

Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria: Understanding patterns, impacts and innovative intervention strategies

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Abstract

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) remains a pressing issue in Nigeria with profound human rights, health, psychological and social implications. This paper examines the legal and policy framework addressing GBV in Nigeria. It focuses on initiatives aimed at prevention, prohibition and prosecution of various forms of violence. The study employs a literature review as its research methodology using relevant secondary sources to buttress the central ideas of the paper. The paper notes that though various acts and policies have aided institutional capacity building and community engagement, these advancements are still plagued with challenges of implementation and enforcement of existing laws and policies. The paper reveals that multi-sectoral collaboration, strengthened enforcement mechanisms and a commitment to promoting a culture of zero tolerance for GBV was proffered as solutions to mitigate the scourge. The essay concludes that prioritization and effective implementation of existing laws and policies will go a long way to address GBV, promote gender equality and human rights for all.

Introduction

Studies have shown Gender based violence (GBV) to be prevalent among women. According to World Health Organization (WHO) report (2013:32), 35% of women in the world have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. While it is true that GBV occurs to both genders of different socio-economic backgrounds and educational backgrounds, its prevalence among women could be linked to the fact that they belong to certain social categories that are predisposed to violence and intimidation. The United Nations (UN) in the 1995 World Conference on women in Beijing identified these social categories to include minority groups, refugees, migrants, migrant workers, people living in rural and remote areas, destitute, people with disabilities, the elderly, displaced and repatriated people. The fact that this demography is populated by women in most places just like in Nigeria means that GBV will usually be viewed as a problem affecting women. The background and context of GBV in Nigeria provide crucial insights into the prevalence, underlying factors and socio-cultural dynamics surrounding this pervasive issue. GBV in Nigeria is deeply rooted in socio-cultural norms, beliefs and practices that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination.

Patriarchal systems, mindsets, cultures and religions propagate rigid gender roles and traditional norms that prioritize male dominance and control over women's bodies often condoning violence against women. The result is a proliferation of various forms of GBV including intimate partner violence, sexual violence, female genital mutilation (FGM) and other

harmful practices. An overall understanding of the background and context of GBV in Nigeria is essential for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies promoting gender equality and advancing social justice and human rights for all individuals affected by GBV.

The issue of GBV can be studied and analyzed through different frameworks and concepts but this study views this phenomenon from two standpoints. The first standpoint is that the society and women condone violence because such behaviour is learnt from repeated observation, modelling and reinforcement. This is the core of the social learning theory. The second standpoint is that GBV is a consequence of societal power dynamics, gender inequality and patriarchy which protects the gender norms, societal expectations and institutional structures that perpetuate violence against women. This is the core of the feminist theory.

Caroline Akers (2009:159) put forward the social learning theory as an aspect of behavioural psychology in a bid to complement an existing theory. The crux of the theory is that criminal behaviour is learnt. It is learnt in social and non-social situations that are reinforced through social interactions in which the behaviour of other persons are reinforced to encourage or repudiate criminal behaviour. In the same vein the protagonists of GBV in Nigeria, learn these actions from social and non-social interactions in the society. These are not innate habits. Their actions are reinforced or otherwise depending on if the existing laws punish or encourage their violent conduct. In the event that

it does punish, they change their ways, when it does not, GBV thrives.

According to Joanne Belknap (2016) noted there are a plethora of feminist theories including Marxist, socialist, liberal, radical and postmodern. However they are all united in the underlying concept that the feminist theory is a woman centred description and explanation of human experience and the social world recognizing that gender governs every aspect of personal and social life (Danner 1989). Feminist theories are predicated on patriarchy and gender differences and is ideal for understanding crime due to the long-standing fact that “being male” is one of the best predictors for most crimes and delinquency (Church, Wharton & Taylor. 2009) The feminist theories allude that the society being patriarchal in nature, the males dominate in number and are therefore more predisposed to crimes hence will probably be the propagators of gender based violence. The feminist theory uses the conflict approach to examine the reinforcement of gender roles and inequalities highlighting the role of patriarchy in maintaining the oppression of women (Thompson 2016). In spite of the several strains of feminist theories, they can be grouped into four broad types: radical, Marxist, postmodern and liberal. Liberal feminism seems to offer the most suitable framework for the understanding and explanation of violence against women in Nigeria. The liberal feminist advocates do not advocate revolutionary changes in a democratic setting as a solution to the problem of gender discrimination like their radical counterparts. Instead, they advocate certain changes such as legislation and reforms within the existing political structure in order to foster

equal opportunities for males and females in every ramification. This research is based mainly on secondary sources of materials such as official publications, journals, relevant texts, historical documents and the internet all of which qualify as tangible sources for the research work.

