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Social Media and Perpetuation of Violence against Women in Nigeria: The Case of Facing Death on Facebook

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Abstract

In recent years, criminals who invade and negatively use the opportunities offered by the internet and the World Wide Web, seem to be removing smiles off the faces of many Nigerian women. Social media forms due to their high interactivity, are used to perpetuate violence against women. Facebook remains the most commonly used one. The case of Cynthia Osukogu provides basis for this assertion. Violence against women through facebook manifests in many forms ranging from the use of words, photographs and physical injury resulting to the death of many women. This paper examines the documented cases of violence against women through facebook using the analytical discussion method. It concludes that such violence has led to emotional, psychological and physical torture of Nigerian women. It however

recommends that caution should be the watch word of women, especially young girls who access facebook and other social media forms.

Key Words: *Social Media, Violence against Women, Nigerian Women, Facebook.*

Introduction

Violence against women is a broad term covering all practices that humiliate women, impair their health and endanger their lives. The United Nation's declaration on the elimination of violence against women (1993) in Fagbemi (2000:1) described violence against women thus:

Any act of gender-based 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.

The above description by the United Nations clearly shows that violence against women manifest in many forms. In most developing nations, especially Nigeria, violence against women, usually occur in forms like wife battering, female infanticide, incest, marital rape and forced pregnancy. Sexual harassment in work place and harmful traditional practice like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), premature marriages and widowhood rites, are other forms through which violence against women used to be executed. Today, with the advent of social networking sites like facebook, Twitter, 2go, blackberry phones, Ipads etc, the story has changed. Violence against women is no longer only on face-to-face basis. The social media forms are being used to perpetuate violence against women. It now transcends international boundaries and affects all classes of women irrespective of income, class or culture, (Grange, 2000; Madunagu, 2003).

Violence against women in Nigeria: Cases, Trends and Consequences

Violence against women is not an entirely new issue among Nigerian people. But it is painful to note the rising trends with which women are brutalized and killed by men who at one point in time have been intimate with them. The major cause of the continued perpetuation of violence against women in Nigeria seems to be due to the nature of Nigerian society which is highly patriarchal. Men are the superior warriors and masters while women are

subjugated to the level of “second class citizens” who by nature are created not to say “No” but always “Yes” to their masters.

Violence against women in Nigerian manifest in forms like slapping, kicking, hitting with an object, calling of names, creating negative stereotypes of women, rape and coercion of sex through threats or physical force. It also exists in psychological forms like threats of abandonment, abuse, confinement to the home, surveillance, threats to take away custody of the children, destruction of objects, isolation, verbal aggression and constant humiliation. Economic abuse manifests in forms like denial of funds, denial of food and basic needs, controlling of access to health care, employment and education (Domestic Violence Against women and Girls in Ohaja, 2012). In some societies or tribes in Nigeria, many cultural practices like widowhood rites, shaving of hairs, female genital mutilation, all support verbal aggression and humiliation of women.

Nigerian society, right from the ancient times, tends to support annihilation and aggression towards women. In this modern times, many enlightened officials still operate from the prejudices and stereotypes of male-dominated society, (Eze- Anaba, 2010). Madunagu (2003:14) lists the following as the most common acts of violence against women in Nigeria: Men;

- Giving orders and being the boss
- Making decisions without seeking her opinion
- Being possessive, keeping track of where she is, who she talks to and what she does
- Criticizing her all the time
- Ruining her reputation by spreading rumours
- Getting back at her for not doing what they want
- Thinking she owes them sex
- Believing she must agree all the time
- Thinking she should not contradict men in public
- Believing she has no right to question men
- Thinking she is responsible to making men feed better when they are unhappy
- Believing she has no right to cheat on men while men can do so
- Not listening to her
- Not respecting her opinions

- Seeing her as a sex object
- Thinking she is not as smart as men
- Thinking she is too sensitive, overly emotional or irrational.

The above mentioned scholar also maintains that lack of prosecution or punishment of perpetrators of violence against women, here in Nigeria, discourage victims from speaking out or seeking redress.

