

State'S Response to Sexual Violence: A Study of Government's Deficiencies, Women's Insecurity, and Justice Provision

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Abstract

Sexual violence is not only a significant issue in terms of a worldwide health topic but also a human rights problem, as it makes women and girls disproportionately vulnerable victims. Although global directives like CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention hold countries accountable in ensuring the safety of the survivors, punishing the abuse, and curbing gender-based violence, the reality of the implementation of the provisions across various jurisdictions has not been satisfactory enough. This study critically examines the state's response to sexual violence, focusing on the interplay between governmental deficiencies, women's insecurity, and justice provision. It is influenced by both feminist legal theory and the human security approach and examines the way that governance-strength systemic factors, including lack of funding, the nature of law enforcement training, and the delays associated with judicial progress, act as obstacles to justice. Triangulation of qualitative data using testimonies of survivors, reports of non-governmental organisations and government statistics will bring to light the extent of institutional failures. The results show that an environment of impunity prevails because of persistent policy gaps, social-cultural stigma, and lack of effective accountability systems, which lead to the increased vulnerability of the survivors. Personalised legal changes, improved systems of survivor-centred responses, and coordinated government and civil society action are also recommended within the study to ensure that sexual violence provokes a speedy, equitable, and multi-faceted reaction.

Keywords: Sexual Violence, Women's Insecurity, Justice Provision, Government Response, Gender-based Violence.

Introduction

Sexual violence is considered one of the most prevalent and serious forms of violations to human rights in the world today, posing a threat to the dignity, autonomy and overall well-being of women. However, despite the development of well-developed international legal frameworks and state policies, which seek to combat gender-based violence and sexual assault, the problem is increasing in both its thorniness and manifestations (United Nations, 2020; World Health Organization, 2021). State duties of prevention, investigation, prosecution and punishment of sexual violence are widely embedded in the sources like the Convention on the Elimination of All

Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Council of Europe Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, 2011; UN Women, 2020). However, practically, the government efforts are still insufficient, victims are frequently left vulnerable to additional abuse, those people who commit the crimes get away with them, many systemic weaknesses of the police crime prevention and victim care systems are still persistent.

Patriarchal ideologies practised in most political and socio-cultural levels in countries result in insecurity for women because of a lack of government efforts that would lead them to justice. Sexual violence causes not only short-term physical and psychological damage, but also long-term socio-economic destabilisation of the life of the person, which prevents the affected person from working, socialising and feeling safe in spaces or places (Htun and Weldon, 2018). Whereas governments are required to offer a survivor-centred justice system that is effective, accessible and survivor-centred, the gaps in these requirements, such as inadequate funding, insufficient specialised training of law enforcement, and delay in the procedures, are systemic (Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022). This has created an impunity environment in which sexual violence is normalised and victims muffled through stigmatisation, intimidation and neglect due to the system.

The academic discussion points out that the insecurity of women cannot be driven merely by the individual form of violence but rather is a part of a larger structural imbalance and institutional failure across (MacKinnon, 2016). As an example, the low rates of conviction and prolonged trial periods continue the cycle of violence because the victims are deterred from reporting the assaults (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Moreover, the lack of an elaborate system of providing survivors with support in the form of trauma counselling, sheltering, and economic recovery depicts the failure of the state to address multi-dimensional impacts of sexual violence in its entirety.

This study undertakes a critical examination of the state's response to sexual violence, focusing on how institutional deficiencies heighten women's vulnerability and obstruct justice delivery. Drawing upon feminist legal theory and the human security framework, the research analyses the intersection of government policy gaps and survivors' lived experiences. It also seeks to develop evidence-based arguments on which policy changes can be made to address the issue better, speed up the process of justice and cultural transformation of zero-tolerance towards sexual violence.

Literature Review

1. Conceptualising Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is a pervasive global human rights violation that transcends cultural, economic, and geographical boundaries, but its manifestations, drivers, and consequences are often shaped by specific socio-political contexts. Also, sexual violence may be described as one of the gross violations of human rights and bodily freedom, and its consequences are pervasive in the domains of psychology, physical, and socio-economic domains. The World Health Organization (2021) estimates that one in every three women across the world will become a victim of physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence, and in most of the low and middle-income countries, including Nigeria, the prevalence rate is higher than the global average- reaching into 35 to 60 percent of movements (WHO, 2021).

