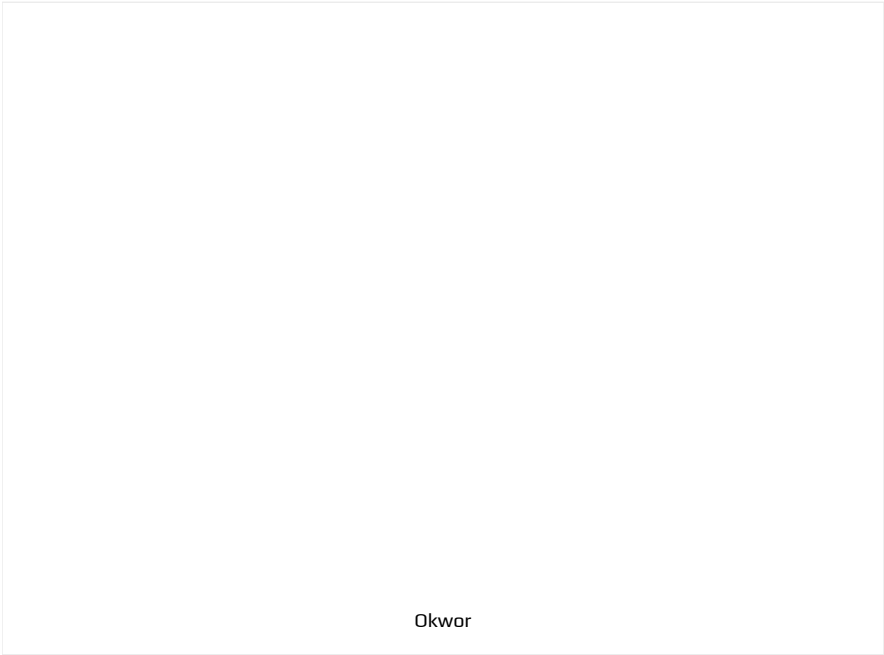




DOMESTIC VIOLENCE Fire is the new weapon

Posted By: Seun Akioye on: September 06, 2015 In: Arts & Life No Comments



Following the recent spate of cases of Nigerians setting their adversaries and enemies ablaze over domestic brawls, Gboyega Alaka beams a search light on the crime, highlighting recent cases and sampling out experts’ opinion on what could be responsible for the rise of such heinous crime.

In the past it used to be acid. That was how vicious people dealt with their adversaries; by pouring hot damaging acid on them, and deforming them perpetually. Psychologists say it gives them sadistic satisfaction and a feeling of perpetual victory. In truth, it did, as the victims carry the horrible scars for life and suffer in perpetuity, unless of course they’re lucky and the damage is minimal, or they could by some stroke of luck avail themselves of some kind of surgery or skin graft.

But like everything, including science and technology, things seems to have ‘progressed’ dangerously. Suddenly, these vicious attackers no longer seem to get satisfaction through acid anymore. Like the devil himself, they now prefer to see their victims roast in the naked fire, and perhaps smell and savour their roasting skin – and perhaps watch life scream out of them. The latest method therefore is to decidedly douse their targets with petrol and then proceed to set them ablaze, lighting a stick of match.

Blazing August

In the last twelve months or thereabout, newspapers and the social media seems to have been agog with horrific news of Nigerians setting their neighbours, lovers and even spouses ablaze in broad daylight; mostly over jealousy issues, domestic arguments and brawls. The immediate past month of August may have unwittingly earned itself the appellation of ‘blazing August’, as it seems to have recorded the highest number of such cruelty in recent memory. Hardly did a week pass, without one or two such incidents grabbing the headlines, astounding a nation that seems to be already neck-deep in violence and other senseless killing.

In one such incident, which occurred mid August in Ede, Osun State, a man whose identity was not immediately revealed, set ablaze his lover, Hadijat Adegoke, his rival, Lawal Muniru, who was said to be sleeping in the house with her on the night and her three children: Fawas (13), Sodiq (eight), and Fathia (six).

The assailant was said to have been enraged by jealousy after discovering that the woman, Adegoke, said to be married but separated from her husband, was keeping another lover. Out of anger, he allegedly bought some petrol, poured it around the house, said to have been build for the woman by her friends, after she was sent packing by her husband, and set it ablaze, knowing fully well that Adegoke was in the house with her lover.

The story further said that only one of Adegoke's daughter, Ishwat, who did not sleep in the house that fateful night, was not caught in the fire and therefore escaped unhurt. All her three siblings suffered various degrees of serious burns and are lying critically ill at the Muslim Hospital, Ede, while Adegoke and her lover Lawal, were said to have died from burns sustained from the attack at the LAUTECH Teaching Hospital, Osogbo, where they were rushed for treatment.

