



Imperatives for Curbing the Growing Violence against Women and Girls in Nigeria: Options Beyond Legislation, Sympathy and Public Condemnation

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Abstract

Violence against women and girls in Nigeria has reached disturbing proportions, manifesting in various forms such as domestic abuse, rape, sexual harassment, forced marriages, and other harmful practices. This increasing scourge of physical violence and killings of women and girls for money-making rituals has further destabilised the lopsided gender balance in Nigeria, with the female gender being the most extraordinary sole victim. Violence against women and girls in Nigeria has become a serious contemporary problem that has to be addressed. Nigerian must create a new culture where women and girls are secured and valued by interrogating the underlying causes of violence, identifying its terrible impact on victims, and proffering preventive measures beyond legislations and public condemnations as well as, examine the existing legal frameworks that is targeted solely on meted minimum punishment on offenders, with no provision for compensation for the victims. Despite existing legal frameworks, public advocacy, and widespread media condemnation, the prevalence of gender-based violence continues to rise, revealing significant gaps in the effectiveness of current interventions. This study explores the imperatives of curbing the growing incidence of violence against women and girls in Nigeria by examining options that go beyond laws, sympathy, and media outrage. The study employs a qualitative approach, drawing insights from existing literature and policy reports to identify structural, cultural, and socio-economic drivers of violence against women and girls. The study finds that while legal instruments are necessary, they are insufficient in isolation from other measures. Therefore, sustainable solutions must include community-based education, empowerment programs for women, reform of traditional and religious institutions, rehabilitation of perpetrators, and the transformation of societal norms that normalise violence. The study concludes that a multidimensional, preventive, and participatory approach is essential to effectively curb the growing menace of violence against women and girls in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Gender-based Violence, Attacks, Women and Girls*

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) represents a persistent and significant issue in Nigeria, transcending social, economic, religious, and cultural boundaries. Despite heightened awareness, legal reforms, public condemnation, and expressions of sympathy, the prevalence of violence against women and girls persists at an alarming rate. Nigerian women and girls encounter various forms of violence, including domestic abuse, sexual assault, harmful traditional practices, and institutionalised gender discrimination, all of which significantly affect their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. In recent years, there has been an increasing incidence of violence against women and girls in Nigeria. Females have been subjected to violent attacks, rape, abuse, assaults, and ritual killings in various settings, including homes, schools, religious institutions, markets, workplaces, political gatherings, and other social events. The increasing prevalence of violence against women and girls has garnered significant concern among various societal groups, as it represents a pervasive and enduring violation of human rights in Nigeria. Houghton (2024) reports that one in three women experiences physical, sexual, or intimate-partner violence, indicating that women and girls currently face significant fear and challenges, as many homes have become unsafe environments. Additionally, schools, workplaces, religious centres, political gatherings, markets, and even transit buses are increasingly unsafe for women and girls. According to Ellsberg et al. (2020) and García-Moreno et al. (2013), it is estimated that one in five women and girls experiences some form of violence in their lifetime, which can result in severe injury or death in certain instances. The incidence of violence against women, particularly domestic violence perpetrated by husbands or intimate partners, has been rising daily. This issue is often regarded by the three tiers of government as a relatively minor social problem, resulting in few cases being brought to court for legal sanctions.

The legal abuse of fundamental rights of women and girls in Nigeria encompasses various forms of discrimination and marginalisation, despite their constitutional entitlement to all categories of human rights as outlined in Chapter Four of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) (Anyogu & Okika, 2024). Human rights abuses were evident through violent killings and various forms of physical, economic, and sexual attacks on women and girls within society (Rafferty, 2013). Despite numerous legislations aimed at addressing human rights abuses, these laws are frequently disregarded by perpetrators of violence against women and girls, as certain customs and cultural practices prioritise patriarchal norms over the female gender in many Nigerian communities. The rising incidence of attacks and violence against women and girls has emerged as a significant barrier to growth and development in the country. It is essential to emphasise that women's rights constitute fundamental human rights, as recognised by the United Nations and incorporated into Nigeria's Constitution for all individuals (Abimbola et al., 2023). These rights encompass the right to live free from violence, slavery, and discrimination; the right to education; the right to own property; the right to political participation; access to healthcare; the dignity of the human person; and the right to earn a living wage (Lusha, 2023). Civil society organisations and advocacy groups have significantly raised awareness and supported victims.