At the core, the United Nations (1993) defines sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic a person’s sexuality, using coercion, threats, or force, by any person regardless of relationship to the victim.” Such a definition states a continuum of maltreatments that constitute rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, forced prostitution, sexual exploitation, and abusive traditional practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation. It is important to note that it not only situates sexual violence in the framework of interpersonal violence but also as a form of structural and systemic violence that is promoted through gendered patterns of inequality. This expansive definition underlines that sexual violence does not only involve physical encroachment; it involves non-consensual or forced acts, and is a power issue.

In Nigeria, the conceptualisation of sexual violence is complicated by cultural relativism, socio-religious norms, and institutional weaknesses. Different definitions of sexual offences are defined under the legal acts, which include the Criminal Code (applicable in Southern Nigeria), Penal Code (applicable in the North) and Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) 2015, causing inconsistencies in interpretation and enforcement (Okafor & Opara, 2020). Although the VAPP Act comprises a broader and survivor-focused definition, its non-universal domestication among the states in Nigeria (especially in Northern states) deprives it of its success (Oladeji & Ajayi, 2021). Also, in Nigeria, official statistics are underreported. VAPP, 2015 (Nigeria Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act) penalises several types of sexual violence, although the state-level enforcement is inconsistent. In a meta-analysis by Aremu and Adeboye (2020), the national estimate referred to the proportion of women reporting some type of sexual violence was 47 per cent. Nonetheless, information sources provided by the police do not cover more than 1 in 10 of all such cases (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022), which leaves a discrepancy of more than 90%.

From a criminological perspective, to have sexual violence is viewed as an act of crime as well as a display of power, as the perpetrators take advantage of social, physical, and institutional weaknesses to empower themselves over the victims (Brownmiller, 1975; Kelly, 1988). Feminist legal theory conceptualises sexual violence as ideologically rooted in patriarchal structures, rather than purely criminal acts (MacKinnon, 1989). Such a strategy puts sexual violence in the context of discrimination and oppression against women and is part of a spectrum that does not include isolated and accidental events. Certain traditions and conventions around gender roles, parental pressure and fear of stigma in Nigeria also apply pressures to keep matters secret and instead move to perpetuate impunity. In the example of Kaduna State, it is seen that during community studies, 70% of respondent survivors gave the major reason of fear of retaliation or stigma when not reporting their cases (Akinlusi et al., 2018).

From a human security perspective, sexual violence poses an existential threat to individual safety. The UNDP (1994) redefined security as freedom against sexual and gender-based violence. This reframing is particularly important in Nigeria: Survivors are often affected not only by violence, but by secondary victimisation, which is represented by poor institutional response. In surveys across Lagos, only 25% of survivors reported trust in the police to handle their case sensitively (Oluduro, 2015). In addition to that, the conceptual range of sexual violence also enters the realms of the economy and psychology. According to a study by WHO (2017), the likelihood that survivors develop depression and anxiety or lose years of schooling or work is three times and two times more than the chances of non-survivors. Sexual violence is also more than just the physical use, such as coercive control and psychological abuse. The use of violence or threat may be

perceived as physical coercion, whereas threats, intimidation, and manipulation of the socio-economic situation can be considered non-physical (WHO, 2022). Such conceptualisation is closer to what happens in real life among Nigerian women because there are settings that may discourage survivors who may be economically dependent, fear shaming, and may not trust law enforcement to report incidents (Amnesty International, 2020).

In comparison, in Lagos State, the commercial city in Nigeria, the adoption of special sexual offence courts and the integration of Mirabel sexual assault referral centre by the government are steps in advanced explanations of sexual violence as a complex social issue that should be addressed by a multi-sectoral approach (Mirabel Centre, 2021). Conversely, the Kaduna State exemplifies one that, having endorsed and appropriated parts of the VAPP Act, is still tackling the problem of deeply rooted socio-cultural resistance to sections of the law, including criminalisation of marital rape. Enugu State is in the middle ground in terms of its institutional capacity, which is moderate and with an expanding civil society advocacy, but infrastructural investment in survivor services is low (Nwafor, 2022). More so, the modern global discourses do conceptualise sexual violence not only as the legal or feminist concept but also as the human security concept. The human security paradigm changes the pattern of state-centric protection to focus on individual security, bearing in mind that sexual violence violates the personal dignity, autonomy of the person, and justice (UNDP, 1994). By employing this framework in Nigeria, the insecurity of women is perpetuated by the failures of the state in providing impartial justice by enforcing the law, a lack of forensic ability to provide justice, and through cultural impunity that destabilises the faith of the populace in the delivery of just services by the state.