According to the committee on the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), GBV against women is violence directed primarily against a woman because she is a woman, a weaker vessel. Violence against women is recognized as a kind of gender discrimination that stems from historically unequal power relations between male and female and effectively prevents women from enjoying the same rights and freedoms in society like their male counterparts (CEDAW, 2017). The effects of GBV against women is very devastating as it can result in medical and or health issues including illegal abortions, mental instability, gynaecological difficulties, miscarriages, sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies, instantaneous behavioural reactions such as anger, guilt, shame , shock, psychological outcomes such as depression, post traumatic stress disorder(PTSD) and so on.

It is safe to say that continuous reinforcement by the patriarchal society, norms and culture have beaten the Nigerian woman into subservience. This has made women to become more tolerant of GBV resulting in increasing abusive relationships that are not reported and hence encouraged to fester. This can be substantiated from Ayotunde T. et al (2014) research examining the influence of women's tolerance level towards domestic GBV in Nigeria with the aid of 2008 Nigerian Demographic and Health

survey women dataset. They established the correlation between places of residence (urban/rural and geo-political zones) and the occurrence of GBV, attitude of women towards GBV in the six geopolitical zones in the country and the relationship between women's attitude towards GBV and the penetration of GBV in each of the geopolitical zones in Nigeria. They were able to show that 31.22% of Nigerian women have experienced at least one form of domestic violence in Nigeria and 44.13% tolerance level of Nigerian women towards GBV. In all they established a positively significant relationship between women's tolerance level and the incidence of domestic violence against women in the country. This goes to show that attitudinal change by women who will need to display zero tolerance to GBV is fundamentally needed to mitigate the scourge of violence towards women and vulnerable populations. This culture of seeming tolerance and silence can be traced to weak institutions which are superintended by patriarchal elements that do not mete out adequate sanctions when cases of GBV are brought before them. Instead of punitive repercussions, there are instances of blaming and shaming the victims. Onyinye et al (2022) noted that GBV remains masked in a culture of silence due to perceived stigmatization from kin and friends. Many survivors in their bid to seek justice are blamed and ostracized from their families and communities thereby sinking them further into poverty, isolation and additional violence. The result is that other survivors are discouraged from reporting cases of GBV or even seeking medical assistance as culture prioritizes protecting family honour and image over seeking justice for heinous crimes committed.

GBV in Nigeria is not only a social and public health issue; It is equally a legal and public health concern. With the rising rate of GBV, Nigeria has developed its own legal and policy framework aimed at addressing GBV and promoting gender equality. The extent to which these policies have mitigated the occurrence or recurrence of GBV is beyond the scope of this paper. It is, however pertinent to take a critical look at the government's legal efforts to tackle this menace. According to Mercy Odeh (2014), Nigeria has well equipped policy frameworks to achieve gender equality and social inclusion. The country is a signatory to a number of key global regional instruments to tackle gender inequality and social exclusion. Some of them include The Convention on the elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW 1979), The millennium Development Goals (2000), The Beijing Platform for Action(1995), The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa(2005), The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities(CRPD). The National Gender Policy (2006) serves as a guiding framework for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in Nigeria. The policy which was agreed on and adopted by all the states, outlines strategies and interventions aimed at addressing GBV, eliminating discriminatory practices and promoting women's rights across various sectors including education, health, employment and governance. It emphasizes the importance of legal reforms, institutional capacity building and community engagement in advancing gender equality and preventing GBV.

The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP)(2015) represents a significant milestone in Nigeria's efforts to combat GBV. The VAPP act enacted in 2015 provides comprehensive legal provision for the prevention, prohibition and prosecution of various forms of violence, sexual violence, harmful traditional practices and trafficking in persons. The act criminalizes acts of violence and abuse, establishes protection mechanisms for survivors and outlines the duties and responsibilities of law enforcement agencies, healthcare providers and other stakeholders in responding to GBV cases. Onyemelukwe (2016) in his research about the VAPP act noted that being an extant law implementation would be an albatross as Nigeria historically was slow in enforcement of extant laws. He observed its limitation in scope as it covers only Abuja and suggested that the government should push for its adoption by other states.