Violence against women comes with many consequences. Besides denying women their fundamental rights, it undermines human developmental goals, brings psychological and emotional trauma and has serious health implications for women. The health consequences as stated by WHO (1996), cover non-fatal outcomes which include physical and mental health outcomes. The non-fatal outcomes may manifest in forms like unwanted pregnancies, STDs, miscarriage, chronic pains and headaches, permanent disabilities, asthma, irritable bowel syndrome, depression, fear, anxiety, low self-esteem, sexual dysfunction, eating problems, obsessive-compulsive disorders and post-traumatic stress disorders. Some women may even indulge in self-destructive behaviours like smoking and unprotected sex as a result of sexual humiliation or violence by men. The fatal outcomes include suicide, homicide, maternal mortality and (HIV/AIDS).

Contextual Overview of Social Media

Social media refers to web and mobile-based technologies which are used to turn communication into interactive dialogue among individuals, organization and communities. They are internet-mediated human communication systems that are based on the framework of web. 2.0. Web 2.0 is the software that accounts for all social interactions and exchange between and among individuals, organization and communities via the Web or internet, (Dominick 2009). The concept of social media therefore finds meaning in the ability of users to generate, interpret, restructure and disseminate content. The idea enables users to create and share experiences, information or ideas based on the pervasive technology of the internet and the World Wide Web (www). Social media, according to Boyd and Ellison, primarily allow individuals to:

- Construct a semi-public profile within a broad system

- Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a common connection and;
- View and to traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) classified social media into six categories as: collaborative projects (wikipedia); Blogs and Microblogs (Twitter etc.); content communities (Youtube etc); social networking sites (facebook etc); virtual game worlds (world of wear craft etc); and virtual social worlds (second life etc). These social media forms use technologies such as blogs, picture sharing, V-logs, wall posting, emails, instant messaging, music-sharing, crowd sourcing and Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) (McAfee, 2010).

Social media combine technologies and features (both past and evolving), to create online global environments for interaction and exchange. And as Ogene (2012) maintains, they have given rise to a new way of life and to essentially new voices through interpersonal communication channels. These new voices which began as innocuous interpersonal communication channels have, following increased access to the internet and other computer devices that support social networking, grown into global sites for news dissemination. Indeed, social networking sites such as facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and other handheld mobile applications, such as blackberry, whatApp etc, are some of the popular web-based social media that are giving vent to previously voiceless individuals and groups who have today become strong new voices. The most popular users of these social networking platforms are the youths and the middle-aged men and women. This of course accounts for the use of the social networking platforms in the perpetuation and carrying out of not only violence against women but nefarious crimes as well.

Facebook and Perpetuation of Violence against Women

Back in August 2011, feminists noticed the proliferation of pro-rape pages on facebook. Two months later, 176,000 people signed a U.S based petition calling on facebook to take them down and nearly 4,000 people have signed a U.K based petition calling for the same. The facebook pages such as “Roses are red, violets are blue, I’ve got a knife, get in the Van”, “You know she’s playing hard to get when your (Sic) chasing her down an alleyway”. Kicking

a slut in the vagina and losing your foot inside”; “shut the f - - k up and make me a sandwich”; “I kill bitches”, and “punch the slut in the face” (Elliot, 2011). These groups as observed by Glaser (2011) have 200,000 likes. Many similar groups also still exist on the web site including “you know she’s playing hard to get when she’s trying to break out of your Van”. This sites has 52, 000 likes. Another site: “wiping make- up off your shoe after a long day of kicking sluts in the face”, has 89,000 likes while the web site “riding your girlfriend softly, cause you don’t want to wake her up” has 87,000 likes. A closer examination of these websites shows a mix of random internet memes and racist, sexist and otherwise controversial humours or jokes that endanger women by diminishing the seriousness of rape (Glaser, 2011). The most popular sites that attracted a grand total of over 200,000 petition signatures (186,000 of them on a single charge. Org petition) is the page titled “what’s 10 inches and gets girls to have sex with me? My knife”. After a twitter campaign, withdrawal of several major advertisers from the site and an outpouring of harsh criticism from a multitude of feminist activist and writers, facebook finally removed the rape humour page but has given no indication that it will remove such pages if they reappear, (Stevens, 2011).