2. Global and Regional Context of State Responses

Globally, state responses have evolved from treating sexual violence as a private matter to recognising it as a public health, human rights, and security concern. Both the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women by the United Nations (1993) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) were significant legal and policy statements as a result of their ratification. Nevertheless, adherence is unequal in that 155 nations have legislated against domestic and sexual violence, but less than 40 percent of victims worldwide report their case to the authorities because of mistrust, stigma, and institutional vulnerabilities (UN Women, 2022).

State Responses in Developed Contexts

Developed economies, especially those in Western Europe, North America, and Oceania, have largely introduced more holistic legal frameworks and survivor-based style. As an example, a lack of consent was legally defined as rape in Sweden in 2018, and the reported rape cases rose by 75% (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2021). Likewise, the compounded “Sexual Assault Evidence Kit” available in Canada has accelerated forensic outcomes within the country, raising conviction levels between 2010 and 2020 by 57 percent as compared to 42 percent (Statistics Canada, 2021). Nonetheless, even in such circumstances, underreporting prevails; 6 percent of sexual assaults in Canada are reported to police (Statistics Canada, 2021), which implies that the well-developed legal frameworks are not enough to provide access to justice.

State Responses in Developing Contexts

Low and middle-income countries encounter poor institutional capacity, lack of resources, and socio-cultural obstacles that usually hinder the responsive capabilities. The Delhi gang rape case

led to a broadening of definitions of sexual offences and new and harsher sentences under the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2013, India. These reforms notwithstanding, as per National Crime Records Bureau (2020) data, the conviction rates in rape cases are less than 28 per cent because of failure to investigate the cases promptly and fear of being intimidated by the accused by the witnesses. Likewise, in Kenya, corruption among police officers and their inability to provide sufficient institutions to support survivors have limited the success of the Sexual Offences Act (2006), which only has a conviction rate of under 15 per cent (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

African Regional Context

In Sub-Saharan Africa, rates are too high, and the African Union (AU, 2020) previously estimated that 50 per cent of all women in Sub-Saharan Africa are subject to gender-based violence at some point in their lifetime. How states reply to this is quite different across the continent. With one of the most progressive constitutions and Sexual Offences Courts in the world, South Africa nevertheless has a detestable rate of 72.1 offences of a sexual nature every 100,000 people, which is one of the highest in the world (South African Police Service, 2022). This “justice gap” is an expression of systemic shortcomings, such as overburdened courts, retraumatization of the survivor during the court process, and failure by the police to follow up.

Legislative reform has not been very even in Nigeria. Although the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 acts to criminalise different sexual violence, it is restricted to the Federal Capital Territory; the adoption is left to the individual states. To date, there are 30 states and territories out of 36 that have domesticated the Act (National Human Rights Commission, 2023). Furthermore, the reporting gap is over 90 per cent, and the national percentage of cases that are convicted and sentenced is below 12 per cent (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In northern states, which have Sharia law, social religious expectations discourage reporting, whereas in southern states, there is a tendency for reports to be lost in the courts through delays and due to the corruption of the police.

Regional Comparative Insights

A useful contrast can be drawn between Nigeria and Ghana, and Rwanda. The Ghana Domestic Violence Act 2007 has led to the creation of community-based assistance centres as well as a form of publicity to create awareness, which has slowly led to increased reporting of the same (now up 15% in 10 years) (Ghana Statistical Service, 2020). The legal reforms adopted in Rwanda after the genocide included the creation of One-Stop Centres in every district, combining police, health, and judicial services, and thus the attrition of the cases declined by 25 per cent between 2010 and 2019 (UNFPA, 2020). Such models present a picture that political dedication, source distribution, and integration of service, as well as survivors, are imperative to a successful state response.

Global Trends and Persistent Gaps

It is possible to identify a pattern of international convergence in the direction of a multi-sectoral survivor-focused approach, focusing on legislation, protection, and prevention of survivors. Nevertheless, there is always a problem of gaps when it comes to enforcement. The World Bank (2022) emphasises the fact that in low-income countries, the average score related to the effectiveness of implementation tends to stand at 0.62/1.00 as opposed to 0.85/1.00 in high-income environments, where laws are present. Besides, the scale of the global support provided to gender-

based violence programs is not always adequate, and it has received 0.12 per cent of the total humanitarian help in 2021 (UN OCHA, 2022).

