

Prevalence of Gender Based Violence in Nigeria: The Way Out

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Abstract

Review Article

Globally, gender-based violence (GBV) is a persistent problem, and women and girls remain particularly vulnerable to its various forms. Gender-based violence (GBV) is a major public health and human rights problem worldwide. Gender-based violence (GBV) is an umbrella term for harmful acts of abuse perpetrated against a person's will and rooted in a system of unequal power between women and men. This is true for both conflict-affected and non-conflict settings. Harm caused by GBV comes in a variety of visible and invisible forms, it also includes the threat of violence: physical violence, such as assault or slavery; emotional or psychological violence, such as verbal abuse or confinement; sexual abuse, including rape; harmful practices, like child marriage and female genital mutilation; socio-economic violence, which includes denial of resources; and sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse. This paper discusses types of gender-based violence, forms, causes, effects as well as remedies to the menace. The researchers relied on context analysis and used secondary data such as published and unpublished materials like text books, journals, newspapers and internet materials to gather and analyse the required data. Based on the findings, the writers recommended among others that; preventing violence against women and girls, it is important to ignite awareness, drive policy changes, and mobilize communities. GBV awareness creation programmes, legal protection and implementation of an effective redress mechanism should be put in place to curb this menace.

Keywords: Gender, violence, gender-based violence.

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Introduction

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is a pervasive and insidious human rights violation that affects individuals, families, and communities worldwide. It is a manifestation of the unequal power dynamics between men and women, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes, social norms, and cultural practices that discriminate against and harm individuals based on their gender. GBV encompasses a broad range of harmful behaviours, including physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual violence, as well as economic exploitation and neglect.

GBV disproportionately affects women and girls, who are subjected to various forms of violence, including intimate partner violence, rape, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and human trafficking. However, GBV also affects individuals of all genders, including men and boys, and those who identify as LGBTQ+, who may face violence and discrimination due to societal expectations and norms. The consequences of GBV are far-reaching and devastating, resulting in physical harm, emotional trauma, and even death. Moreover, GBV perpetuates cycles of inequality,

undermining social cohesion, economic development, and human well-being. Eradicating GBV requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach that addresses the root causes of violence, promotes gender equality, and empowers individuals, communities, and societies to challenge harmful norms and behaviours. Efforts to address GBV in Nigeria include policy reforms, community engagement, and support services for survivors. However, more needs to be done to prevent GBV, protect victims, and hold perpetrators accountable.

The incidence of gender-based violence (GBV) is growing astronomical with the activities of the insurgency in the North East. Gender Based Violence (GBV) is defined as all forms of Discrimination Against Women. Gender-based violence (GBV) is a persistent and entrenched issue in Nigeria, affecting millions of individuals, particularly women and girls, across the country. The prevalence of GBV in Nigeria is alarming, with the National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) (2018) reporting that 28% of women aged 15-49 have experienced physical violence, while 22% have experienced sexual violence. The North-East and North-West regions of the country have the highest rates of GBV, with 42% and 37% of women experiencing physical violence, respectively. GBV in Nigeria is perpetuated by harmful cultural norms, social attitudes, and power imbalances. Factors such as poverty, lack of education, and limited access to economic opportunities further exacerbate the problem. The consequences of GBV are severe, ranging from physical and emotional trauma to long-term psychological damage, social isolation, and even death.

Globally, the UN reports that one in four women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime, and research has shown that it is the most common form of violence against women and girls in humanitarian contexts (Working Group on Higher Education, 2016). The findings shown that from forced and early marriages to the physical, mental or sexual assault on a woman, 1 in 3 Nigerian women have experienced physical violence by age 15 (NDHS, 2018). According to Working Group on Higher Education (WGHE) (2016), over one-third of

women and girls globally will experience some form of violence in their lifetime. However, this rate is higher in emergencies, conflict, and crisis, where vulnerability and risks are increased and most often family, community, and legal protections have broken down. Harm caused by GBV comes in a variety of visible and invisible forms; it also includes the threat of violence. For instance, one in every four Nigerian females will experience sexual violence as a child. Yet, conversations on sexuality remain taboo in Nigeria, especially among young people between the ages of 10 and 18. Moreover, Nigerian women are regarded as subordinate to men (Ajuwon, 2023). This culture of sexual ignorance, coupled with enforced stereotypes, demeans women and contributes greatly to gender-based violence. This is taking a terrible toll on Nigerians old and young alike.