Another such daring incident that occurred in the second week of August in Idi Oro in Mushin, Lagos had hoodlums set a 17-year old boy on fire, after stabbing him severally, and living him to die. The boy, Lekan Agbaje, however got lucky, as he was rescued by passersby and policemen at the Alakara Police Station and rushed to a private hospital. It was also said that the hoodlums, believing he could never survive the attack, also pasted his obituary poster all over the area. Agbaje is said to be a member of a rival cult group and had been marked out for elimination.

Just about the same time, precisely on August 11, 22-year old Emmanuel Asuquo, an undergraduate of the University of Uyo was doused with petrol, set ablaze and roasted to death, for daring to report a series of daring attacks on his family by a neighbour, Jane Osasa, to the police, at the Ajeromi Police Station in Ajegunle.

The neighbourhood brawl was said to have taken roots far back in March (2015), when a quarrel between Osasa and Mrs Asuquo, Emmanuel's mother, left the latter with a gorge on her forehead, as a result of a stab. The same Osasa also stabbed Emmanuel's cousin, who was said to have come home to collect N4,000 for some examination fees from her uncle, a few days earlier (August 8).

Curiously, the multiple assailant was said to be walking free and even threatening more violence on the hapless Asuquo family, causing the deceased's father, Matthew Asuquo, to openly petition the Lagos State governor, Akinwumi Ambode on the plight of his family, as it seemed the police were not able to do much in terms of instituting justice and guaranteeing their safety.

In a case of jungle justice, a mob in Calabar reportedly set a young man ablaze, after dealing him several machete blows, for allegedly robbing a woman of her pot of soup. The man, who was said to be in company of two others, was said to have attacked the woman on Mayne Avenue Extension in Calabar South, seizing her pot of soup in the process, until she raised an alarm and neighbours came to her rescue.

The victim was said to have been unable to run as fast as his accomplices because of the pot of soup he was carrying, which he refused to drop. It was said that robbery attacks on the neighbourhood had become incessant; hence the neighbours took it upon themselves to send a strong message to the criminals.

A few days before August, precisely July 27, Uchenna Ezeiro reportedly set her lover's neighbour, Ifeoma Okwor, a 28-year old nurse ablaze in downtown Karmo, on the outskirt of Abuja, over arguments on the former's hemp smoking habit.

Ezeiro said to be boyfriend to Amaka, a next-door neighbour to Okwor in the tenement house, was said to be in the habit of smoking Indian hemp, anytime he came around, which Okwor was said to have repeatedly complained about, because the smoke and odour always streamed into her room and made her queasy.

Things however got to a head on the morning of August 3, when Ezeiro started the smoking again, and Okwor took it up with her neighbour, Amaka; but whilst they were at it, Ezeiro was said to have been enraged by Okwor's audacity and therefore proceeded to scoop petrol from a nearby generator, doused the unsuspecting Okwor, struck a match and immediately set her on fire.

Help though immediate, came a bit too late, as burns sustained were said to be so severe that she was eventually transferred from the nearby hospital, where she was initially rushed, to the National Hospital, where doctors battled hard to save her life until she gave up the ghost on August 3rd.

Reports have it that Ezeiro has been remanded in prison, pending subsequent court appearance, while Amaka, his lover, who was also arrested initially, has been set free.

In Offa in Kwara State, a 14-year old girl, Mariam Adebisi was said to have been allegedly raped by one Mustapha Muritala, 22, and thereafter set ablaze.

According to a police prosecutor during a hearing at a magistrate court, Adebisi was said to have been sent out by her mother to buy petrol from a nearby station on June 12, 2015 at about 4pm, when she was waylaid by Muritala who after beating her into submission, tied her with her bra ropes, raped her

was raped by men, who after beating her into submission, sed her, then she raped, raped her, before spraying her with the petrol she went to buy and setting her ablaze.

Also in that same month of June, a 60-year old man, Yakubu Vong, allegedly set ablaze an eight-year old girl (name withheld) at Sabon Layi in Barkin Ladi Local Government Area of Plateau State on suspicion of witchcraft.

The old man, who was promptly arrested by the police and placed in custody, allegedly set the little girl ablaze, while urging her to confess to her involvement in witchcraft. It was said that her refusal to confess infuriated the old man, who promptly set the little girl ablaze.

The girl was said to have died as a result of the burns suffered from the fire at the hospital.

In April (2015), a woman, identified as Amina Dauda, was arrested and arraigned before an FCT High Court for allegedly setting her husband ablaze.