However, despite these efforts, the prevalence of gender-based violence remains high. Reports from the National Human Rights Commission and various NGOs highlight a disturbing pattern of underreporting, low conviction rates, and the pervasive culture of silence and stigma that protect perpetrators while discouraging victims from seeking justice (Ogunleye, 2019).

This study argues that while legal instruments, sympathy, and public condemnation are necessary, they are insufficient on their own to reverse the growing trend of violence against women and girls in Nigeria. There is a critical need to explore and implement more pragmatic, preventive, and community-rooted approaches that address the socio-cultural, economic, and psychological drivers of gender-based violence. These include grassroots education, economic empowerment for women, community policing, offender rehabilitation, and the transformation of harmful gender norms through strategic engagement with traditional, religious, and political institutions. The research, therefore, seeks to interrogate the structural and systemic underpinnings of violence against women and girls in Nigeria and to propose innovative, sustainable solutions that go beyond reactive legalism and emotional appeals to stem the tide of violence against women and girls, which can be meaningfully curbed in Nigeria.

Statement of Problem

Violence against women and girls in Nigeria has become an entrenched social crisis, cutting across urban and rural spaces, age groups, ethnic identities, and socioeconomic classes. Physical attacks represent the most extreme manifestation of gender based violence against women and girls, and it is a form of gender-based violence that affects all regions and countries worldwide (Modise & Modise, 2023). Despite numerous legal instruments, including the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act of 2015 and state-level laws aimed at protecting women and girls, the incidence of gender-based violence continues to escalate. Public condemnation, media campaigns, and expressions of sympathy often follow high-profile cases, yet these reactions rarely translate into sustainable solutions or behavioural change at the grassroots level (Marat, 2024). A critical gap exists between legal provisions and their practical enforcement, with many victims denied justice due to institutional weaknesses, cultural stigmas, patriarchal norms, and economic dependency. Ifayomi (2023) revealed that perpetrators are frequently shielded by societal silence, while victims endure re-victimisation, social exclusion or are pressured into withdrawing complaints. Moreover, interventions have largely been reactive rather than preventive, focusing on punishment after harm has occurred rather than addressing the root causes of gender-based violence. This study is therefore motivated by the need to examine why violence against women and girls persists in Nigeria despite the presence of laws and advocacy. It seeks to interrogate the systemic, cultural, and socio-economic barriers to meaningful change and to explore innovative and community-centred strategies that can complement legal frameworks and move beyond symbolic gestures of sympathy and condemnation. Without a shift towards proactive, holistic solutions, violence against women and girls (VAWG) will remain a recurring threat to gender equity, human rights, and national development.

Literature Review

This study focuses on the persistent and evolving nature of violence against women and girls in Nigeria, highlighting the inadequacy of conventional responses such as legal instruments, public sympathy, and condemnation. It seeks to provide a strong analytical foundation for evaluating the limitations of existing approaches and the possibilities for more robust, grassroots-driven strategies to reduce and prevent violence against women and girls in Nigeria. Violence against women and girls refers to any act of gender-based violence that

results in physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm or suffering to women and girls (Modise & Modise, 2023). In Nigeria, this includes domestic violence, rape, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, child marriage, trafficking, emotional abuse, and institutionalised gender discrimination (Mshelia, 2021). Domestic violence can take various forms, including physical, sexual, emotional rape, acid attacks, molestation, wife beating, battery, and mental torture, and is committed against female gender and resulting in the death of the victim (Ivone & Negri, 2019). Sexual violence against women and girls is defined as forcing or manipulating someone into unwanted sexual activity without their consent, resulting in rape, assault, abuse, and exploitation (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013). It is a sexual act obtained by force, violence or coercion, regardless of the victim's relationship. The World Health Organization (2021) defines sexual violence as sexual activity when consent is not obtained or freely given, or any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comment, advances, or act directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person, regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including home and work. In Nigeria, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015, various state laws, and international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) are prominent among the legislations designed to prevent and punish gender-based violence.

