

Issues in Marital Conflict and Violence: Sociological Analysis of Narratives of Selected Yoruba Women

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Abstract

The study examines the causes, responses and consequences of marital conflict and violence as perceived by women in these relationships. It analyses the narratives of 28 Yoruba women selected through snowball sampling in Lagos, Nigeria. The women's narratives were obtained through in-depth interview to understand issues associated with marital conflict and violence from their perspective. The study confirms the ubiquity of conflict in marital relationships as well as diversity in the nature and extent of violence which often results from it. Consequent upon conflicts, partners shun inter-personal relations such as verbal communication, family meals and sex. The study is hinged on the social structural model which offers explanation for power relations among the Yoruba where the husband wields control and authority. The study reveals the relevance of extended families in the mediation process despite couples' neolocal residence. It found that traditional values still influence women's understanding and attitude to conflict and violence in their families in spite of their educational and economic status. Dominant reasons for remaining in violent marriages include the desire to protect children and the belief that a good woman must persevere. The study recommends strengthening the extended family and equipping key players in faith-based organizations for more effective intervention.

Key words: marital, conflict, violence, Yoruba, women

1. Introduction

Marital conflicts are ubiquitous and inevitable, cutting across socio-economic strata and without prejudice to the age, religion and occupation of marital partners. Conflicts vary in intensity ranging from minor issues that can be unravelled to major issues, the causes of which are not understood by both partners and therefore cannot be solved by them. The latter could lead to violence and may be destructive to the relationship. Gottman and Driver (2005:65-66) examined Wile(1993)'s submission "that marital conflicts could either manifest in a cooperative manner in which partners admit their mistakes and support each other to move forward or an antagonistic style in which they become defensive and blame their partners, or an avoiding style in which they withdraw to avoid conflict through stonewalling".

Marital conflict can lead to undesirable outcomes. Severe adverse reactions could trail marital withdrawal, verbal hostility, nonverbal hostility, personal threat, physical distress, personal insult and defensiveness (Cummings, Goeke-Morey & Papp, 2003). Marital conflict has implications for mental, physical and family health (Fincham, 2003). The implications of marital conflict often transcend the individuals directly involved in the relationship. The conflict impacts negatively on significant others such as the children of the marriage. It has been observed that marital conflict has more negative outcomes on children than divorce because children whose parents engage in extreme marital conflict tend to be worse off than those whose parents are divorced (Morrison & Coiro, 1999).

Statement of Problem

In spite of being considered empowered Yoruba women rarely disclose their experience of marital conflict or violence until the situation can no longer be contained (Omoyibo, Egharevba & Iyanda 2010; Makinde 2004). The Yoruba worldview of marriage as 'an institution of learning' for the 'woman' expects women to learn virtues such as endurance and forbearance. This restrains women from disclosing episodes of conflict or violence in their relationships. Researchers studying marital conflict attempt to study couples from diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds without due cognizance for peculiar normative gender relations within specific cultural contexts (Tolorunleke 2014; Amadi & Amadi, 2014; Omoniyi-Oyafunke, Falola & Salau, 2014), which may influence the subjects' responses.

The Yoruba cultural context can influence the manifestation of conflict as well as its resolution. It can also influence the perception and understanding of violence by players in subordinate positions. Many statements reflect the Yoruba worldview of normative gender relations in marriage, which endorses power asymmetry and values obedience to and respect for the husband as the locus of authority and control. This could foster acquiescence on the part of a wife such that unpalatable situations that could trigger altercations are overlooked and emotions suppressed until the situation escalates and conflict can no longer be delayed. This study focuses only on the women, and examines their subjective understanding of marital conflict, its causes and

consequences. The subjective nature of the women's argument means that while the study does not intend to achieve a generalization, it does seek to provide an in-depth understanding of the views of these women.

Specifically, the study seeks to examine the causes of marital conflict as perceived by Yoruba women; identify responses to and consequences of marital conflict; and analyze latent issues within the conflict situation.