According to the prosecution witness, Usman Idoko, Muhammed Matazu, a journalist was sprayed with petrol in his Gwarinpa residence in Abuja, and set ablaze. The reason behind the action was not immediately known, but neighbours were said to have struggled to save Mutazu's life by taking him to three different hospitals, until he gave up the ghost.

Not much justice

Significantly, little has been heard of conviction of perpetrators of this heinous crime, even as cases continue to dot our news space. Perhaps, this is responsible for the impunity with which people have carried on with the crime.

But in what looked like a welcome development, an Egor Magistrate Court in Benin, Edo State last Monday sentenced one Lucky Esonahae to five years imprisonment for setting his pregnant lover ablaze.

The 37-year old was arraigned on a one count charge bothering on causing bodily harm to his lover, a crime he committed on July 6, 2015 at Uwelu Quarters in Benin. Prosecution witness, Sergeant Ganiyu Yahaya, said Esonahae poured kerosene on the seven-month pregnant woman's head, lit a match and set her ablaze and locked her in a room.

The victim was later rescued by one of her sons and neighbours, who forced the door open and rushed her to the Central Hospital, where she was treated for burns sustained on her hands and forehead.

According to the prosecutor, Esonahae had accused the woman of infidelity after allegedly returning late from her ante-natal appointment at the hospital, and threatened to kill her.

Even though the accused pleaded guilty, the presiding magistrate, Igbo Braimoh, refused to be lenient, and therefore sentenced the 37-year old to five years in prison with hard labour.

Applause for prompt judgment, but...

While many have however welcomed the prompt delivery of justice in this case, since it took just about two months to dispense with the case, a good number of people have wondered at the tenderness of the judgement, considering the gruesome pain the poor woman must have gone through, the stigma of scar she will have to carry for the rest of her life, and the fact that she could have been killed.

Professor Oloruntoba Elegbeleye of the department of psychology, faculty of Social Sciences, Obafemi Awolowo belongs to the latter group. According to Elegbeleye, "Even if you set somebody ablaze and she does not die in the process, it does not mean the person would not carry the scar for the rest of her life. And carrying a scar is always going to be a sad reminder that something terrible happened to her in the past, and this has a way of working up a negative psychology for the person."

He thus queried the quality of the nation's law system and places the responsibility at the doorstep of the lawmakers. "That borders on the quality of law we have given to ourselves in Nigeria, and many people have been shouting that our laws and penalties need to be revisited. I think we need to take this back to the doorsteps of our lawmakers. If they can just wake up one day and make a law on homosexuality and impose 14 years, I want to agree that the sentence is too light."

Interestingly, some members of the public have advocated the Mosaic Law for anyone who dares to go to that length in dealing with their adversaries.

About the Benin judgment, Nelson Ekujimi, a social commentator wrote on his facebook page that the man should have been burnt too, so he might know how it feels. To underline his annoyance at the judgment, he ended his posting with an outright insulting the convicted criminal by calling him, "Useless man."

Benjamin Omowale, who lives in Ajegunle and claimed he was aware of the Emmanuel Asuquo incident, said such incident will only begin to abate, if they know that they will also be burnt alive when they indulge in such wickedness.

A psychologist's explanation

Asked what could cause people to adopt such extreme measure, as setting foes and adversaries on fire, to settle disputes, Professor Elegbeleye said, "It is about the dissipating issue of our value orientation. Using psychological terminology, there is what we call desensitisation. People are becoming desensitised to values we normally hold with sanctity, such as the human life, and this can be as a result of the fact that so very many things have robbed us of who we are as a people. One of them is the way our economy has been managed and the way our fortunes have been managed. So, very many people have been tilted towards the edge and are not able to control their temperament. People have been driven to the edge, and the threshold of anger has become so short. And where people have been so frustrated, they can resort to virtually anything, including setting people ablaze. So, I think basically something has happened to people's psyche.

Asked what satisfaction, such action can possibly give to the perpetrators, Prof Elegbeleye said most people who indulge in this kind of actions hardly border about the satisfaction or consequences. "When you allow yourself to be driven to the threshold of provocation, you do not begin to look at the consequences of your action. When you acted on the spur of the moment to satisfy that extreme uncontrollable urge to at least prove a point, you really do not look at justification."

He said the fact that things have degenerated to the extent that people believe they can get away with any crime, no matter how heinous, is not helping matters. "It's just like boko haram killing people needlessly and without any justifiable reason; ethnic killers killing people and going scot-free; robbers invading our homes and going scot-free; this makes life cheaper, and people are beginning to believe that killing is now an option to solving conflicts – which shouldn't be. But I believe the reason behind it is multi-faceted, not just mono-factored. So when you look at it against the backdrop of what is happening in our country, you begin to understand what is happening.