3. Institutional, Procedural, and Socio-Cultural Deficits

Among such institutional gaps are under-equipped police departments and a lack of forensic capacity and gender desks (UN Women, 2019). The encroaching inquiries and lengthy trials, including trial-ackermann, contribute to the discouraging factor to report (Amnesty International, 2021). Justice pathways are further damaged by socio-cultural rules, such as victim-blaming, family pressure, informal settlements, etc. (Heise et al., 2019). The systemic nature of sexual violence in Nigeria reaffirms its entrenched set of institutional inadequacies and procedural weaknesses, as well as social-cultural impediments that weaken the response of the state. Although there is some progress in terms of legislation (e.g., the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) 2015 and individual state adaptations, such as 2007 Domestic violence Law in Lagos State, Child Welfare and Protection Law of 2018 in Kaduna State, and VAPP domestication in Enugu State), the fact remains that the application is haphazard and weak, to say the least (Amnesty International, 2020; Oduah, 2021).

Institutional Deficits

Institutional gaps manifest in chronic underfunding, a lack of specialised personnel, and weak coordination between law enforcement, judicial bodies, and health institutions. According to the reports, more than 70 per cent (7 out of every 10 cases) of sexual violence reported in Lagos State between 2022 and 2023 have fallen due to incomplete evidence and procedural delays in 2022 (CLEEN Foundation, 2023). The same pattern can be observed in Kaduna and Enugu states, rate of attrition of cases is over 65 percent owing to the foremost fact that survivors continue to experience several institutional barriers as sufficient forensic capacity, lack of gender desks in rural police departments, and protracted adjournment periods in courts of law (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023). These problems are exacerbated by the unavailability of trained forensic specialists in Nigeria. By 2021, the estimated number of forensic pathologists certified was less than 15, and they were mainly situated in big cities such as Lagos and Abuja, to cover a population of well over 200 million people (Federal Ministry of Health, 2022). This scarcity undermines the possibility of collecting and presenting even acceptable evidence which is applicable in the case of sexual violence.

Procedural Deficits

Procedural bottlenecks include slow judicial processes, a lack of survivor-centred reporting mechanisms, and excessive reliance on police discretion. It is estimated that in Nigeria, it takes a median of years to prosecute a case on sexual violence, namely, 3561 (3- 5), Mirrored on 36/92 (1218 months), in South Africa (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2022). There are also barriers to reporting, such as the disturbing environment, because a victim or survivor will face threatening reporting conditions when the police officer may demean complaints or require some unofficial fees to address his or her case (Okonkwo & Akinlabi, 2021).

Even where specialised gender-based violence (GBV) desks exist, their reach is limited. In Kaduna State, the presence of functional GBV desks is recorded in 28 per cent of all police divisions, and in Enugu, this number is just 18 per cent, indicating that huge portions of the rural population lack direct access to specialised reporting mechanisms (NBS, 2023). Such a lapse in procedure deters

official reports, which have continued underreporting, with the literature indicating a rate of sexual violence cases in Nigeria that is higher than 80 per cent (World Health Organisation , 2021).

Socio-Cultural Deficits

Cultural norms and stigmatisation create a hostile environment for survivors, often pressuring them into silence. In most of the Nigerian communities, the patriarchal values construct sexual violence as an individual concern as opposed to a crime (Awe & Ajayi, 2022). In Lagos, #SayNoToRape, one of the urban campaigns to address the issue of rape, has slightly changed the discourse, but in other areas, like Kaduna and Enugu, there are strong cultural taboos against discussing rape in any way, with the risk that it may cause a victim to lose marriage prospects or even become an object of revenge attacks (Okafor & Ibrahim, 2020).

Survivor protection is even complicated by the interface between religion and culture. Procedural norms informed by Sharia that privilege conciliation over criminal proceedings can fragment justice delivery by prevailing over the criminalisation of the perpetrator in some of the states in the north (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Furthermore, the elders and the traditional leaders of communities in the rural Enugu usually avoid encouraging further steps involving formality and formal case but press on to compromise through out-of-court settlements, which are devoid of any element of deterrence.

Comparative Summary of Lagos, Kaduna, and Enugu

While Lagos demonstrates relatively stronger institutional frameworks, including the Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency (DSVA), its procedural delays remain a critical barrier. Kaduna experiences a lack of adequate forensic infrastructure and insufficient coverage of the GBV desk, even though it has an increased criminal punishment policy. The inadequacies that exist in Enugu are augmented by the powerful socio-cultural opposition and low level of awareness campaigns. These deficits together bring a loophole of justice where the survivors in all three states are hit incredibly hard by the insurmountable hindrances to legal redress and psychosocial support. Removing such institutional, procedural and socio-cultural shortcomings calls on coherent policy reformation, enhanced responsibility, budgetary allocation on GBV address, capacity building of police and courts officials, and mass cultural reformation focusing on demystification of stigma. Unless these multi-layered challenges are addressed, the state will not be effective in defending the rights of women against the national and international standards of women's rights protection.

