

# Covid-19 lockdown and domestic violence in Nigeria

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## Abstract

The period of Covid-19 witnessed the spread of a new global culture of lockdown as a way to stem the spread of the dangerous killer disease that is ravaging the human race. Covid-19 forced national governments to come up with laws and policies of lockdowns, preventing or reducing physical contact as well as social gatherings. Consequently, people were forced to stay at home in their different countries. This study focused on how the lockdown culture affected homes and marriages in Nigeria. It used focus group discussions to explore how the period of lockdown was characterized by domestic violence in Nigeria. Many husbands, wives and children were victims of the negative force of lockdown, while many other families used the period for bonding, re-integration and self-rediscovery. The study recommends increased gender-based empowerment, consultation of psychologists and counsellors as well as civil society-sponsored media programmes on the post-lock-down healing process.

**Keywords:** Gender, violence, Covid-19, lockdown & Nigeria

## Introduction

Historically, humanity faces different forms of challenges, especially crises related to the outbreak of diseases.

Diseases have such a powerful effect on persons and groups, especially when it is a communicable disease or fast-spreading pandemic. The World Health Organisation (WHO) announced the coronavirus pandemic in February 2020 when it started spreading across different parts of the world like wildfire. Coronavirus has a high contagious level and kills very fast. Its contagious nature is spread through droplets (WHO, 2020; Sen-Crowe, McKenney & Elkbuli, 2020). Coronavirus is not airborne (WHO, 2020); it is mainly transmitted through air droplets from person to person or by coming in contact with objects upon which it has been dropped.

Sadly, many African countries could not adequately equip the health sector during the coronavirus period. There was no construction of new isolation centres across many African states. The existing isolation centres in many African hospitals were either created within a single building in many hospitals, which does not help in the adequate management of the spread of infectious diseases. Other isolation centres were too

poorly structured and equipped for human accommodation. In the few places where quasi-isolation centres were built, there was no upgrade of such facilities.

There was also a lack of community awareness or orientation campaigns/projects to prepare citizens at the grassroots for the fast-spreading Covid-19 crisis. As a result, many African hospitals lacked basic medical equipment for the management of Covid-19 such as ventilators and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), so the masses were left to die in their numbers in remote areas where most people did not even associate the deaths with the pandemic. The pandemic has indeed devastated humanity, causing untold havoc to different countries of the world at different times. Not only has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the economic and social conditions of the people, but it has also been responsible for the collapse of national, regional and continental economies. Exports and imports in African countries are projected to drop by at least 35% from the level previously reached in 2019 as a result of the pandemic. Thus, the loss in economic value as at 2020 was estimated at around 270 billion US dollars. Hence, fighting the spread of the virus and providing medical treatment

will lead to an increase in public spending in Africa, which is also estimated to be at least 130 billion (African Union, 2020), thereby revealing the deep nation-building challenge that the pandemic has created on the African continent. This unpleasant economic situation has forced different countries to respond in different ways to the pandemic. This study focuses on the reality of Covid-19 lockdown and how it promoted gender-based violence (GBV) in Nigeria.

Onyeaka, Anumudu, Al-Sharify, Egele-Godswill and Mbaegbu (2021) maintain that a combination of financial, social and emotional stress occasioned by the Covid-19 lockdown kept abusers and the abused together for a longer period, thereby promoting gender-based violence. They went on to argue that the period recorded an increase in the number of abused women and children. The World Health Organisation (2020) documented that about 35% of women globally experienced different degrees of sexual or physical violence during the Covid-19 lockdown. The United Nations Population Fund (2020) estimated that there were additional 31 million cases of domestic and gender-based violence during the period of lockdown. Further, UNICEF (2021) revealed that in Ghana,

children experienced increased exposure to violence, child labour and abuse during the Covid-19 pandemic in general, maintaining that from March to June 2020, the percentage of Ghanaian children that were exposed to physical punishments in their households galloped from the traditional 18% to 26%.