The Child Rights Act enacted in 2003 with varying levels of adoption by states, provides legal protection for children against all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation including child marriage, trafficking and child labour. In consonance with the VAPP Act, the Child rights act reinforces the legal framework for preventing and addressing GBV against children and adolescents in Nigeria. The National Action plan on Gender Based Violence (NAP-GBV) is a strategic roadmap developed by the Nigerian Government in collaboration with civil society organizations and development partners to guide efforts to mitigate instances of GBV. It prioritizes areas of action including legislative reforms, capacity building for law enforcement agencies and service

providers, public awareness campaigns and support services for survivors. It underscores the importance of multi-sectoral collaboration and coordination in effectively addressing GBV at the national, state and community levels.

Despite the existence of legal and policy frameworks addressing GBV in Nigeria, significant challenges and gaps remain in their implementation and enforcement. These include inadequate funding and resources, weak institutional capacity, limited access to justice for survivors, cultural barriers and societal attitudes that perpetuate GBV. Additionally, inconsistencies in the adoption and enforcement of laws at the state level pose challenges to achieving comprehensive protection for all individuals at risk of GBV. Nigeria has made significant strides in developing legal and policy framework to address GBV and gender equality. However, concerted efforts are still needed to address implementation challenges, strengthen enforcement mechanisms and promote a culture of zero tolerance for GBV across all strata of the society. Through the optimization of implementation of existing laws and policies, Nigeria can advance its commitment to preventing and addressing GBV and promoting the rights and dignity of all individuals particularly women and girls.

The most effective enforcement mechanism is by the implementation of the rule of law. For these laws to be enforced they must be known by the government agencies including but not limited to Federal Ministries of Health, Women Affairs, Justice and others whose statutory duty it is to enforce such laws and acts , their duties within these acts must be clear to them.

The vulnerable should be armed with the knowledge of these laws and should know that they can seek its protection when abused. To achieve this, Cheluchi Onyemelukwe (2016) opined that to create this needed awareness, the act should be made more publicly available in accessible language such as pidgin language. It would be helpful to use different forms of media such as newspapers, electronic media, and development of websites with requisite information about the act, social media platforms, films (Nollywood), and incorporation into school curriculums.

Efforts to address GBV in Nigeria has led to the development of innovative intervention strategies aimed at prevention, response and survivor support. Community-based approaches such as women's empowerment programs, gender sensitive education campaigns and legal advocacy initiatives which have shown promise in challenging harmful gender norms and promoting positive social change. The use of technology including mobile applications and social medial platforms has facilitated GBV reporting, access to support services and efforts at raising public awareness. Additionally, engaging men and boys as allies in GBV prevention through gender-transformative interventions has emerged as a promising strategy to foster gender equality and prevent violence. This is pertinent because the fight against GBV must have the patriarchy in active participation to make a headway.

Tomi Obagboye (2021) proposed a step up in women empowerment, education and activism as a panacea to the hydra headed problem of GBV. The Government and its institutions should prioritise the education and empowerment of the girl child

in line with Universal Basic Education and SDGs. Even though educations does not automatically translate into lower levels of domestic violence, surveys have shown that educated women are more aware of their rights and freedoms guaranteed by the law and are better able to protect themselves from domestic violence than uneducated women. An uneducated and financially dependent woman is less likely to repudiate domestic violence and is usually trapped because they are totally dependent on the perpetrators of domestic violence for their livelihood. It is also vital for women to champion women activism to work actively for change so that they do not remain victims.

Conclusion

Despite the existence of legal and policy frameworks addressing GBV in Nigeria, significant challenges and gaps remain in their implementation and enforcement. These include inadequate funding and resources, weak institutional capacity, limited access to justice for survivors, cultural barriers and societal attitudes the perpetuate GBV. Additionally, inconsistencies in the adoption and enforcement of laws at the state level poses challenges to achieving comprehensive protection for all individuals at risk of GBV.

Nigeria has made significant strides in developing a legal and policy framework to address GBV and promote gender equality. Concerted efforts are still needed to address implementation challenges, promote a culture of zero tolerance for GBV across all facets of the society and strengthen enforcement mechanisms. As is common with Nigeria, the laws are good, but the

mechanisms for enforcement are flawed. Concerted efforts are needed to address implementation challenges, strengthen enforcement mechanisms and promote a culture of zero tolerance for GBV across all sectors of the society. By understanding the prevalence, socio-cultural context impacts and innovative intervention strategies, policymakers, practitioners and advocates can work collaboratively to promote gender equality, prevent violence and support survivors of GBV in Nigeria.

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