to April 2). This number is almost double the complaints of domestic abuse the Commission received earlier in the month of March before the lockdown.

In Nigeria, the director of Lagos-based Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre, said since the lockdown started, the most common gender-based violence reports recorded by her organisation have been spousal violence, landlord-tenant violence, neighbour-to-neighbour violence, and parent-children abuse. Others are homeowner-house help violence, boyfriend-girlfriend violence, violence on widows, police-sex worker violence, police-citizen violence, visitor-caught-in-lock-down child rape. The Lagos State government-run Domestic and Gender Violence Response Team said it has been inundated with increased reports of sexual and domestic violence since the lockdown started late March. It was reported that at the peak of the lockdown in Lagos, the Team on average received 13 new cases daily. In March alone, it received 390 reports. It has been 60 per cent increase in domestic violence, 30 per cent rise in sexual violence, and 10 per cent increase in physical child abuse (Umukoro, 2020).

Gender-Based Violence

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is any form of deliberate physical, psychological or sexual

harm, or threat of harm, directed against a person on the basis of their gender. Although gender-based violence is not exclusively directed against females yet they do suffer from it the most, that is why the focus of this study is on women and girls. GBV is a violation of fundamental human rights. Violence against girls and women prevents them from enjoying their rights.

Violence against women and girls is a grave violation of human rights. Its impact ranges from immediate to long-term multiple physical, sexual and mental consequences for women and girls, including death. It negatively affects women's general well-being and prevents women from fully participating in society. Violence not only has negative consequences for women but also their families, the community and the country at large.

Every week in Nigeria, domestic violence, sexual and gender-based violence: rape, molestation, defilement, sexual assault, early marriage, female genital mutilation, sexual harassment, or trafficking in persons is published in the media or on social media. The perpetrators are often males: fathers, uncles, brothers, cousins, teachers, friends, neighbors, or male mentors.

Worldwide, 35% of women have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. Globally, 7% of women have been sexually assaulted by someone other than a partner. Globally, as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner. 200 million women have experienced female genital mutilation. The reports of domestic violence in Nigeria are following a similar trend to elsewhere in the world. Since various versions of lockdown were put in place across the country on 30 March, 2020, data on reported incidents of GBV cases in Nigeria based on preliminary information from 24 states shows that in March, the total number of GBV incidents reported were 346, while in the first part of April, incident reports spiked to 794, depicting a 56 per cent increase in just two weeks of lockdown. Some of these incidents of violence have tragically resulted in the death of victims, the rape of children, including incestual

rape, and tenant–landlord assault (UN Women, 2020).

Table 1: Number of reported cases of gender-based violence in Nigeria during March to April 2020 by State:

S/NO	STATES	NUMBER OF CASES	
		MARCH	APRIL
1	Abia	25	46
2	Adamawa	16	20
3	Anambra	3	22
4	Bauchi	9	30
5	Benue	30	52
6	Borno	6	26
7	Cross River	8	12
8	Ebonyi	5	2
9	Ekiti	25	51
10	Enugu	3	22
11	Gombe	19	39
12	Kaduna	6	23
13	Katsina	23	33
14	Lagos	37	185
15	Nasarawa	5	20
16	Niger	2	8
17	Ogun	18	22
18	Osun	3	18
19	Oyo	8	20
20	Plateau	25	45
21	Rivers	10	23
22	Sokoto	23	31
23	FCT	5	31

Source: Federal and State Ministries of Women Affairs, April 2020

An unprecedented number of countries have laws against domestic violence, sexual assault and other forms of violence. Challenges remain however in implementing these laws, limiting women and girls’ access to safety and justice. Not enough is done to prevent violence, and when it does occur, it often goes unpunished.

According to European Institute for Gender Equality (2020), numerous studies have shown that children growing up with violence are more likely to become survivors themselves or perpetrators of violence in the future. One characteristic of gender-based violence is that it knows no social or economic boundaries and affects women and girls of all socio-economic backgrounds: this issue needs to be addressed in both developing and developed countries. Decreasing violence against women and girls requires a community-based, multi-pronged approach, and sustained engagement with multiple stakeholders.

- **Physical violence:** Any act which causes physical harm as a result of unlawful

physical force. Physical violence can take the form of, among others, serious and minor assault, deprivation of liberty and manslaughter.

- **Sexual violence:** Any sexual act performed on an individual without their consent. Sexual violence can take the form of rape or sexual assault.
- **Psychological violence:** Any act which causes psychological harm to an individual. Psychological violence can take the form of, for example, coercion, defamation, verbal insult or harassment.
- **Economic violence:** Any act or behaviour which causes economic harm to an individual. Economic violence can take the form of, for example, property damage, restricting access to financial resources, education or the labour market, or not complying with economic responsibilities, such as alimony.