4. Women's Insecurity and Justice Provision

The insecurity experienced by women in contexts of sexual violence is multidimensional, extending beyond physical harm to psychological trauma, economic deprivation, and social exclusion (Heise et al., 2019). Delays in any effective justice response increase the vulnerability of the survivors, and a silence-underreporting loop continues (Bott et al., 2014).

Women's insecurity in the context of sexual violence is both a symptom and a consequence of systemic failures in state response mechanisms. Women in Nigeria are surrounded by various safety threats that are caused by long-standing patriarchy, the lack of resources to support the justice system, as well as a culture that enshrines impunity. Remarkable are the statistics on the prominence of sexual violence in Nigeria; the National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS, 2018) indicates that physical violence is experienced by 30 per cent of women aged 15 to 49 in Nigeria, whereas 39 per cent of these women were faced with sexual violence. Nonetheless, one

could expect them to be underreported because many stigmatise, fear speaking out for fear of retribution, or have no confidence in justice delivery systems (Amnesty International, 2020). The justice gap about the survivors occurs in various facets, which include tardy investigations, inadequate evidence gathering and casualty levels to prosecute. The statistics of the gender desk of the Nigeria Police Force (2021) reveal that few cases of sexual violence make it to prosecution, with conviction rates at less than 5 per cent across the country. This failure undermines the confidence of survivors of one of the legal institutions and further makes them insecure, especially for women in a high-incidence area.

Even in Lagos State, where some tremendous progress has been made to support progressive systems of law, including its Domestic Sexual Violence Agency (DSVA), the state continues to provide a slew of systems which offer victims prolonged trials with an average of 18 to 24 months (DSVA Annual Report, 2022). Kaduna State is progressing, given the introduction of Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs), but due to geographical inaccessibility and lack of finances, the ability to provide a steady service is hampered, specifically in the rural communities (Yusuf & Oladipo, 2021). The situation in Enugu State is more severe; the strong social-cultural norms deter victims of sexual violence from revealing their experiences publicly, and traditional mediation tends to select the concept of family respect over the rights of the victim (Okonkwo, 2020). The women not only experience physical insecurity but also psychological and economic insecurity. The survivors also have to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and social rejection, which further limits the ability to seek legal justice (Oladeji et al., 2019). The failure by the state to guarantee rapid, transparent, and just delivery of justice, therefore, contributes to a culture of fear, further propagating patterns of violence. Comparative analysis between Lagos, Kaduna, and Enugu suggests that while urbanisation, funding, and policy innovation influence justice provision, the decisive factor remains the state's political will to prioritise sexual violence as a public security crisis. The insecurity of women is unlikely to end unless they are given continued investments in specialised investigative bodies, survivor protection programmes and educational campaigns to stop this crime in Nigeria.

5. Gaps In Existing Scholarship

While the literature extensively documents the prevalence of sexual violence and critiques the inadequacies of state responses, fewer studies adopt an integrative approach combining feminist legal theory with human security analysis in the Nigerian context. Few Nigeria-focused studies integrate feminist legal analysis with human-security perspectives while triangulating survivor, institutional, and media data. This study fills that gap by comparing three socio-legal contexts and mapping the implementation terrain between policy intent and lived experience. It also has a gap in the empirical studies that are synthesised to promote the voice of the survivors, the evaluation of policy, and the systemic capacity. This research will fill these existing gaps since it will not only examine the legal and institutional frameworks but also the lived experiences of those most affected by the system, that is, the survivors and how they cross the justice systems in Nigeria. Therefore, research on sexual violence has consistently demonstrated the intersection between gender inequality, weak institutional frameworks, and impunity (Jewkes et al., 2013). Some of the theoretical approaches, like the feminist legal theory, have stated that the justice system is patriarchal, hence failing to provide women with an equitable system of legal redress (Smart, 1989).

The widespread literature arguably covers the number of sexual violence (Olayanju et al., 2013; National Population Commission [NPC] & ICF, 2018) and the social and cultural norms leading to gender based violence (Makama, 2013). These contributions are useful, but there are limited empirical papers that are available that look at the landscape of government deficiencies, the capacity of the institutions, and outcomes of the survivors across various locations in Nigeria.