For example, Elegbeleye said "If you have graduated for about ten years without a job, and then you manage to get yourself a wife and you're not able to perform your roles as a bread-winner in the family, it might just happen that something might go off course. And in a way, you may not be responsible for what the consequences of your actions might be. So this is part of it, because I believe that if you wake up at the right side of your bed, you have a job to do, then you will begin to value human life and are not likely to go to that length in settling a conflict, especially if you're responsible for the upbringing of your children and taking care of the home.

Insanity as an excuse

Asked what he thinks of arguments that people who go to that length can only do so because they're mentally unbalance or because they believe they could hide under the clause of insanity, the renowned psychologist said when it is premeditated, there can be no excuse whatsoever.

"There are times when it is premeditated. Every human being is capable of evil and it depends on what your motivations are. There are different types of homicides that are being committed on a daily basis at the level of the family, but because we don't have efficient policing, we do not have a proper record system. Definitely, a person who went to buy petrol and even waited until midnight before executing his action actually planned for it. So that is a deliberate case of assault and murder."

Explaining further, he said "I can see that you're harping on method, but it could have been a dagger. It could have been a gun. What is on the mind of a person who commits that kind of atrocity is that he wanted to eliminate. He probably has it at the back of his mind that the fellow must be eliminated in the harshest way possible; and it has nothing to do with wisdom or lack of it. And that decision, like I said earlier, may have come out of frustration; out of envy; or out of the fact that in the process of living together, something may have robbed the wrong way off the perpetrator; or out of the fact that the perpetrator might be a case of insanity. But we have to perform an insanity test on him, to determine that. In the case of the guy who went to buy petrol, don't forget that he himself got burnt. So that may mean that he wasn't in his right senses, especially if he is aware that he could be harmed in the process."

He said "All decisions that are premeditated, all decisions that are not taken on the spur of the moment, but are thought out are a function of a cognitive function of the individual. So it depends on what motivated you into doing it. If you have thought it out, there definitely must be something in it for you that made you do it, either to rob your ego, solve your financial needs or other extreme needs. And mind you in this country, if you're talking of motivation, it does not exclude things like rituals and other things you might not even begin to fathom in the realm of logicity."

Asked if the recent rise in this kind of crime is not connected to the spate of impunity that seems to

have taken over the nation's socio-political space in recent time, Professor Elegbeleye said "Even before you finish your question, I say yes emphatically. You see because all over the country, there are pockets of terrible occurrences and our law processes are not efficient enough to bring people to book, I think people are getting more daring. So I think for a long time, we might have to live with this situation.

A lawyer's angle

When asked to comment on the legal angle of such heinous crime, Adebamigbe Omole, a lawyer and former chairman of the Nigerian Bar Association, Ikeja branch, said "In most cases it depends on the degree of the burn. If perchance the burns result into death, then the perpetrator of such act is going to be charged with murder. If it is a hazard posing a threat to the life of the person, then it can be attempted murder. So that will determine the kind of punishment that will be meted out to the person at the end of the day. But if it is just a mere burn that poses no threat to life, then the sentence may be light. And you know that for murder, the punishment is capital punishment. The person will be hanged."

He however said there is no law per se that addresses people setting people ablaze. "As of the present moment, we do not have it in the statute book that 'If somebody sets another person ablaze... such and such would be their penalty.'

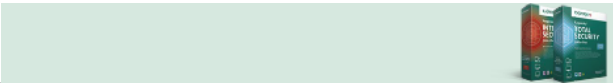
Barrister Omole said the charge will be prepared based on the degree of bodily harm to the victim, and if it results in death, then such incident would automatically have graduated to murder.

"It is basically like fighting somebody and injuring that person by any other means, you may be charged with injury to the person; and if you give somebody a punch and the person falls down and die, then you will be charged with murder. So it depends on the degree of the injury."

On the possibility of pushing a specific law to address this crime, he said that can be done, "In which case it will now be said that if you set people ablaze, this is your sentence. But if you say if you set somebody ablaze, the punishment is 15 years, the question still arises that if you set somebody ablaze and the person dies, what happens? So the matter of the degree or outcome of the crime or bodily harm will still come up, because once it leads to death, it is murder and it is punishable by death.

And regarding the possibility of hiding under the pretext of insanity, the former Ikeja NBA chairman said, "If a person claims insanity, there will be a need for a medical test; but even then, that will not mean that he will be set free. He will still be locked up in prison, pending the decision of the governor."

In conclusion, Elegbeleye inadvertently sounded a warning to would-be perpetrators of such evil: "There is nobody that can set somebody ablaze and go scot-free. It is not possible; as long as the person sustains injury, no matter how minor the injury may be and the case gets to the law court."



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