Ways Covid-19 Exacerbate Risks of Violence for Women

According to the WHO (2020), COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risk of gender-based violence in the following ways:

1. Stress, the disruption of social and protective networks, and decreased access to services all can exacerbate the risk of violence for women.
2. As distancing measures are put in place and people are encouraged to stay at home, the risk of intimate partner violence is likely to increase. For example:
 - The likelihood that women in an abusive relationship and their children will be exposed to violence is dramatically increased, as family members spend more time in close contact and families cope with additional stress and potential economic or job losses.
 - Women may have less contact with family and friends who may provide support and protection from violence.
 - Women bear the brunt of increased care work during this pandemic. School closures further exacerbate this burden and place more stress on them.
 - The disruption of livelihoods and ability to earn a living, including for women (many of whom are informal wage workers), will decrease access to basic needs and services, increasing stress on families, with the potential to exacerbate conflicts and violence. As resources become more scarce, women may be at greater risk for experiencing economic abuse.
 - Perpetrators of abuse may use restrictions due to COVID-19 to exercise power and control over their partners to further reduce access to services, help and psychosocial support from both formal and informal networks.

- Perpetrators may exert control by spreading misinformation about the disease and stigmatize partners.

3. Access to vital sexual and reproductive health services, including for women subjected to violence, will likely become more limited.
4. Other services, such as hotlines, crisis centers, shelters, legal aid, and protection services may also be scaled back, further reducing access to the few sources of help that women in abusive relationships might have.

The Role of the Public Libraries

The public library is a democratic equalizer, open to all and providing access to information that helps people improve their individual, family, and community lives. The public libraries today function as robust community centers, often providing services that people cannot get elsewhere (Scott, 2011). Public library is closely linked with the community and has the obligation to provide information needed by the community in all the ways. Public libraries in many communities play a vital role by serving as an important resource for meeting the educational and informational needs of the community, as well as assisting in the process of 'general upliftment' of these communities (Abu, Marty and Carroll, 2011).

According to Lulu-Pokubo and Igwela (2020), the public libraries can provide a number of services to curb the menace of Gender-Based Violence in our society today. These services are:

1. Providing information to the community members thereby increasing their awareness on the risk of violence against women during this pandemic and the need to keep in touch and support women subjected to violence, and to have information about where help for survivors is available. It is important to ensure that it is safe to connect with women when the abuser is present in the home.
2. Sensitizing all stakeholders that are involved in COVID-19 response the need to

be aware of and raise awareness of the potential impacts that physical distancing, stay at home and other measures to address this pandemic are likely to have on women who are subjected to violence and their children.

3. Regular Campaign Programs: Public libraries should hold campaigns monthly or quarterly to remind perpetrators and the general public of the dangers and consequences of Gender-Based Violence. Parents should be encouraged to be part of the campaign and can be done in batches of men this time, women another time but somehow all-round the year there must be a continued campaign.
4. Religious Bodies should be Involved: Religious bodies should be invited for seminars in the library that could encourage them teach and emphasize on violence regularly to their congregation. They could organize programs inviting other faith communities and general public to learn about and help prevent family violence.
5. Librarians as volunteers in providing family support services: Librarians can help as volunteers in making significant contributions to ensure the healthy development of children in need. Librarian can provide one-on-one support, mentoring, and other wrap-around services to children and parent. Librarians can work as solicitors with other firms and organization to provide funds, materials and information services that will immensely benefit the vulnerable.
6. Public libraries can partner with other professional bodies like health sectors to orient parents of the challenges of life coupled with the responsibility of taking care of their female children and how all can be balanced without any form of abuse or violence.
7. The library could host free events featuring comic books stories like Spider-Man, child abuse prevention, face painting, games, and snow cones in order

to help children to learn more on morality issues.

8. Libraries should provide counsellors/Librarians who could help counsel identified victims on how they can overcome the effects of the traumatic experience.
9. Librarians could organize a competition for men and fathers: The essence is to challenge them on the responsibility of a loving father. How to care, love, nurture and rock a complaining baby. It should also be intended to train them on the importance of patience, tolerance and dedication to people around them.
10. Librarians should work with local schools in the prevention of GBV, by providing parents positive information on how to cope with child's poor grades and other behaviours,
11. Libraries are expected to provide the right information materials that could make them wiser, sharper, build their knowledge in other to be able to perceive danger zones or signals.
12. Public libraries should be well funded and equipped to encourage people to make use of it in order to get the necessary information on how to live.
13. Public libraries should collaborate with civil society organizations, including local women's organizations as they can help to disseminate information to those who need it most. They should also partner with the disability organizations and caregiver groups to help reach women and girls with disabilities, and ensure their needs and interests are integrated into GBV services and delivery.

Conclusion

In the bid of enforcing stay at home measures to stop the spread of the COVID 19 pandemic, the lockdown having its positives also has its fair share of negative feedback. Instances of Gender-Based Violence bring to question whether the lockdown is really serving its purpose. There has been increase in GBV which has led to death and stigmatization of victims.

The public libraries especially in the rural areas which is considered as the first point of call for information should continue to play its role in order to curb this menace.

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