However, this study critiques their limited enforcement and effectiveness in addressing the cultural and structural roots of violence against women and girls. Sympathy and public condemnation are emotional and social responses triggered by violence against women and girls. Sympathy is expressed by individuals or institutions, while public condemnation involves widespread societal disapproval (Frazer, 2010). These reactions raise awareness and provoke temporary outrage, but often do not lead to sustained action or systemic change. The study views these responses as symbolic unless backed by concrete, long-term strategies. This study defines "curbing" as the deliberate reduction and eventual elimination of violence against women and girls, involving punitive responses and preventive measures such as education, economic empowerment, community involvement, social reorientation, and institutional accountability (Yusef, 2013). Violence against women and girls remains a global issue, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. Studies have shown that around 30% of Nigerian women aged 15-49 have experienced physical violence, while 7% have experienced sexual violence (Ajayi et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021; Tetteh et al., 2020; Tesfaw & Muluneh, 2022). Domestic violence is the most common form, often underreported due to fear of stigma, retaliation, and cultural pressures. Ajayi (2025) argue that such violence is often normalised within the context of marriage, religion, and tradition, especially in rural and conservative communities. Oluwagbemiga et al. (2023) found that intimate partner violence is prevalent in 25% of women with basic primary education, 23% in women with secondary education, 13% in women with tertiary education, and only 9% in women with no education. Rafferty (2013) stated that women and girls continue to face discrimination in various aspects of life, including the workplace, public office, property rights, education, reproductive rights, family property inheritance, domestic violence, and other harmful traditional practices. Witnesshood is considered a stigma in many cultures in Nigeria, with some regions limiting widowhood and preventing widows from taking ownership of their deceased husband's property or alienating it without family consent (Umeh et al., 2023). In southeast Nigeria, widows are prohibited from viewing their deceased husband's corpse or eating the food prepared for burial rites, which are passed down through generations to prevent further harm (Omozusi & Oluchukwu, 2023). This

practice is perpetrated on the widow in the southeast by fellow women called "Umuada," who are daughters of the deceased's immediate and extended families, married to other families.

Despite Nigeria's implementation of various laws aimed at addressing violence against women and girls, such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP, 2015), the enforcement of these laws continues to be inadequate. Doma et al. (2024) have analysed the State's response, characterising it as reactive, fragmented, and predominantly urban-centric. The varying implementation of the VAPP Act among States significantly undermines its effectiveness. Major institutional failures have been identified, including the absence of specialised courts, adequately trained personnel, and effective victim support systems (Nnaji et al., 2024). Media reports of high-profile cases of VAWG frequently evoke public condemnation and sympathy. Enyinnaya (2023) contends that these responses are generally fleeting and emotion-driven, seldom resulting in policy or societal reform alterations. The performative aspect of these responses may effectively conceal underlying systemic inaction. In a similar vein, McCarry and Lombard (2016) contend that societal outrage often neglects the routine, normalised violence that numerous women and girls experience quietly.

A burgeoning body of literature highlights the necessity for preventive, community-oriented strategies in tackling violence against women and girls, moving beyond mere legalistic approaches. Chikwe et al. (2024) assert that eradicating gender-based violence necessitates a comprehensive societal approach that includes education, economic empowerment, community leadership, and youth involvement. Warren et al. (2024) indicate that initiatives engaging traditional and religious leaders, men and boys, and local women's groups have effectively contributed to altering detrimental social norms regarding women and girls. Furthermore, economic empowerment and access to justice are associated with decreased vulnerability among women. Women who are empowered demonstrate a greater capacity to resist abuse, exit violent relationships, and pursue justice (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015). Psychosocial support and the rehabilitation of perpetrators are proposed as complementary strategies that target the root causes of violence instead of merely addressing its symptoms. The current literature identifies a notable disparity between legislative measures and their implementation and between transient outrage and enduring systemic change. This study enhances existing insights by proposing a comprehensive, grassroots approach to mitigating violence against women and girls in Nigeria.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is descriptive, exploratory and documentary in nature. This qualitative research study aimed to explore the lived experiences of women and girls who have encountered various forms of gender-based violence in Nigeria. The phenomenological approach was used to gain deeper insight into how survivors, activists, service providers, and government officials perceive the causes, implications, and systemic responses to such violence. The study was conducted in selected states in Nigeria, representing different geopolitical zones and socio-political contexts, such as Lagos (Southwest), Kaduna (Northwest), Benue (Northcentral), Borno (Northeast), and Rivers (South-south). The target population included women and girls who are survivors of violence, officials from Ministries of Women Affairs, Human Rights Commission, and law enforcement agencies, medical professionals with experience handling abuse cases, NGO staff and gender-rights activists, and religious and traditional leaders

