

Domestic Miscommunication as a Development Constraint: A Study of Wife- Beating Among Selected Junior Workers

by Noma Owens-Ibie*

Abstract

The paper examines communication breakdown in the home as expressed through physical violence on the wife. It discusses the subject from the perspective of its centrality to mobilizing women toward the development effort. From the findings of a study of wife-beating among a sample of junior workers in Nigeria, it is clear that development communication programmes for women would be more effective, if properly packaged with a consciousness of the limitations and handicap of the women at the grass-roots, as well as the often domineering personality of the man at the lower rung of the economy. The paper also identifies the involvement of husbands in development programmes for women as a vital key to promoting such programmes among women.

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Mauvaise Communication comme Contrainte au Développement: Brutalité Masculine dans les Foyers des Travailleurs du bas Echelon

Résumé

L'article examine la crise de communication au foyer telle qu'elle se manifeste à travers la violence physique perpétrée contre la femme. Il se penche sur le sujet sous l'angle de la nécessité de mobiliser les femmes pour le Développement.

Selon des conclusions tirées sur base des cas des femmes battues dans les foyers des travailleurs subalternes au Nigéria, il est clair que le développement des programmes de communication pour femmes seraient plus efficaces s'ils étaient accompagnés de conscientisation sur les limitations et handicaps de la femme de la petite société, ainsi que le caractère dominateur de l'homme au plus bas échelon de l'économie.

L'article exhorte aussi la participation des maris dans le développement des programmes pour femmes comme un élément vital pour la promotion de tels programmes.

Introduction

Over the years, communication in the home has come to take a prominent position in the body of communication research. Hitherto, people have assumed that once there is love, there is perfect communication in the home. They have not considered the difficulty that good and effective communication involves. Andersch, *et. al.* (1969, p. 12) have stated that: 'Good friendships also do not just happen. They are the product of mutual effort. It takes a lot of work just to get along with others, let alone build strong personal friendship'.

The irony is that the closer the relationship between two people, the more difficult it is to achieve perfect communication. This is a major explanation that McCroskey *et. al.* (1971) seems to give for the rising wave of unmarried couples living together, especially in the U.S. and other industrialized societies. According to these experts, unmarried people would often defend cohabitation without marriage by saying, "We love each other, and we don't want to spoil it by getting married". Funny as this may sound, it only shows that marriage vows impose much communicative responsibility that a couple would not expect from an 'outsider'. McCroskey *et. al.* (1971, p. 182) note that 'one or both parties may even arrive at the unstated conclusion that they "own the other" or that the other "belongs to them"'.

This places a high demand on competence in communicating in the home. A negation of this expectation, in any form, leads to a breakdown which subsequently leads to friction. One outlet of friction in a marriage is domestic violence.

This leaves an inescapable option for the couple. There must be a determination to achieve a high level of perfection in communication, even at the risk of redundancy. Redundancy, as a matter of fact, has positive values if it helps strengthen marital ties and if it reinforces existing acceptable channels of expression between husband and wife. These facts are often ignored or overlooked in a home situation, leading to a collapse of the framework of communication and often to physical violence on the wife.

Though differences arise in the theoretical foundations of the black polygamy and the white monogamy, on the one hand, and the black and white monogamy on the other, the world marital system seems to have found close association in domestic violence, and in wife-beating as a specific case. In short, wife-beating has no colour bias, and to a large extent, no class bias.

The main purpose of the study reported in this paper was to examine communication breakdown in the home as expressed through physical violence on the wife.

Review of Past Work and Theoretical Framework

Scholars, over the years, have noted and complained about the dearth of literature on wife-beating, an attitude which has been termed "selective inattention" (Gelles, 1974;

Nichols, 1976). Davidson (1977), while observing that throughout history there has always been someone to cover up the crime to public view, also says of available literature on the subject:

A visit to a large library recently showed that there is no volume on the history of wife-beating in the western world. There was no category called "Wife-beating" in the card catalogue . . . Every librarian, anthropologist and historian I turned to for reference help remarked on the "almost impossible job" I had ahead of me. (p. 3).

Despite this scarcity of references, it is reported that agency and police records in the United States and elsewhere are filled with complaints of wife-beating (Nichols, 1976).