In Nigeria, it would be recalled that there was presidential order that initiated the cessation of all movements in Lagos State, and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja for an initial period of 14 days, starting on 30 March 2020. The restriction was also applied to Ogun State because of its proximity to Lagos State, which makes Ogun State residents vulnerable. Not long, the restriction policy extended to all of state across the country. Private businesses were not unaffected by this lockdown. Consequently, there was hunger and starvation as people could not go about their normal economic activities. Education was badly affected (Anyika, Anikelechi, Thobejane, 2021). To cushion this effect, the government in collaboration with some nongovernmental organizations and private individuals made arrangements for palliatives to be provided to Nigerians, which were largely hoarded by

the government at different stated levels. Unfortunately, when the masses began to discover that the government had the stock of these palliatives, mob protests started and the warehouses where the palliatives were stored were attacked, destroyed and looted by millions of Nigerians who were being dealt a blow by pandemic-induced hunger.

The public health system of the world was significantly negatively affected by Covid-19 (Etodike, Ekeghalu Ani, & Mutambara, 2021). The period of the lockdown witnessed the manifestation of violent behaviours, including gender-based violence, thereby creating additional problems for the female gender in Nigeria who are often the targets of gender-based abuse (Joseph, Alika, Anikelechi, & Thobejane, 2021). More broadly, there are some figures regarding the scale of domestic and GBV during Covid-19 from around the world and then specifically in Africa. For instance, Oxfam (2021) revealed that GBV increased by 25 per cent in Argentina; in the United Kingdom and Cyprus, there was a 25% and 39% increase in gender-based violence respectively, while Italy had a 73 per cent increase. Colombia had a 79 per cent increase, while Malaysia recorded a 111 per cent increase, which is one of the

highest in the world. Tunisia recorded a 43 per cent increase in gender violence during this period, while China experienced a 50 increase, with Somalia and South Africa having 50% and 69% increase.

Adebowale (2020) quoted Pauline Tallen, Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development as saying that Nigeria recorded over 3,600 rape cases during the lockdown. The perpetrators GBV include but are not limited to family members, neighbours, landlords, police and other security agents. In light of this, this study interrogates the role of these people in promoting and entrenching gender-based violence during lockdown in Nigeria.

### **Methodology and theoretical framework**

This study was developed using focus group discussions as a source of primary data. These data were supported by existing literature. The researchers did focus group discussions of five to seven adult persons of both genders that were conducted in Mazamaza, Lagos State, Abakaliki of Ebonyi State and Nyanya of Abuja, which targeted the three popular ethnic groups of Nigeria (i.e., Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba respectively). A total of two focus group discussions made up of five to seven persons were conducted in each

research setting. A total of forty-five persons were involved in the focus group discussion and the distribution across gender is twenty-five females and twenty males. More ladies were selected purposely for the focus group discussion considering the fact that they were at the dominant receiving end of gender-based violence. Mazamaza and Abakaliki had seven persons each in their focus group discussion, while Nyanya had five. Their opinion was sincerely sought on the nature of gender-based violence that was recorded in their setting. Their responses were thematically arranged and presented in relevant parts of the study. The study was conducted from October 2021 to April 2022. Each focus group discussion lasted between fifteen to twenty-five minutes. The data collected were interpreted thematically and supported by necessary academic literature.

The study is also rooted in the social ecology paradigm of violence analysis, which interprets the factors that drive interaction within the individual family and cultural levels. It reveals how each of these units of interaction reinforces and influences events within its level and beyond. Thus, violence manifests within the forces of interaction at family,

community, environmental and cultural levels. The World Health Organization's (*WHO*) report on *Violence and Health (2002)* corroborates the arguments of the Social Ecology Model. It states that 'trigger factors' for men's violence against women are consistent globally. Those consistent triggers include women disobeying or arguing against their husbands and boyfriends, or questioning their husbands and boyfriends about money, with emphasis on how he has spent it or intend to spend it. Others factors include a) questioning men or women about their girlfriends or boyfriends, b) not having food ready on time or in the right way, c) 'failures' as mothers or housekeepers, d) women and girlfriends refusing to have sex when needed by their husbands and boyfriends, and e) either party in the relationship being accused of infidelity.

### **Findings on domestic violence during the Covid-19 lockdown**

Obinna (2021) argued that the pandemic has forced women to stay very close to their supposed attackers due to the lockdown that forced most people to stay home.