All the above mentioned cases show that facebook cannot be exonerated of encouraging the perpetuation of sexual violence against women. In defence to the petitions, facebook compared the offensive contents to cracking dirty jokes at a bar. “It is very important to point out that what one person finds offensive, another can find entertaining, and just as telling a rude joke won’t get you thrown out of your local pub, it won’t get you thrown off facebook”, said the site in a statement, (Glaser, 2011 p.1). In another development while defending women-denigrating representation of Mark Zuckerberg’s alcohol-fuelled creation of facemash, the precursor to facebook, Aaron Sorkon wrote:

...that was the very specific world I was writing about...facebook was born during a night of incredibly misogyny....comparing women to farm animals, and then to each other, based on their looks and then publicly ranking them. (Chemaly, 2012 p3).

Facebook also defended these numerous pages that violate specific clause in facebook’s statement of rights and responsibilities that are supposed to protect groups against violence and hate speech. This clause instructs the user: “you will not post contents that is hateful, threatening or pornographic,

incites violence or contains nudity or graphic or gratuitous violence”. In defence, facebook claims groups that express an opinion on a state, institution, or set of beliefs-even if that opinion is outrageous or offensive to some-do not by themselves violate our policies”, (Elliot, 2011 p. 1). Many feminists however think these contents are not only offensive but threatening, hateful, and appear to incite violence against women. And as Clemaly (2012) puts it, facebook does not have a word problem, or a terms problem or a censorship problem, but it has a sexism problem. That’s why, as with rape jokes, the problem is not that these pages exists, it’s that so many people finds the idea of violence against women so entertaining and the people running facebook flaunt such an openly sexist and misogynistic interpretation of their policies. The situation is more than controversial and is really #Not-funny-facebook.

Facebook and Violence against Women in Nigeria: The Sad Stories

On August 2012, indications emerged that the late Cynthia Osukogu, the only daughter of General Frank Osukogu (rtd) whose body was discovered in a Lagos Morgue a month after she was declared missing, could have been murdered by her facebook acquaintances. Investigations by the Nigerian police force revealed that Cynthia was strangled to death in the hotel by her facebook friends, who thereafter left with an undisclosed amount, her student identity card and phones, (Usman,2012).

A year before the ugly incident reported in the paragraph above, a similar case involving five undergraduate male students of Abia State University and a female student was all over the airwaves. In September 2011, a male facebook friend to a female undergraduate, names withheld, invited the so-called girlfriend only for the girl to be gang-raped by five young men. The most barbaric act of the young men was the posting of the gang rape video over the internet. While the face of the girl could be seen, the faces of the men in the video clip were blurred. The rape, which went on for an hour, was recorded by the rapists and was shared via mobile phones before making it way to the internet, (Okoye, 2011).

Similar cases to the ones mentioned above occur on daily basis but unfortunately they are not reported. Many women are assaulted daily on facebook pages, while the younger ones who are vulnerable are lured into having sex by people they meet on facebook. Some other ones are called names, insulted and molested via facebook. The question therefore is: who

will bail the cat? With the increase in the number of facebook users, majority of whom are youths, the problem seems to be increasing on daily basis.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In this paper, it could be seen that facebook has become part of most young people's lifestyle especially in their quest for relationship and socialization. This trend has resulted in the use of facebook to commit violence against women. Facebook executives have done little or nothing to stem this ugly trend. The specific clause in facebook's statement of rights and responsibilities that is supposed to protect women against violence and hate speech instructs the user: "you will not post content that is hateful, threatening, or pornographic; incites violence; or contains nudity or graphic or gratuitous violence." However, facebook has now defended the numerous pages that clearly violate these terms by claiming. "Groups that express an opinion on a state, institution, or set of beliefs even if that opinion is outrageous or offensive to some – do not by themselves violate our policies." What facebook do not seem to get, is that rapists and others who perpetuate violence against women do so because they know they will get away with such acts. We live in a society where violence against women is not taken seriously and where posting heinous comments online that promote sexual violence are not treated as hate speech or as content that threatens women's safety, but are instead treated as a joke and given a completely free pass.

By refusing to take these pages down and by not blocking people who post offensive photographs of women, facebook executives have made absolutely clear where they stand on the issue of violence against women.

This study therefore recommends that:

- Facebook executives take serious measures on how to curb violence against women via facebook pages
- Media scholars come out with measures on how violence against women could be reduced via social media networks
- Nigeria government stipulate serious punishment for people who commit violence against women via the social networking sites.

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