A Harris poll in the U.S. once showed that 20% of all Americans endorse the hitting of a spouse when necessary. The figure rises to 25% when the opinions of graduates are sought (Roy, 1977). Also, in a study among non-European cultures, Murdock (1964) found that cruelty to wife was the single most important factor that led to the break-up of homes. Prescott and Letko (1977) have also observed:

While statistics reveal that in the New York State in 1973, there were almost 5000 rapes reported, almost three times that number of wife-abuse complaints went to family court! Unreported cases could perhaps double or triple that number. Undetected and hidden for the most part, statistics and estimates are most difficult to retrieve, since most women will not make public the conflict in their marriages. (p. 72).

This historical hypocrisy has not helped any society. It is obvious that wife-beating is rampant in societies across the globe and yet people pretend that nothing is happening.

Wife-beating is often an avenue for asserting power, though it also often results from provocation, drunkenness and even mental disease. Lewis (1964) observes that men generally feel that they must conserve the old order in the home to maintain control over the family. He proffers the "martyr complex" as explanation for the woman's often unquestioning and unchallenging acceptance of the home experience. Here, women see themselves as having been 'destined' into oppression and therefore they must patiently go through the ordeal of wifhood. They prefer to quietly lament their fate rather than boldly question the situation and make effort to effect change.

Wife-beating is sometimes used to assert authority and gauge the measure or degree of power that flows from the husband. This makes wife-beating common, with excuses that include the drunkenness of the husband, rude speaking of the wife, bad meal preparation, failure to iron husband's clothes, suspicion of unfaithfulness in wife, the jealous wife or the questioning or inquisitive one.

Roy (1977), in a study among 150 victims of wife-beating, reports that 85% of the violent husbands had alcohol or drug problems. She also identifies causes of wife-beating as including argument over money, jealousy, sexual problems, husband's drinking or taking drugs, conflicts over the children, husband's unemployment, wife's

desire to work outside home, pregnancy, wife's drinking or taking drugs (Roy, 1977, p. 40).

Available literature attests to the view that wife-beating permeates various strata of socio-economic placement. However, it is clear that the low-income, less educated and unemployed class resort more frequently to wife-beating, more often as an escape from their unfulfillment. Prescott and Letko (1977) report in their study that while 73% of men with unfulfilling jobs engaged in high domestic violence, only 37% of those with fulfilling jobs engaged in high violence in their homes.

The consequences of wife-beating are numerous. They range from the immediate physical injuries (a common feature of wife-beating) to more serious emotional and psychological trauma which, more or less, reverberate on the entire being of the woman, including her vocation. Prescott and Letko (1977) report in their study that three-fourths of the wife-beating victims reported being depressed, while one-third reported feelings of humiliation. Victims of wife-beating are ultimately at the risk of maladjustment in all their endeavour: work, school, social or community service, mobilization programmes, and they are less likely to respond to and be affected in development communication programmes.

Despite this crisis and recurrence of violence in their homes, most women prefer to remain where they are. Reasons often given for this behaviour include a hope for reform or change in the home, nowhere else to go, fear of reprisals, fate of children, economic dependence, fear of loneliness, the stigma of divorce, etc. And the fear of reprisals often accounts for why many wives do not lodge complaints to an outside party, while some only try to avoid what they consider a social disgrace.

Wife-beating is an anti-social behaviour, therefore it is rare to find people disclosing that they beat their wives. Little (1973) has noted that 'a husband may, in private, completely dominate his wife, but he cannot, with impunity, treat her in front of other people as an inferior. If he does, he will run a grave risk of being stigmatized as "bush" and losing prestige'. (p. 174).

According to him, an answer to the question "Do you beat your wife?" is relevant here. An answer in the affirmative would sociologically and socially mark the man concerned as a non-elite person. The argument is that the elite in society are unlikely to admit any manifestation of anti-social behaviour, even though it thrives among them. And among intellectuals too, the situation is the same. A university teacher is not likely to admit that he beats his wife even if he did a few hours before.

Existing literature also identifies husband-beating; but this is less common and often does not carry with it the grave consequences that goes with battered wife.

Study Objectives and Methodology

The aims of the study were as follows:

- To determine the prevalence of wife-beating among junior workers.
- To investigate some of the socio-psychological implications of wife-beating on the wife.

To identify implications for development communication, especially as it relates to women.