Obinna (2021) narrated how the 44-year-old husband of Evelyn Ejima (a mother of two) was turned into a punching bag, in

the quest to satisfy the sexual need of the husband, which happened in Otumara Community in Lagos State. Evelyn who married the man at the age of sixteen (16) was said to have refused to satisfy the endless sexual urge of the husband, who rewarded her with the beating of her life. She was later rushed to the hospital when her husband angrily broke her head in his bid to ensure that she gets the violent message of the seriousness of the emotional need was demanding.

Similarly, Obinna (2021) narrated how Ahmed and his friends kicked the wife, Bola Lawal, out of the house, after battering her, even when the said Bola was the breadwinner of the family, who also pays the children's school fees. Bola narrated how she has been locked outside for several days by her husband, who also had the culture of seizing her phone in order to prevent her from talking with other men. During the lockdown, Ahmed broke her wife's shoulder over a minor provocation.

Furthermore, Lola Ayanda of ActionAid Nigeria reported that her Action Aid documented two hundred and ninety-nine (299) cases of gender-based violence against women and girls in seven states of Nigeria. She noted according to Obinna (2021) that fifty-one (51) cases, out of all

were sexual violence targeted at minors between the ages of three and six. These cases of gender violence manifested in the following forms:

Intimate personal violence: This is a form of violence that manifests when people begin to physically attack members of the domestic family. It could manifest as a physical attack by any of the spouses against the other partner. It can also emanate from parents against the kids or maidservants. Generally, within the period of the lockdown, the fact that spouses lived day in, day out with their partners, children and maids, re-enforced the psychology of anger, fear, bitterness and tendency to attack, which naturally escalated into many forms of violence. Some used machetes, mortars and different dangerous weapons to attack unsuspecting persons, thereby inflicting heavy wounds on them and a number of cases leading to death (FGDs-I, 2021).

Withholding physical needs: The period of Covid-19 lockdown was characterized by different forms of denial within the domestic front. The extreme poverty created by the lockdown heightened the wind of hunger, which dealt a heavy blow to many of the already poor sections of the Nigerian population. It should be noted that millions of Nigerians fend for

themselves via the informal economy which entails going out for daily labour. Consequently, locking them up within their household implied forcing them to battle with a lack of food and clean water (FGDs-II, 2021; FGDs-VII, 2021). Family breadwinners experienced the height of their crisis in the form of worries and psychological threats that undermined their opportunity to sleep at night. They remained awake for days thinking of how to feed their children, wives, husbands, and aged parents in the face of a total lack of money and access to basic human needs. Such families faced the threat of malnutrition and the sicknesses that went with it. Unfortunately, they could not even afford the necessary medical treatment as they have no form of medical insurance due to poverty, hence they prayed and waited to God for a miracle while they died slowly (FGDs-III, 2021).

Refusing to release necessities: There were also cases where parents, out of fear and anger would refuse to release the necessities that their children and wards needed within the period of the lockdown. Parents and guardians were hoarding food and drink as a way of rationing it to serve for other days. Some of those that had to buy expensive

medications for the members of their household that were ill also engaged in this culture of withholding drugs as they were thinking of how to ensure that the little drugs that they have access to would be spread across a longer time frame due to emergencies and unforeseen future (FGDs-IV, 2021; FGDs-VI, 2021).

There was also widespread complaint of denial of sex by partners who saw the period as the best time to punish their partners sexually by starving them of sex. Women and men that suspected that their spouse were unfaithful followed this path. as a way to ensure that the other partner appreciates his or her sexual worth, which has long been neglected and undermined (FGDs-II, 2021; FGDs-IX, 2021; FGDs-XI, 2021; FGDs-VIII, 2021) Others willfully withheld different forms of help from their family members during the period of the lockdown for a range of other reasons. Some family members that were sick were generally neglected by their partners willfully not necessarily because there was no money to pay for the cost of medication but just to send a message of punishment to the victim. Such victims, especially the husbands were either punished for misusing their funds on girlfriends and women friends when they were healthy, while others

were punished for reckless spending in social gatherings and alcoholism at the detriment of their households (FGDs-XVIII, 2021).