GBV can manifest in a variety of ways. Some of these include: physical violence, such as assault or slavery; emotional or psychological violence, such as verbal abuse or confinement; sexual abuse, including rape; harmful practices, like child marriage and female genital mutilation; socio-economic violence, which includes denial of resources; and sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse (Worku & Addosie, 2022). This paper therefore discusses the concept of gender-based violence, forms of gender-based violence, causes and effects as well as solutions to eradicate the menace.

Concept of Gender Based Violence

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) defines violence against women as *any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life*. In more recent legal documents, there are examples of the two terms being merged, and the term ‘gender-based violence against women’ is used. For example, in the Council of Europe’s Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), Article 3 offers this definition as *gender-based violence against women shall mean violence that is directed*

against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) (CEDAW, 2020). Gender based violence can also be defined as any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. Gender-based violence (GBV) is an umbrella term for harmful acts of abuse perpetrated against a person's will and rooted in a system of unequal power between women and men. According to the United Nations, GBV encompasses harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender, including sexual, physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. In Nigeria, GBV manifests in various forms, such as domestic violence, sexual assault, female genital mutilation, child marriage, and human trafficking. This is true for both conflict-affected and non-conflict settings.

Definitions such as these apply to instances where gender is the basis for violence carried out against a person (River, 2020). However, there is more to gender than being male or female: someone may be born with female sexual characteristics but identify as male, or as male and female at the same time, or sometimes as neither male nor female. LGBT+ people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other people who do not fit the heterosexual norm or traditional gender binary categories) also suffer from violence which is based on their factual or perceived sexual orientation, and/or gender identity. For that reason, violence against such people falls within the scope of gender-based violence. Furthermore, men can also be targeted with gender-based violence (Lwanga & Lemeshow, 2019). Statistically, using the definition of 'gender-based violence against women' from the Explanatory report to the Istanbul Convention as a starting point, one can say that *gender-based violence refers to any type of harm that is perpetrated against a person or group of people because of their factual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity*. Gender-based violence is based on an imbalance of power and is carried out with the intention to humiliate and make a person or

group of people feel inferior and/ or subordinate. This type of violence is deeply rooted in the social and cultural structures, norms and values that govern society, and is often perpetuated by a culture of denial and silence. Gender-based violence can happen in both the private and public spheres and it affects women disproportionately. However, the number of such cases is much smaller, in comparison with women, but it should not be neglected (Dean, et al, 2019).

Gender-based violence can be sexual, physical, verbal, psychological (emotional), or socio-economic and it can take many forms, from verbal violence and hate speech on the Internet, to rape or murder (Dean, et al, 2019). It can be perpetrated by anyone: a current or former spouse/partner, a family member, a colleague from work, schoolmates, friends, an unknown person, or people who act on behalf of cultural, religious, state, or intra-state institutions. Gender-based violence, as with any type of violence, is an issue involving relations of power. It is based on a feeling of superiority, and an intention to assert that superiority in the family, at school, at work, in the community or in society as a whole.

Types of Gender-Based Violence

- **Domestic violence** includes all acts of physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence that occur within the family, domestic unit, or between intimate partners (Patel & Andrew, 2021). These can be former or current spouses also when they do not share the same residence. 22 % of all women who have (had) a partner has experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner since the age of 15.
- **Sex-based harassment** includes unwelcome verbal, physical or other non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person. Between 45% to 55% of women in the EU have experienced sexual harassment since the age of 15. In the European Union for example, one out of three women has experienced physical

and or sexual violence while one in two women has experienced sexual harassment. In another way, one out of twenty women has been raped while one out of five women has experienced stalking. 95% of victims trafficked for sexual exploitation in the European Union are women (CEDAW, 2020).

- **Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)** is the ritual cutting or removal of some or all of the external female genitalia. It violates women's bodies and often damages their sexuality, mental health, well-being and participation in their community. It may even lead to death. Today, more than 200 million girls and women alive worldwide have undergone female genital mutilation. At least, 600,000 women living in the EU have undergone FGM.
- **Forced marriage:** This refers to marriage concluded under force or coercion, either physical pressure to marry or emotional and psychological pressure. It is closely linked to child or early marriage, when children are wed before reaching the minimum age for marriage. This is more predominant at the Northern part of Nigeria.
- **Online violence:** This is an umbrella term used to describe all sorts of illegal or harmful behaviours against women in the online space. They can be linked to experiences of violence in real life, or be limited to the online environment only. They can include illegal threats, stalking or incitement to violence, unwanted, offensive or sexually explicit emails or messages, sharing of private images or videos without consent, or inappropriate advances on social networking sites. One in 10 women in the EU has experienced cyber harassment since the age of 15 (Stets & Stronis, 2019).