First, a large part of the research already conducted is towards describing, but not evaluating. Researchers often report the magnitude of sexual violence, yet very seldom does it involve an extensive analysis of the performance of state policies, including the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP Act) 2015 or sexual offences laws of various states. As an example, the Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency (DSVA) of Lagos State has released some annual reports, but peer-reviewed scholarly examinations that address the actual consequences of such interventions on rates of conviction, the well-being of survivors, or their deterrence have not been developed (DSVA, 2022).

Second, the unevenness of scholarship exists geographically. The body of research has overemphasised urban areas and states that are more politically visible, including Lagos, Abuja (Federal Capital Territory) and Kaduna, effectively ignoring rural and conflict-affected zones, where vulnerabilities of the system have the potential to be most acute. This lapse restricts the interpretation of the influence of such variables as insurgency, displacement, and poor local governance not only on the incidence of sexual violence but also on the success of justice delivery services (Ajayi & Okechukwu, 2020).

Third, there is little quantitative evidence on the results of justice delivery. Although national surveys record prevalence, too little longitudinal and disaggregated data follow rates of case attrition, length of law courts, and satisfaction of the victims with court results. An example is the data released by the Nigeria Police Force Gender Desk in 2021: they show that sexual violence cases reported only result in conviction in the 2 percent range, whereas the rate of prosecuting such cases remains absurdly low (one in six cases, to be precise); however, even this data has gone virtually unaddressed in scholarship, with no-one scrutinizing them in any significant detail, including by their geographical distribution. In the absence of an effective statistical analysis, it is difficult to detect bottlenecks in the procedures or test strategic plans of change.

Fourth, it is done with poor interdisciplinary implications. Whereas legal scholars focus on statutory models and criminologists look at the practices of law enforcement, there is no cross-disciplinary study that encompasses such perspectives as the socio-economics of public health and psychology. This is especially concerning due to the mental health burden of sexual violence in this area, which a study in Nigeria showed was much more prevalent among survivors, but this is rarely included in policy-focused studies on the state response mechanisms (Oladeji et al., 2019).

Fifth, there is weak scholarship on the survivor-centred models of justice. International best practices like trauma police, single stores of crisis centres and witness protection are criticised in rare contexts of Nigeria and very little research on how these practices can be customised due to cultural diversity and available resources. The literature to date tends to prematurely leave what to make of reconciling global standards with local realities, a proverbial critical gap in both theory and practice.

Lastly, comparative research does not exist enough in Nigeria. The number of studies comparing policy innovation at the state level with the results in various socio-political conditions is limited. As an example, relatively high rates of prosecution in Lagos can hardly be explained in legal literature with regard to Enugu or Zamfara. Best practices in other jurisdictions cannot be transferred in a systematic manner without making a comparative analysis.

Methodology

The methodological approach to this research uses existing traditions of research in the field of gender-based violence (GBV) in a combination of mixed-methods research with a solid theoretical and empirical literature background. The study of sexual violence needs pluralism in the methods to embrace both quantifiable patterns in the institutions and subjective experiences of the survivors (Flick, 2018). This ambivalence is essential to the study of state failures that are not only enshrined in bureaucratic procedures, but also within socio-cultural reality (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Justification for a Mixed-Methods Approach

In recent years, mixed-methods designs have also been overwhelmingly accepted in GBV research due to the possibility of triangulating quantitative data estimating GBV prevalence with the qualitative narratives, thereby obtaining more comprehensive results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative analysis will enable the usage of indicators of performance in government in terms of the rates at which cases are reported, prosecuted, and convicted. As a specimen example (NBS, 2022), in Nigeria, of the 28 per cent official reports of sexual violence survivors to the police, fewer than 5 per cent of the cases ever led to conviction, and the two best angles to start from on the topic, respectively, are statistical trends and survivor testimonies.

During qualitative inquiry, on the other hand, the methods allow one to notice the interpretation and orientation of survivors through justice system frameworks, with obstacles, including police bias, prolonged case processing, and underdeveloped survivor support services, being identified (Aborisade & Fayemi, 2020). Consequently, there is a richness of the survey-based data and an in-depth interview approach to the conduct of the research of this sensitive nature that goes in tandem with best practice, as the World Health Organisation (2007) recommends in the conduct of violent research.