The study population comprised junior staff of the University of Ibadan. A sample of 250 junior workers was chosen. This consisted of an equal number of 125 men and 125 women. Two sets of interview schedules were drawn up; one for the men and the other for the women. The interviews were done in the place of work of the respondents and in the junior staff quarters of the University of Ibadan, called Abadina. Twenty three third and final year students of the Departments of Communication and Language Arts and English were trained to do the interviewing. They comprised 12 girls and 11 boys. The girls interviewed the women while the boys interviewed the men. This was done to ensure a high degree of honesty and co-operation among the respondents. Apart from the English language, field assistants were encouraged to use the pidgin English and local languages, where necessary. The interview method was preferred because of the fear of a possible low response rate for a self-administered questionnaire, and because of their level of literacy.

Response rate shows that 121 interviews were completed among the women while 118 interviews were completed among the men. Some of the respondents refused to answer some questions. Each interview schedule consisted of 13 questions relating to self-perception, opinion and attitude, information and demographics.

Analysis and Discussion

A total of 239 junior workers were successfully interviewed. The average age of the respondents was 35 years for women and 40 years for men. Length of marriage was between 11 and 15 years while the average educational qualification was the Secondary School Certificate or General Certificate of Education (ordinary level) for the men and women.

From the responses, 83% of the husbands and 88% of the wives believe that quarrels may occur in a matrimonial home, while 11% of the men and 1% of the women do not think there can be quarrels between couples. On whether the husband should beat his wife if there is a quarrel, Table 1 has a breakdown of responses.

Table 1: *Should a Husband Beat his Wife?*

Opinions	Husbands		Wives	
	N	%	N	%
Yes	10	8	19	16
No	101	86	102	84
No Opinion	7	6	—	—
Total	118	100	121	100

From Table 1, we see that a very high percentage of the men and women do not think that it is right for a husband to beat his wife after or during a quarrel. However, more women (19) than men (10) think that the wife should be beaten. Their opinion is that if a wife decides to provoke her husband to such level of anger then she should face the consequences. While all the women expressed an opinion, 6% of the men said that they had no opinion on the issue.

When the respondents were asked if they had ever quarrelled with their husbands or wives, 82% of the husbands said that they had quarrelled with their wives at various times. On the part of the wives, 88% said that they had quarrelled with their husbands at various times. Again, 4 of the male respondents said that they had no opinion. Table 2 presents the data on that question.

Table 2: Ever Quarrelled with Husband/Wife?

Opinions	Husbands		Wives	
	N	%	N	%
Yes	97	82	106	88
No	17	15	15	12
No Opinion	4	3	—	—
Total	118	100	121	100

A follow-up question to this was whether husbands had ever beaten their wives and whether wives had ever been beaten by their husbands. Table 3 summarises responses to this question.

From Table 3, we see that more of the husbands and wives deny the incidence of wife-beating in their homes. This is not unexpected as it would be quite difficult to get people to discuss such subjects honestly. However, the figure of those who admit wife-beating is very important. Twenty-six percent of the men admit beating their wives while 35% of the wives say that they have been beaten by their husbands. It is interesting here that the wives are more willing to admit that they have been beaten than the husbands are willing to admit that they beat their wives. Women could be obviously under more pressure to tell the truth than the men because of their unending ordeal.

The study also sought to know how frequently this beating takes place. So the husbands were asked how often they beat their wives and the wives were asked how often they have been beaten by their husbands. Table 4 presents the data.

From Table 4, we observe that no husband admits beating his wife very often whereas three of the wives admit being beaten very often. In the same vein, more of the wives admit being beaten often, more admit being beaten occasionally while less admit being seldom beaten. It is interesting to note that even though the men admit

Table 3: *Beating of Wife*

Opinions	Husbands (Ever Beaten Wife?)		Wives (Ever Been Beaten by Husband?)	
	N	%	N	%
Yes	31	26	42	35
No	81	69	76	63
No Opinion	6	5	3	2
Total	118	100	121	100

Table 4: *Frequency of Beating*

Frequency	Husbands (How often do you beat your wife?)		Wives (How often are you beaten?)	
	N	%	N	%
Very often	—	—	3	7
Often	2	5	5	12
Occasionally	16	46	22	52
Seldom	17	49	12	29
Total	35	100	42	100

beating their wives, they do not admit any appreciable frequency, whereas the wives admit more regular beating from their husbands. It is equally interesting to note that while the figure of those women who admit being beaten remains at 42, the figure for the men who admit beating their wives (originally 31 in Table 3) rises to 35.