involved in gender advocacy or dispute mediation. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants with rich and relevant knowledge or experiences. In contrast, snowball sampling was used to reach survivors who were otherwise difficult to access due to the stigma and sensitivity surrounding their experiences. In total, 50 participants were interviewed, with face-to-face and virtual interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. Three field group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with female community members and advocacy groups to explore communal narratives and social perceptions about violence and reporting. Relevant documents such as national policy frameworks, newspaper reports, UN/WHO reports, NGO documentation, and government response strategies were reviewed to contextualise findings and corroborate interview data. Other instruments included audio recorders, field notes and observation logs, FGD protocols, and a document review checklist. The data were analysed using Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), followed by transcription, familiarisation, coding, theme development, and interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings on Cases of Violence against Women and Girls in Nigeria

Table 1.
Findings on Cases of Violence against Women and Girls in Nigeria

Category	Percentage/Statistic
Women aged 15–49 who experienced physical violence	31%
Women aged 15–49 who experienced sexual violence	9%
Women who experienced physical violence during pregnancy	6%
Married women who experienced intimate partner violence with serious injuries	36%
Female genital mutilation (FGM) prevalence (age 15–49)	20% (down from 25% in 2013)
Circumcised women by age 5	86%
Female genital mutilation by ethnic group (Yoruba women)	35%
Female genital mutilation by ethnic group (Tiv and Igala women)	1%
Increase in domestic violence cases during the COVID-19 lockdown (March 2020 to April 2020)	127% (from 60 cases to 238)
Percentage of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are women and children	79%

Category	Percentage/Statistic
Women and girls affected by Boko Haram, banditry, and insecurity	Targeted for abduction, rape, forced labor, child marriage, religious conversion, and sexual violence
Female exposure to gender-based violence (Stojetz & Brück, 2023)	48%

The findings from the 2018 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) provide a grim picture of gender-based violence in Nigeria, with significant percentages of women experiencing physical, sexual, and intimate partner violence. Notably, 31% of women aged 15-49 reported experiencing physical violence, while 9% faced sexual violence. Furthermore, 36% of married women endured intimate partner violence, often resulting in serious injuries. The prevalence of female genital mutilation remains alarmingly high among certain ethnic groups, especially the Yoruba, where 35% of women have undergone the practice. The COVID-19 lockdown of 2020 exacerbated cases of domestic violence, with a staggering 127% increase in reported incidents in states under lockdown, such as Lagos, Ogun, and the Federal Capital Territory. Additionally, the report highlights the disproportionate impact of insecurity, particularly in conflict zones, where women and girls are often subjected to abduction, rape, and forced labor. The findings also underscore the profound impact of gender-based violence, as 48% of Nigerian females were exposed to some form of abuse during the pandemic.

Findings on the Government’s Poor Response to Cases of Violence against Women and Girls in Nigeria

Table 2.
Findings on the Government’s Poor Response to Cases of Violence against Women and Girls in Nigeria

Category	Finding
Medical professionals’ role in domestic violence	Health professionals often treat injuries without addressing the root causes of violence (Dicker et al., 2021)
Police response to violence	Arrests are decreasing due to the victim's fear of exposure and difficulty prosecuting perpetrators.
Victims of marital violence	Serious injuries often result in death, with marital separation seen as the best preventive measure.
Need for counselling perpetrators of domestic violence	Effective intervention should focus on anger management, recognising abusive behaviours, and addressing substance abuse and mental illness (Zarshenas et al., 2017)
Effectiveness of anger management	Anger management alone is insufficient; it should be part of a broader strategy to address power and control dynamics in abusive relationships.

