

## Murderous marriages

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### •More must be done to reduce spousal abuse and killings

The arrest of Mr. Lekan Shonde, who fled his Egbeda-Idimu, Lagos home after allegedly beating his wife, Ronke, to death, highlights the disturbing increase in marital murders in a nation where they were previously so rare as to be unheard of.

The Shondes' story is depressingly familiar: increasing matrimonial tensions, exacerbated by jealousy and suspicion, aggravated possibly by physical abuse. Mr. Shonde's own explanations have been somewhat inconsistent; he has variously said that he did not touch her, that he "only" slapped and pushed her, and that she was fine when he left the house on the fateful Thursday that she was last seen alive. Hopefully, a comprehensive police investigation will uncover the true facts of the matter.

The Shonde tragedy is only the latest in a series of growing occurrences of such incidents in Nigeria. Perhaps the best-known recent case is that of the Arowolos which occurred in June 2011. The wife, Titilayo, was stabbed more than 76 times by her husband, Akolade, apparently in a fit of murderous rage. In February 2014, a Lagos High Court sentenced him to death.

In July 2013, Wale Agbaje allegedly beat his wife, Jumoke, to death in Ilesha, Osun State during a domestic quarrel. **In the same month, Damilare Olotu poisoned his wife, Mary, in Ondo allegedly for being barren.** In April this year, Fatima Ibrahim was allegedly killed by her husband, Manu, in Katsina; he was apparently intent on acquiring her inheritance.

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Like all social ills, the causes of marital murders are complex. Some are related to the increasing urbanisation of the country's landscape, with all the associated problems that it brings in its wake. There is also the weakening of taboos and other forms of social control which make it less likely for individuals to engage in certain sorts of behaviour. The decline of the extended family and its capacity for amicably settling marital disputes is yet another factor.

Role-reversal within marriage is another feature of modern matrimonial relationships which can increase tensions and turn love into hate. Nigeria's economic challenges have led to a sharp rise in unemployment which has led to many husbands losing their jobs, thereby making wives the primary breadwinners for their households. Some men are unable to come to terms with the seeming loss of prestige that this situation entails. The consequence is increased spousal abuse which can become a gateway to murder.

Social attitudes have also contributed to increasing marital difficulties. The CLEEN Foundation, a non-

governmental organisation (NGO), claims that a nationwide survey saw a rise in domestic violence from 21 per cent in 2011 to 30 per cent in 2013. It appears that an increasing number of men do not have a problem with physically chastising their wives. Popular culture, with its emphasis on materialism and shallow sexual relationships, only seems to worsen the problem.

It is time for the country to confront the issue of marital murder head-on. Laws prohibiting spousal abuse and matrimonial violence should be enforced with greater rigour. The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, in particular, should be fully implemented. More states should imitate Lagos and Ekiti states in promulgating laws against domestic and gender-based violence.

Nigeria's community heads, leaders of thought and public role models must speak more forcefully against the phenomenon of spousal abuse; it should not be left to human-rights activists only. The ultimate goal should be to create a national atmosphere in which domestic violence will be less easy to conceal, easier to identify, and more speedily prosecuted.

Marriage is the fundamental building-block of a healthy society. Nigeria must do all it can to ensure that it remains the durable social institution that it must continue to be if the country is to thrive.

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