2. Literature review

The literature on marital conflict is vast. The issues of marital conflict, domestic violence or intimate partner violence have been discussed in literature as issues with severe implications for family life (Gottman & Driver 2005:65-66; Cummings *et al* 2003; Fincham 2003). Conflicts can have multiple causes and this is confirmed by the literature. Conflicts occur as a result of disagreements about money (Idialu 2003; Furnham & Argyle 1998; Lauer 1992) and the frequency of money-related decisions; and discrepancies in families have been associated with some conflict characteristics (Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2009). Clash of interests and needs may also be at the root of marital conflict (Bjornberg 2004). Marital conflicts could also ensue when people's attempt at everyday close or friendly relations fail (Wile 1993); may be due to individual differences (Falk 1975) or because partners hold different values, norms and expectations.

Marital conflicts may be functional when properly managed; allowing partners to know more of each other; understand each other and develop a stronger sense of unity (Siegert & Stamp 1994) or serve some other useful functions (Caughlin & Vangelisti 2006). When mismanaged however, conflicts may be dysfunctional with grave implications for partners and their relationship (Fincham & Beach 1999). It may give rise to chaos and anarchy (Omorogbe, Obetoh & Odion 2010; Garuba 1998) as well as other undesirable outcomes (Cummings *et al* 2003). Marital conflicts are possible in all marriages but a distinction has been made between stable and unstable marriages. Three groups of stable couples identified are validators, volatiles and avoiders while two groups of unstable couples are hostile and hostile-detached couples (Gottman 1994). Global assessments of marital discord are weakly indicative of specific behaviour (Cummings *et al* 2003). Some studies of marital conflict have relied on samples of conflict behaviour obtained from laboratory encounters but there have been questions as to the appropriateness of such observational methods (Heyman 2001). Some have relied on retrospective reports while others have used diaries and log methods. The strengths and weaknesses of such methods have also been discussed by Caughlin and Vangelisti (2006).

In Nigeria, marital conflict is discussed in the literature in the context of domestic violence with evidence of its multiple causes varying across Nigeria's multi-cultural setting as well as its pervasiveness (Omorogbe *et al.*, 2010; Aderinto 2004; Aina 2004; Alumanah 2004; Idialu 2003). Whereas most studies on marital conflicts have examined couples or relational partners (Aderinto 2004; Aina 2004; Alumanah 2004; Idialu 2003), this study is different because it examines the views of only the women in the relationships. It focuses specifically on Yoruba women experiencing marital conflict and violence, seeking to unravel the causes of such conflict as well as their response and the consequences.

The study's focus is important in view of Yoruba women's desire to conform to the image of the 'good woman'. Although this imagery of a good woman is not exclusive to the Yoruba, it is important. It is believed largely in Africa that a good woman is one "who is of good character, obedient, hard-working and generally well-respected in the community" (Gyekye 1996:82). This study therefore seeks to fill important gaps in the literature. By focusing only on the women, the study deliberately seeks to examine the women's subjective understanding of marital conflict, its causes and consequences.

Theoretical considerations

Several explanations, three of which we consider here have been offered for marital conflicts. One set of explanation focuses on gender differences in behaviour. Caughlin and Vangelisti (2006) identified two types of gender differences: differences in the extent to which men and women enact particular behaviours and differences in the association between conflict and other constructs (Caughlin & Vangelisti 2006:11). They observed that women in heterosexual unions tend to display more of negative behaviour than their partners including being more critical (Kelley, Cunningham, Grisham, Lefebvre, Sink, & Yablon, 1978), more demanding (Mikolic, Parker & Pruitt 1997), displaying more overt hostility (Zuroff & Duncan 1999) and distributive tactics (Messman & Mikesell 2000). Some explanations have also linked conflict behaviour with other constructs showing variations by sex. For example, women who have had negative experiences in their family of origin (e.g., parental divorce) may respond more negatively in conflict situation than men with such experience (Sanders, Halford & Behrens 1999). There is however the possibility of gender differences in conflict being exaggerated with researchers propagating gender stereotypes and ignoring conflict behaviours that run counter to stereotypes (Caughlin & Vangelisti 2006). Also of relevance is the cultural explanation

theory which offers a set of explanation by underscoring the use of tradition and norms within culture to explain marital violence (George 2011). The Yoruba culture does not endorse the use of violence in marriages but through the tradition which stipulates deferment to the husband, certain actions of the husband reveals his powerful position relative to his wife and these actions become part of the norms. Even among the Yoruba, cultural practices vary and some aspects of culture give way as social change become inevitable but this theory offers some insight because women often express hesitation to quit violent relationships because their culture abhors divorce.