Gender-based violence is a phenomenon deeply rooted in gender inequality, and continues to be one of the most notable human rights violations within all societies. Gender-based violence is violence directed against a person because of their gender

(Calverton & Iliyasu, 2021). Both women and men experience gender-based violence but the majority of victims are women and girls. Gender-based violence and violence against women are terms that are often used interchangeably as it has been widely acknowledged that most gender-based violence is inflicted on women and girls, by men. However, using the 'gender-based' aspect is important as it highlights the fact that many forms of violence against women are rooted in power inequalities between women and men. The terms are used interchangeably throughout EIGE's work, reflecting the disproportionate number of these particular crimes against women.

Forms of Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence can take different forms and mostly affects women and girls. Gender-based violence is violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately (Yohannes, 2017). Violence against women is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in

- physical harm,
- sexual harm,
- psychological,
- economic harm, and
- or suffering to women (Burton, 2015).

It can include violence against women, domestic violence against women, men or children living in the same domestic unit. Although, women and girls are the main victims of GBV, however, it also causes severe harm to families and communities.

According to Bunch et al (2022), gender-based violence can take various forms:

- **Physical:** it results in injuries, distress and health problems, and may even lead to death in certain cases. Typical forms of physical violence are beating, strangling, pushing, and the use of weapons. In the

EU, 31 % of women have experienced one or more acts of physical violence since the age of 15.

- **Sexual:** it includes unconsented sexual acts, attempts to obtain a sexual act, acts to traffic, or acts otherwise directed against a person's sexuality without the person's consent. It is estimated that one in 20 women (5 %) has been raped in EU countries since the age of 15.
- **Psychological:** includes psychologically abusive behaviours, such as controlling, coercion, economic violence and blackmail. 43% of women in the EU have experienced some form of psychological violence by an intimate partner.

The most at-Risk Person to Gender Based Violence

Gender-based violence can happen to anyone. However, it disproportionately affects women and girls. Those in crisis settings are at a double disadvantage due to their gender and their situation (Arnold, et al, 2018). Women and girls from other diverse and marginalized communities face an even greater risk where gender inequality intersects with other forms of oppression.

Those at higher risk include:

- Women and girls living with disabilities
- Young and adolescent girls
- Older women
- People who identify as LGBTQ+
- Women of ethnic minorities
- Refugees and migrants

While it is important referencing these different identities separately, each person holds multiple identities at once. For example, a woman who lives with a disability might also be an older refugee. This is why it is important to understand the concept of intersectionality, that a person faces different kinds of discrimination and risks due to a combination of their identities like gender, race, religion, age (Both et al, 2015).

It is crucial to understand intersectionality when working to determine and provide prevention

and response services. For instance, research has found that adolescent girls living in displacement are particularly at risk of being overlooked in emergency settings, where they may fall between the cracks of child protection services and those aimed at adult women.

Causes of Gender-Based Violence in Crisis Settings

Gender inequality, and the norms and beliefs that violence against women and girls is acceptable, cause gender-based violence. There are also many factors that increase the risk of GBV, with women and girls living through crises experiencing an increase in both the frequency and severity of GBV (Shumba, 2021). This is because the same conditions that contribute to conflict and forced displacement also accelerate GBV. These include:

1. Poverty

Research from What Works found that when families are pushed into poverty, harmful practices like child marriages increase (Jewkes, et al, 2022). According to these researchers, young girls may be pulled out of education for marriage, to help with domestic tasks or to generate an income. Unemployment and economic distress in the household can increase instances of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), as well.

2. Breakdown of Services

A collapse of community structure and the rule of law means women can find themselves without social support and protection systems in violent situations. It can also result in women and girls traveling great distances in search of food, water or fuel, further increasing risk of sexual harassment and assault.

3. Conflict and War

Rising numbers of conflicts globally are driving an increase in conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). Without the rule of law, CRSV is often carried out with impunity. Armed forces may use

rape as a weapon of war. Other forms of CRSV include sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage and other forms of sexual violence (Samuel, 2020).