Literature-Informed Sampling Strategy

The study of sexual violence usually regards the balance between representativeness and ethics of sampling (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Using these precedents, this work used purposive sampling to recruit survivors using the NGOs and crisis centres' practice that has been studied to result in higher rates of disclosure, where stigma makes random-sample recruitment uncommon (Palinkas et al., 2015). The social network of professionals (law enforcement, judicial officers, and civil society activists) was used to recruit key informants who had a multi-level perspective of the situation. The statistical calculation of sample size was done based on the statistical formula of Taro Yamane (1967) on a finite population, as the size of the sample was 500 survey respondents proportionally distributed within Lagos, Abuja (FCT), Kaduna, Enugu and Borno States. SAABDHS selected these sites because of already existing GBV prevalence mapping (UN Women, 2021), and it determined that they are diverse in terms of geography, institutional capacity, and socio-political context.

Data Collection Instruments Grounded in Prior Research

The questionnaire of this survey was empirically developed on the relevance of the validated questionnaire that was used in the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS, 2018) and the Women's Health and Domestic Violence Multi-country Study (WHO, 2005). The tools are culturally adaptable and psychometrically sound in the Nigerian setting (Okafor et al., 2021). Regarding the thematic categories noticed in the prior GBV justice research, i.e., police responsiveness (Akinlabi, 2017), diligence in the prosecution (Amnesty International, 2020), and GBV survivors' safety after the GBV was reported (Odujinrin et al., 2022), in qualitative data, semi-structured interview questions were designed about them. This guaranteed the comparison of the research with previous studies and being able to be flexible to emergent themes.

Findings and Discussion

1. Government's Institutional Deficiencies in Responding to Sexual Violence

Across Lagos, Kaduna, and Enugu, participants consistently described systemic weaknesses that hinder the effective handling of sexual violence cases. Survivors reported slowness in investigations by the police, poor collection of forensic evidence and a casual attitude by law enforcement officers. Such reports are also consistent with research conducted by Okorie and Okocha (2021), which reveals that undertrained and under-resourced Nigerian police tend to view the issue of sexual violence as a matter of a domestic nature, instead of a crime. The fact that there is not a single police division with a specialised sexual offences unit, particularly those in Kaduna and Enugu, makes the situation even more difficult. As a case in point, the delay in bureaucracy and intra-agency competition among the police, the Ministry of Justice, and the courts in Kaduna was cited severally times as a significant stumbling block in the way of dispensation of justice promptly. This is correlated with the view by Amnesty International (2020), which notes that procedural inefficiency is another facilitator of cases being left by the survivors.

2. Women's Insecurity and Fear of Retaliation

A central theme emerging from all three states was the pervasive sense of insecurity and fear of retaliation among survivors. A great number of them reported threats by perpetrators or their relatives that were typically ignored by the police. Survivors in Enugu reported high levels of pressure to keep quiet within the society because of the influence of community traditional leaders who attempted to maintain the family honour. Such an atmosphere of fear also directly negates the likelihood of sexual violence reporting by women, which, according to the research by Akinlusi et al. (2018), was found to be influenced by community stigma and the perceived inability of the police to act when it comes to reporting sexual violence. An example is that women in Kaduna complained that religious and cultural explanations of female behaviour would blame the victim, and this adds to the insecurity of women.

3. Justice Provision Gaps

The research revealed substantial gaps in justice provision, including the scarcity of specialised courts for sexual offences and the underutilisation of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act in states where it has been domesticated. Even in Lagos, where there is some level of institutional capacity, the report of survivors indicates persistently prolonged cases taking more than two years to conclude. Kaduna and Enugu have been reported to face high attrition rates in sexual violence prosecutions due to a lack of well-trained prosecutors and also due to a lack of case management systems. This resonates with the reasoning put forward by Adebanjo (2022) that

the inefficiency of the justice system in Nigeria facilitates the perpetuation of the impunity that continues to cause abuse.

4. Cross-State Variations and Contextual Influences

While institutional weaknesses were evident in all three states, variations emerged. In Lagos, there were better infrastructure, NGOs activities and sensitization of the populace which part of their roles contributed to higher reporting rates. The urban-rural form of Kaduna implied that access to justice mechanisms was far less available to the survivors of the rural communities. The traditional authority structures had a critical influence on the context in Enugu, as many cases were informally mediated without cases being brought to legally relevant structures. This cross-case analysis reaffirms the fact that although its national legal system is increasingly applied in line with international norms, it is not consistently enforced and strongly influenced by the socio-cultural and political realities of both the nation and the individuals (Makinde, 2020).