The social structural model, which considers the power structure of marriages, offers another set of explanations. It suggests that there is power asymmetry in marriage with men having more power relative to their partners in heterosexual relationships. The power asymmetry tends to favour men and puts women in a position in which they keep agitating for change while men resist the change (Jacobson 1990). This model offers a suitable explanation for power relations in marriage among the Yoruba where the husband clearly wields control and authority in the relationship. The marriage relationship among the Yoruba is not a relationship of violence which forces, bends, breaks, destroys all possibilities and minimizes resistance (Foucault 1982) but “a power relationship which is articulated on the basis that ‘the other’ (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible interventions may open up” (Foucault 1982:14). These responses, reactions and possible interventions to marital conflict among the Yoruba are what this study explored.

3. Methods

The study relies on primary data collected through in-depth interview with selected women in Lagos, Nigeria. The women were selected through snowball sampling in Ogba and Yaba areas of Lagos State on the condition that they satisfy the criteria for inclusion in the study. These are that they are Yoruba women, married for at least five years, were having or must have had marital conflict and were willing to share their story by giving their informed consent. Although 42 women were contacted through the snowball technique, only 28 women completed their interview and gave their consent.

Instrument

An in-depth interview guide was the study instrument. Caughlin and Vangelisti (2006:1) observed that questions about conflict can reflect various timeframes. Following their submission, we asked the interviewees to recall episodes of conflicts in their relationships. The interview guide ensured that the retrospective reports focused on what the women thought they did to cause the conflict, the responses of their spouses, and the consequences of the conflict. The study used the technique of ‘herstory’ to unravel women’s perception of conflict situations of which they are a part by undertaking thematic analyses of the narratives of the 28 women. The analysis followed the themes central to the objectives including causes, responses and consequences of marital conflict as well the sociological explanation of the conflict situation.

4. Results

Characteristics of participants

The participating women were between 30 and 59 years of age, with the majority being in their 40s. All but two of them had children ranging from one to six with the majority having between one and three children. They all had spouses who were older than they were with the age difference varying from one to 18 years. Most of the women were educated to the secondary and tertiary levels except one without formal education, two with primary education and two with postgraduate education. They were all engaged in economic activities outside the home. In presenting the women’s narratives, we have focused on their capacity for decision making, what they perceived as causes of marital conflict in their unions, consequences of these conflicts and women’s responses and interventions sought.

Decision making

Most of the interviewees would not take decision without consulting their spouses. The few who took decisions on their own did so because it involved their work or other things pertaining to them or their families of orientation. For matters concerning their immediate family, the majority consulted with their husbands whose views were respected. A 33-year –old holder of ordinary national diploma says:

‘If I want to buy something for my children or parents, I take that decision on my own but there are things I must not fail to tell him (husband) before I do them...like acquiring a property’.

A 43-year –old Master degree holder confirms the freedom to take decision related to her job. ‘...Mostly, those things I can take decisions on, have to do with my job, because he is not part of my job. But when it concerns family issues, I cannot take decisions on my own’.

A 39-year-old self employed computer operator and mother of two confirmed that women’s autonomy in decision making only extends to their jobs and businesses. When it concerns the family, that autonomy ends. She explains:

‘I can take decisions concerning my business on my own without telling him; but when it concerns the children or the family at large, I cannot take decisions on my own’.

Causes of marital conflict

To determine the causes of conflicts in their marriages the women were asked to give retrospective reports about what they considered the most important triggers of conflict they could remember. A common cause of conflict was the women’s lateness from work. Husbands complained about wives coming home late from work and not preparing meals on time.

A 40-year-old hairdresser said her coming back late from work was always a cause of conflict:

‘Several times he complained over the issue of my coming late from my shop. Sometimes he would scold me or even refuse to eat his meals. He even threw my things out once and I went to his mother. She said I should heed his instruction of not keeping late nights in the shop’.

A 35-year- old first degree holder and secretary to an HR Manager said she would not work if her husband had his way.