The study also investigated the feelings of the respondents after beating their wives or receiving beating from their husbands. Among the men, 19% said that they felt guilty, 16% said that they were satisfied, 37% said that they felt depressed, 19% said that they felt indifferent while 9% said that they were angry. Table 5 presents the feelings of the women.

From Table 5, it is clear that most of the beaten wives feel depressed after the experience (44%). Twenty-one percent say that they feel discouraged and demoralised; 10% say that they feel more afraid of their husbands; 17% say that it makes no difference to them while 8% say that they feel satisfied. This last group may appear strange but the theoretical proposition is that where a wife considers herself the homebuilder, receiving beating from her husband is sometimes seen as an indictment

Table 5: *Feeling After Being Beaten*

Opinion	N	%
Depression	23	44
Discouragement	11	21
Fear	5	10
Satisfaction	4	8
Indifference	9	17
Total	52	100

on her role in the home and she 'gladly' accepts it as punishment for her failures.

Here again, it is interesting to note that whereas 31 husbands admitted beating their wives, 43 discussed how they felt after beating their wives and whereas 42 wives admitted being beaten by their husbands, 52 discussed how they felt after the experience. Generally, as the interview progressed, more of the respondents were willing to open-up and talk more frankly.

On the effect of being beaten by their husbands on their personality, some said that being beaten is disgraceful, depressing, discouraging and embarrassing. Some are unable to do active work after the experience, some lack concentration, some plan to retaliate, some are unsettled and some who trade say that they become rude to their customers.

Implications for Development Communication

Wife-beating is the result of a breakdown in communication in the home. It tends towards deviance because it does not seek to explore other avenues of resolving conflict in the home. Some men have become monsters in their homes rather than husbands. They deliberately instil fear in wife, children and even neighbours. The home is only lively when such husbands are away. And as Little (1973) has stated, they see wife-beating as the most effective way of asserting authority in the home. They feel threatened any time their views are questioned.

Wife-beating is a dangerous phenomenon because it only bends a little to literacy. Both the literate and non-literate beat their wives. Women under such bondage will suffer at the psychological and emotional levels, which might make them less accessible to, and enthusiastic about, social change and development. Participation in projects designed for women would now be at the mercy of the ever-watchful husband. And, as previous studies have shown, wife-beating ultimately results in low emotional energy which could cripple plans aimed at improving the lot of women.

Available literature has shown that though wife-beating also occurs among those who are high on the economic ladder, it is more prevalent among the low income and

less educated groups. It suggests, therefore, that people outside the university may be in more danger of wife-beating since their husbands would be less rational and more oblivious of embarrassment or disgrace. Such wives may not likely benefit from women-directed programmes.

Statistics show that in Africa, though women are more in number, they are less literate and they are more of the grassroots people. Therefore, any development programme that ignores them is likely to fail. And any programme that does not take their social constraints into consideration in its design is also likely to fail. There is more economic independence among literate women; but where the man is the sole breadwinner, the woman is likely to be under subjection to him, despite constant battering.

Programmes that focus on women, without provisions for the needs of their husbands may likely fail. If women need education, so do men. Development communication should focus on training husband and wife to maximise acceptable channels of communication and resolve domestic conflicts amicably.

Conclusion

Communication in the home cannot be ignored in development policy-making. The traditional orientation of many men make them put aside, for a moment, their academic training, and attempt to solve problems in their homes through violence. This paper has focused on the lower-class group because they stand to benefit more readily from development communication and to utilize it in uplifting their social well-being.

Women cannot be ignored, and their travails should be brought to the fore. Wife-beating is a contemporary social vice that can and should be handled through communication education. Husbands and wives (whether monogamous or polygamous) have to realise that any such conjugal relationship requires more tact, effort and patience in the interpersonal communication process. A clear understanding of this could save us the hypocrisy of sweeping under the carpet a very prevalent problem. If wife-beating can be, at least, minimized, our women-folk would be the better for it, and development communication would be more successful in execution.

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