5. Linking Findings to Broader Literature

The findings of this study reinforce international literature that highlights the interplay between institutional failures, socio-cultural barriers, and survivor vulnerability (UN Women, 2021). This recorded fear of retaliation can be seen as a trend in other African societies, where patriarchal norms overlap with gaps in the state to discourage reporting (Jewkes et al., 2017). Interestingly, the lack of justice in terms of recurring gaps, primarily the inability to deliver reporting and adjudication procedures that are survivor-friendly, allows putting in context the legitimate feminist criticisms of criminology reflected in calls to adopt a victim-centred model of justice (Walklate, 2018). The model would shift the sense of the state response narrowly viewed in the form of criminal justice to one that includes psychosocial, economic, and community support components. Additionally, the work also contained the patterns of police negligence, social stigma, and corruption in the justice system, which were also observed. Impunity is further enhanced by the cultural norms that deter victims of sexual violence from reporting occurrences of the vice.

Conclusion

This article has examined how the state's response to sexual violence remains constrained by a persistent implementation gap—one that separates legal aspiration from lived protection. In law and policy documents worldwide, governments commit to due diligence in terms of preventing, safeguarding, investigating, prosecuting and redressing gender-based violence. Nevertheless, survivors still have to face defunded policing, episodic forensic service, prolonged and antagonistic steps, and socio-cultural forces that make silence and informal resolution the new norm (Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022; UN Women, 2019). This is known not only to exert a low level of reports and case attrition, but a continuous erosion of the day-to-day security of women, which has been seen reflected in assembly numbers worldwide and public-health evaluations (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2021).

Three mutually reinforcing deficits present themselves. Weaknesses in the institution (namely, understaffed and undertrained units, an underdeveloped medico-legal infrastructure, and poor inter-agency coordination) dilute effective and evidence-based investigations and protection of survivors (Oluduro, 2015; Makinde, 2020). The procedural vulnerability, characterised by court adjournments, more cumbersome rules of evidence, less drop in support of victim-witnesses, and intermittent application of protection orders, can contribute to the decline of the TC cases and does not serve the aim of deterrence (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Victim-blaming, fear of retaliation,

and pressure to make informal settlements an element of socio-cultural drag that closes the actual possibilities of accessing justice despite the existence of formal legislation (UN Women, 2019; WHO, 2021). Such observations support feminist legal argument that formal neutrality of the law can obstruct power discrepancies between the sexes in enforcement and adjudication processes (MacKinnon, 2016; True, 2012) and advances arguments of human-security studies that locate violence as a part of a wider environment of threats to bodily integrity, livelihood, and the ability to participate in society (Htun & Weldon, 2018).

The analysis, informed by feminist legal theory and human security approaches, illustrates that the problem in Nigeria is not so much lack of formal law enshrined on the books, but the knock-on issue of what human rights lawyers colloquially call an implementation gap: the chronic shortage of law in action, translated into under-resourced law enforcement authorities, uneven prosecutorial services, fewer survivor-support services, and ubiquitous socio-cultural scripts and norms that normalise impunity (Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 20 Women and girls are more so the ones to suffer the consequences of this, as they as well as experience the immediate impact of the sexual assault including infection and the ongoing uncertainty and destabilization of their livelihoods and social socialization (WHO, 2021; Heise et al., 2019).

Recommendations

I. Strengthen Institutional Capacity and Accountability

- Put well-staffed Sexual Offences Units in all state police commands with trained investigators and forensic experts.
- Implement a strong surveillance and vigilance model on law enforcement and judicial officers who deal with sexual violence cases so that they do not approach cases in a careless or discriminatory manner.

II. Expand and Harmonise Legal Framework Implementation

- Feasibility of the complete domestication and implementation of the VAPP Act with equal force in all states.
- Develop dedicated courts of sexual offences with speedy hearings to lessen delays in the process of prosecution.

III. Enhance Survivor Protection and Support Systems

- Develop and fund survivor shelters and safe houses in all states to protect victims from retaliation.
- Provide free legal aid and psychosocial support for survivors, integrated within public health and justice systems.

IV. Community Engagement and Cultural Reform

- Work with traditional and religious authorities to call out negative gender norms that allow sexual violence.
- Implement prolonged community-based education programs that would help reduce the stigma and make the survivors report the incidents.

V. Data Collection and Research

- Build a national database of sexual violence as a way to monitor prosecution outcomes and how cases are tracked and used to effect policy change.
- Promote coordination among learning institutions, NGOs and the government in the development of evidence-based interventions.

VI. Multi-Sectoral Coordination

- Establish state-level Gender-Based Violence Response Task Forces to have a comprehensive and coordinated response, with all law enforcement, health providers, civil society, as well as survivor advocates.

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