‘He does not want me to work but because of the situation of things, I have to. Sometimes, I come late when my boss keeps me. My husband does not like it, but he allows me to continue’.

A related complaint was the women’s inability to give adequate child care because of long hours of work. The 40-year-old hairdresser said the husband always complained that the children spend the whole day without their mother looking after them even when he is not available.

Other causes of conflict were lack of trust by the husband, arguing with husband, wife challenging husband’s extramarital affairs, husband’s jealousy or problem with in-laws.

Consequences

If the behaviour which seems to trigger a conflict situation persists, other negative behaviour manifests deepening the conflict situation. Some of the consequences of conflict from the women’s perspective include verbal and physical abuse, withdrawal by the husband who avoids all forms of contact and communication with the wife. Depending on the complexity of the situation, the withdrawal mode may manifest in form of avoidance of physical contact or sex with wife, not talking to her and not eating at home. Other consequences include threats of divorce, confiscating equipment or materials related to wife’s economic activities, locking wife out of the home, coming home late or not coming home for days.

Responses of the women and intervention sought

The response of most of the women was that they appealed to their husbands. When this failed to restore peace, they sought family intervention by reporting to family members predominantly husband’s parents and siblings or their own parents and other relations.

A 43-year-old woman without formal education said:

‘Due to his incessant beating and physical abuse, my family had to come and rescue me from him before he killed me. My bad eye sight resulted from his beating and torturing me’.

Others whose interventions were sought included pastors and respected elders. There was no instance in which the women reported to the police. The family responded through intervention meant to facilitate peaceful resolution of the conflict. In one instance, reporting to the family led to a backlash. The man became angrier and the conflict escalated. The women generally wanted to achieve peace and remain in their marriages for the sake of their children or to conform to social expectations.

5. Discussion

A number of issues are discernable in the women's narratives:

Redefining empowerment: Educational attainment and economic participation are expected to empower women so they can protect themselves against physical and other forms of abuse. The study however shows that women may be subjected to abuse in spite of being educated and economically independent. These two variables also did not affect the causes of conflict which seem to be similar for all participants. This is in consonance with the finding that education and length of marriage did not influence causes of conflicts among couples in Ijumu, Nigeria (Tolorunleke 2014). Participants who had both indices of empowerment still experienced abuse especially when their partners think they are usurping their role or appropriating the honour due to them.

A 35-year old nurse whose husband was uncomfortable with her night shifts often got scolded and beaten by the husband for coming late from work and for giving money to her siblings. In her words, "he believes I am taking the glory when he is supposed to be doing these things". Following arguments on such issues, he could refuse his meals and shun sexual relations with her "as long as the quarrel lasts".

A woman can get beaten for contravening her partner's orders. The experience of the 36-year old banker and mother of two girls confirms this. She gets beaten for going out with a particular friend against the wishes of her husband. As an expression of his anger, she says "he refuses sex, refuses my food and comes home late". In both instances, the men would also withdraw their financial support. Both women believe they are empowered because they are not perturbed by the withdrawal of financial support and can take decisions relating to their jobs, thereby giving their own understanding of empowerment.

Women with lower educational attainment seem to be worse off as they experience more aggression and maltreatment relative to their more educated counterparts. A primary school leaver and a school certificate holder who both said they could not take any decision without their husbands, experienced physical violence for challenging their husbands' extramarital affairs. The former said: "I did not agree with him when he brought a woman into the house. He beat me mercilessly; I lost a front tooth in the process". To the latter, being beaten since he found out about his affair with a girl in the same compound was "a normal thing".

The only participant without formal education who worked as a 'sales girl' suffered physical and emotional abuse on suspicion of extramarital affairs. In part, she says:

'I never hid anything from him but he never trusted me. He didn't want me to work outside the home. He was always beating me, throwing my things out....my people came to plead on my behalf. I used to go to the village to deliver my children but I did not go for the last child as his mother was also annoyed because I used to help her on the farm.... My bad eyesight is as a result of his beating and torturing me...'. (43-year-old mother of six)

Family intervention did not resolve the conflict in this case, yet the woman did not report to the police. She says:

'After beating me, most times, he did not allow me into the house I would sleep in the passage and he would warn other tenants not to take me into their homes and would never listen to their pleas on my behalf'.