Physical violence: There was also the incidence of physical violence that manifested during the period of the Covid-19 lockdown. Within that period, a number of families that have used physical separation and avoidance to manage their family problems became caught up in the culture of grabbing and pushing partners, which is the first stage of physical violence. Others advanced from pushing to slapping their partners. Such acts naturally advanced the anger level against the victims and set the stage for responses that sometimes led to hitting and physical punching. When the victims respond to such offensive slaps or attacks, they were further rewarded with violent hitting and in some cases punching (FGDs-III, 2021; FGDs-VIII, 2022). Whereas in some other cases, the scenario led to hitting with dangerous objects that were capable of inflicting permanent wounds and leading to death, others that had high libido for violent attacks simply grabbed hard objects and used them to attack the victim(s) (FGDs-III, 2021; FGDs-IX, 2022; FGDs-III, 2022, 2021)). Many people were stabbed using

knives and other weapons. A number of others responded by biting their stronger partner while others simply wept and sought help from neighbours who could rescue them from the attacker (FGDs-XX, 2021). There are those who simply went for acid and poured it on their partners as a way of responding to their attacks or punishing them for infidelity, while others unleashed different degrees of burning using hot water, acid and other forms of physical cut on their victim (FGDs-XXIII, 2021).

Sexual violence amongst siblings and relatives: This is a form of violence in which siblings, who find themselves caught up in the period of lockdown and had no access to their boyfriends and girlfriends engaged in sexual intimacy otherwise called incest. Incest is forbidden in most cultures. (FGDs-IX, 2022).

Emotional (blackmail) and psychological violence (threats): This is a form of gender-based violence where couples attacked each other emotionally. It is a form of psychological warfare by one partner against the other. In this form of emotional blackmail, partners are openly told their crimes, commission and omissions in the past. They are often told what they failed to do and how those

failures have caused a permanent dent in them and their families (FGDs-V, 2021).

**Domestic violence amongst tenants and Landlords:** The period of the lockdown recorded a high level of violence between tenants and many landlords. The lockdown did not allow many of the tenants to eke out a living and pay for their rent. Unfortunately, the landlords, who were already poverty-stricken due to reduced economic activities, were putting undue pressure on the tenants to pay their rents when due and the economic meltdown that the lockdown promoted caused the inability to pay, thereby creating a crisis scenario. It should be noted that few good-spirited landlords waved the tenancy rates of their house occupants within the period of the lockdown (FGDs-VIII, 2022).

#### **Analysis of the impact of lockdown-driven domestic violence**

Gender-based violence during the pandemic was seen as a widespread social pandemic. The UN Women (2020) did a study on the place of the lockdown in promoting gender violence. They found that gender-based violence had a widespread effect in different states in Nigeria due to the Covid-19 lockdown. The UN Women (2020) revealed that in March 2020 alone, there were fifty (50)

cases of Gender-Based Violence in the North-East region of Nigeria. The same month witnessed fifty-two (52) cases in the North-West region, while sixty-seven (67) cases were recorded in North-Central Nigeria. In South-Eastern part of the country, there were thirty-six (36) cases, and ninety-one (91) cases in the South-West region as well as eighteen (18) cases in the South-South region of Nigeria. However, the recurrence of gender-based violence increased geometrically the next month, April 2020, in all the regions of Nigeria. Within April, the North-Central region recorded an extraordinary increase up to one hundred and fifty-six (156) cases, while South-East moved up to ninety-two (92). The number of GBV victims tripled in the South-West to two hundred and ninety-six (296), while the South-South recorded thirty-five (35) cases (UN Women, 2020).