The study indicates a troubling lack of adequate government response to gender-based violence in Nigeria. Medical professionals are disengaged mainly from addressing the underlying causes of domestic violence, with many preferring to treat physical injuries without recognising the broader issues at play. Inadequate law enforcement efforts compound this lack of involvement. Arrests of perpetrators have decreased, as victims are often too fearful to report the violence due to concerns about retaliation or ineffective prosecution. Victims of marital violence frequently suffer severe physical harm, and many view marital separation as the only way to prevent a tragic outcome. The findings also emphasise the need for a more comprehensive approach to treating perpetrators of domestic violence. While anger management can play a role, it is not sufficient. A deeper understanding of power dynamics, recognition of abusive behaviours, and addressing substance abuse and mental health issues are essential components of a more effective intervention strategy.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study were segmented into three key areas: (i) cases of violence against women and girls in Nigeria, (ii) government responses and institutional management of such cases, and (iii) a synthesis of the overarching implications. Compared with existing literature, these findings affirm and, in some aspects, depart from previous scholarly conclusions. This study reaffirms the conclusions of the 2018 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), which documented the widespread prevalence of gender-based violence, including physical (31%) and sexual violence (9%) among women aged 15–49. These findings are consistent with those of Abulude et al. (2022) who observed a sharp increase in reported rape and domestic violence cases during the COVID-19 lockdown. Similarly, Akudolu et al. (2023) and Airaoje et al. (2025), which indicated that 48% of Nigerian women had experienced one or more forms of violence during the pandemic, aligns strongly with the current study's data on the exacerbation of gender-based violence during periods of crisis. Moreover, the current research supports Nwakanma and Abu's (2020) findings on the rise of ritual killings and organ harvesting targeting Nigerian women, reflecting a deepening crisis of both gender violence and ritualistic criminality. Such horrific acts—documented across national dailies and verified by police records—confirm earlier suggestions by Lawson (2015) that Nigerian women are increasingly vulnerable to both sexual and homicidal violence. However, this study moves beyond existing data by highlighting the intersectionality of violence, revealing how women in conflict zones (Northeast Nigeria) suffer compounded harms due to displacement, insurgency, and systemic neglect. While previous studies mention these contexts, few provide detailed, current accounts of how insurgency, herder-farmer conflict, and displacement uniquely target women and girls. In this regard, the present study expands the understanding of gendered violence in humanitarian crises. The current research confirms earlier critiques of the Nigerian government's inadequate response to violence against women and girls. Troy et al. (2025) identified a reluctance among medical professionals to address domestic violence beyond surface-level injury treatment. This lack of medical engagement aligns with the current study's conclusion that healthcare providers often avoid the social dimensions of abuse, thereby weakening holistic responses. This research largely aligns with previous studies regarding the prevalence and persistence of violence against women and girls in Nigeria. It confirms well-documented patterns of abuse and institutional failures but also extends the literature by revealing newer, evolving patterns of violence, including ritual killings, insurgency-related

gender targeting, and systemic neglect of internally displaced women. Moreover, while it agrees with past research on the shortcomings of the legal and medical systems, it diverges by strongly advocating for localised, community-driven solutions rather than relying solely on government-led interventions. By blending empirical findings with theoretical analysis, the study underscores that sustainable change will come not from laws alone but from a societal shift that demands a collaborative effort from communities, institutions, and individuals alike.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals a critical disconnect between Nigeria's legal architecture and the social realities that perpetuate violence against women and girls. While laws exist, their weak enforcement is evident, especially at the state and local levels. Cultural and religious norms, religious misinterpretations, and patriarchal ideologies are identified as primary enablers of violence. Victims often lack access to justice and support systems, and public condemnation is performative and lacks follow-up. Community involvement is key to lasting solutions, with strong support for grassroots-level interventions. Education and economic empowerment are practical preventive tools, as poverty, dependency, and lack of awareness significantly contribute to women's vulnerability. The study supports the view that a multidimensional and grassroots-oriented approach is essential to tackle violence against women and girls in Nigeria. Enforcement mechanisms must be strengthened through institutional reforms, funding, and establishing specialised gender response units within law enforcement. Community engagement programs targeting men and women, especially in rural areas, are critical to long-term change. Economic empowerment of women reduces dependency and increases their ability to leave abusive environments. Initiatives such as microcredit, vocational training, and access to legal aid services can be practical safeguards. The findings underscore the need for a more holistic and transformative approach, moving beyond the courtroom and media space to the grassroots, where social norms are formed and reinforced. Community-based interventions, economic empowerment, education, and the active involvement of men and traditional authorities are essential to shifting attitudes and practices. The study recommends several measures to address the increasing violence against women and girls in Nigeria. These include strengthening law enforcement and judicial processes, implementing community-based interventions and awareness campaigns, introducing comprehensive gender education programs, involving men and boys in violence prevention, providing economic support and access to justice for survivors, promoting collaboration between the government and civil society, and reviewing and amending existing policies and laws. These measures seek to improve the accessibility of justice for marginalised groups, promote gender equality, and ensure that all levels of government prioritise gender equality in their development agendas.

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