The women above have redefined empowerment. To them, they are empowered because they could take decisions about their jobs. In reality however, their partners' capacity to sanction them by beating them indicates that they are not empowered. The physical, emotional or psychological violence they experience can be described as social control mechanism, the consequences of which can affect the performance of their job. The women, however, seemed conditioned to take the violence they experience in their stride.

Relations of power: Discernable in the women's narratives is the fact that relations in their marriages are relations of power in which the men held the reins of control with the women's complicity. The women's choice of words to describe their husbands' actions (e.g., I was slapped, I was scolded or I was beaten) showed the asymmetry of power in the relationship. It confirms that battered wives are often subjected to verbal and physical coercion that is part of a coherent pattern of control (Johnson 2001).

The influence of culture: There is a place of culture in the understanding and perception of conflict and abuse. The reluctance of women to disclose their experience of abuse and their failure to perceive certain behaviour as abusive may be informed by the cultural scripts by which they live. Normative gender relations in marriage among the Yoruba reinforce female acquiescence and submissiveness which enable women tolerate different forms of abuse. Since both the abusers and the abused share the same social context, they understand the direction of public opinion about their behaviour. Cultural values sustain the non-reporting of marital violence

to agencies of the state. In spite of the neolocal pattern of residence in the 21st century, the family is still more relevant in conflict resolution than the police. The primacy of the family in conflict resolution has been sustained through shared values and beliefs. Even where family intervention has failed to yield any positive outcome, the women still justified why they would not file formal reports against their husbands. They quote well known Yoruba beliefs that friendship is severed once you have sought formal intervention in the courts, thereby justifying their stance through the Yoruba belief in restorative justice.

The influence of socialization and shared norms and values also reflect in the reasons they have remained in their relationships despite the conflict and violence they experience. Endurance was a key word used by many participants and children were an important consideration.

'My mother usually says marriage is for better for worse; not just when the going is good. You remain there because of your children. It is better to stay in a troubled home than in a broken home. That's what keeps me going. When I think about the children and the future I want for them, I just have to remain and let things be'. (35-year-old nurse and mother of two)

This attitude confirms that claim that having "a family of origin with a conformity orientation (one that stressed homogenous attitudes, harmony and obedience) was associated with avoiding conflicts and with negative behaviour during conflicts" (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006:12).

A 38-year old accountant and mother of three gave two reasons for remaining in her marriage. According to her, she must remain in her marriage "because of my children and besides, marriage is like a school where you are learning and you have to be committed and dedicated to your marriage". Religion has also given some of the women reasons to remain in their marriages. A 34-year old B.Sc. degree holder believes that God would change her husband and a 43-year old accountant finds succour in her faith. She says:

'According to Bible standards, there is no divorce in marriage once you're in, its till death do us part and that has been my guide; and that one day, no matter what, God will change him'.

Gender division of labour: This came out clearly in the women's narratives. Roles and responsibility were clearly identified and it was clear that subverting these roles could engender strife. Women got beaten for usurping the roles of their husbands in terms of decision making.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study is different from most studies on marital conflict because it has examined the narratives of women alone making it subjectively women-focused. This limitation has however not foreclosed its objective of examining issues that would emanate solely from the women's narratives. Evidence from the study has shown that the cultural context of the study, including norms guiding behaviour in marriage, gender relations and social expectations defined the women's understanding of and responses to marital conflict.

Women's experience of violence in marriage is connected to the issue of human rights. The rights of women to life, dignity and protection from abuse are often eroded in the context of violence. Violence, apart from being a mechanism for perpetrating human rights abuse, also increases women's vulnerability to harmful traditional practices. The tendency of women to remain in verbally or physically abusive relationships without reporting same or seeking help from formal institutions underscores the need to strengthen the reconciliatory processes they believe in. The effectiveness of the family in the mediation process can be questioned by the knowledge that the aggressor does not always abide by its decision but if it is the institution in which the aggrieved believes, more would be achieved from its being strengthened. It is important therefore that in considering reconciliatory measures, efforts should be made to increase the relevance of the extended family. Given the place of religion in the lives of the people, faith-based organizations should also be equipped to play more active roles in conflict intervention. This can be facilitated through appropriate trainings for key officers, including marriage counsellors.

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