Umokoro (2020) documented the findings of Abiola Akiode-Afolabi, the Director of Lagos-based Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC). The WARDC found that the lockdown increased spousal violence and other forms of gender-based violence. Another popular form of violence that was witnessed at that time was house owner-house help violence. This was a form of

violence where house owners physically vent their lockdown frustrations on the housemaids. Some went to the level of unleashing physical injury and repeated rape on their victims. There was also neighbour-to-neighbour violence and parents-children abuse, boyfriend-girlfriend violence, especially those that were unfortunate to be caught up in lockdown during a visit to their boyfriend or girlfriend that did not have the needed resources and preparation to feed and sustain life within the long period of the lockdown. The police were also accused of violently arresting and taking advantage of the lockdown to have an undue advantage over sex workers that were caught breaking the lockdown roles to make a living (FGDs-XVIII, 2021). This is not the first time the Police has been accused of raping women during arrest. In April, 2019, the sixty-five arrested women in Abuja stated categorically that some of the police men that came to carry out the arrest raped them and accused them to be prostitutes, who were indecently dressed (Adebayo, 2019).

### **Implications of lockdown violence**

Nigerian journalists reported extensively on how Covid-19 affected the Nigerian state (Odi, Ani & Ojatorotu, 2021). The culture of gender-based violence during

the lockdown period affected nation-building in Nigeria in different ways. Unfortunately, the feminisation of sin (Sokwaibe, Anikelechi & Thobejane, 2021) has remained a problem in contemporary African society and Nigeria in particular where the influence of patriarchy is still widely felt. The harvest of deaths was the height of the negative effect of the pandemic as there were manifestations of gender-based violence that led to death. There were obvious or hidden cuts and bruises in the life of victims that escaped death and violent experiences during Covid-19. Many people were sent to their unprepared graves due to the gender violence that occurred at that time. Covid-19 affected all aspects of human security in Nigeria negatively (Ani, Chapanyi, Ihuoma & Ani 2022).

The period witnessed apprehension and fear. Many people were behaving apprehensively in the presence of their partners due to poverty, fear of providing the next meal and the challenge of prolonged psychological problems due to the lockdown. Others were routinely making excuses for a partner's behaviour in public or towards loved ones. The situation was worsened by a financial crisis that many households experienced during that period. There was violence

over who would have control over limited available finances. Covid-19 affected the trade and economy of families and households due to the lockdown (Uwizeyimana, Anyika & Ani 2021). The effect of the poverty, fear and neurosis of that time was such that many people were talking fewer times with family members and loved ones and living in constant fear of saying the wrong thing, of contradicting a partner, or of refusing or being refused sex.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

It is no longer news that COVID-19 has already affected the everyday life of millions of people all around the world. In the most affected countries, people who are expected to be at work, producing, distributing and marketing have been living in quarantine and lockdown, thereby forcing many businesses and industries to close down. What apparently is also not news to anyone is that national, regional and global economies are also taking a negative trend due to the negative conditions that people faced during epidemic.

The financial crisis that was experienced at that time increased the tendency for the use of hard drugs, negative psychology, poverty and other forms of neurotic behaviours that made relatives

vulnerable to being violently attacked. The study revealed that gender-based violence within the period of the lockdown affected all genders; however, women and children tend to have suffered more than others. The study identified the unique ways in which gender violence manifested and discussed its impact on the Nigerian state. They include but are not limited to spousal violence, which is the form of violence meted out by a spouse against his or her partner at any little provocation. The period of the lockdown according to them also witnessed landlord-tenant violence. This was a popular form of violence that manifested between the shylock landlords that were putting pressure on their tenants to pay their monthly or annual rents at a time that the tenants could not go out to fend for themselves and raise the needed money for house rent.

However, it would be recalled that the enforcement of travel and social gathering restrictions in many African countries increased the problem of poverty and created domestic violence on one hand, but on the other hand, it promoted family bonding at the nuclear and extended family level in many African communities. It also intensified the degree of conjugal intimacy, conception

and increase in human population. The challenge of antenatal care became highly problematic during the period of lockdown and the management of other forms of health emergencies increased the number of deaths caused by Covid-19 pandemic in Africa.

The solution to the problem of gender violence includes but is not limited to awareness creation and re-orientation programmes for both male and female genders. It also includes increased

national empowerment and resource access, which will give each gender access to basic needs of life. There is a need for the collective culture of promoting the duty of care by everybody in society as a transformative strategy for both victims and abusers. Finally, the study recommends increased gender-based empowerment, consultation of psychologists and counsellors as well as civil society-sponsored media programmes on the post-lock-down healing process.

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