4. Displacement

Women living in refugee camps and other temporary accommodation can face safety issues that put them at greater risk. This can include having no locks on bathroom doors, joint male and female facilities, and inadequate lighting. Women living as refugees may have to find new livelihoods, which can lead to an increased risk of exploitation. Displaced women and girls in emergencies are often less visible. They are not always included in national surveys or reports, which means their needs go unmet (Samuel, 2020).

5. Stress in the Home

Intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence women experience in humanitarian settings. IRC research suggests that IPV and child maltreatment and abuse occur more frequently when families experience an inability to meet their basic needs, alcohol and substance abuse and inconsistent income.

Effects of Gender-Based Violence

Violence has a long-lasting effect on survivors and their families. Impacts can range from physical harm to long-term emotional distress to fatalities. Rape and sexual assault can result in unwanted pregnancies, complications during pregnancy and birth, and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV (Afenyadu & Goparaju, 2023).

According to Correia and Van Bronwhorst (2020), social and economic fallout from GBV can lead to a loss of livelihood and increased gender inequalities in the long term. Reporting or seeking services for GBV can lead to further threats of violence, social stigma and ostracization. GBV is also a key barrier to women and girls accessing other lifesaving services, such as food, shelter and healthcare.

Crises are not short-term occurrences. Climate-related disasters can create recurrent crises and many women and girls who are forcibly displaced can end up living in temporary accommodation for years. This exposes women and girls to GBV for longer and can draw out and compound the effects of that violence for decades, hampering long-term resilience and empowerment (Ajuwon, 2023).

Preventing Gender-Based Violence

While GBV continues to be a huge risk that women and girls face daily, there are ways to prevent it. Mirembe and Davies (2021) highlighted many of these which include:

- Empowering women and girls across their lifetime by:
 - Keeping girls in school
 - Empowering women economically
 - Using feminist approaches to tackle gender inequality, including in the home
 - Providing women and girls with safe spaces
- Giving women cash support
- Engaging male allies
- Including women in decision-making at leadership level
- Supporting local women-led and women's rights organizations

Comprehensive GBV services need to be established quickly in times of crisis to protect women and girls and reduce their exposure to violence, while increasing their chances of recovery and resilience. Humanitarian organizations should bring a feminist approach to programming, that takes into account the unequal power balance between genders when designing support and interventions for crisis-affected populations. Yet, despite knowing the scope of the problem, the serious and at times fatal effects of GBV, and that one can prevent and respond to it, GBV is still not prioritized with enough urgency during humanitarian responses. In 2021, just 28% of GBV funding requirements

were met, the lowest proportion reported over the previous four years and down from 32% in 2020 (Appiah & Cusack, 2023).

The IRC response

The IRC prioritizes the needs of women and girls across its programming. This body works to support the resilience and dignity of women and girls exposed to violence in crisis settings in over 50 countries worldwide (Appiah & Cusack, 2023). The IRC delivers essential healthcare, GBV case management and psychosocial support to survivors, including through safe spaces and outreach teams. In 2022 for example, the IRC provided 177,404 women and girls with psychosocial support and registered 43,817 GBV survivors for case management, ensuring that they receive necessary emotional, medical, psychosocial and other support services throughout their recovery journey (Patel & Andrew, 2021).

Solutions

There are efforts being made by the government, civil society organizations and active bystanders to end GBV in Nigeria, but they are not enough. Nigeria requires a stronger focus on creating and upholding legal frameworks against GBV that can be facilitated by political will and the increased inclusion of women in political positions. To end gender-based violence start by including more women in politics. Women make up half of Nigeria's population, but they have never held more than 15 per cent of elective offices. For, instance, there has never been a female governor or president in Nigeria. This gap needs to be bridged at least to ensure they are given equal opportunities (Lori, et al, 2020).

Socioeconomic Freedom

Poverty is a risk factor for various types of violence against women. Lack of economic independence can make it very difficult for women to report and leave abusive relationships; having access to economic opportunities helps women break free from this cycle of dependency. Gender-based income inequality is reduced in countries with a higher proportion of women in

top legislative positions because female political leaders are more likely to support economic reforms, gender-sensitive budgets, and interventions that benefit women economically.

Polarized Leadership

Gender-based violence can be traced to persisting power imbalances and gender stereotypes that place women below men. Harmful gender norms, war, conflict and the long masculinized political leadership in Nigeria need to be addressed so women are seen as equal citizens across the nation. A shift in power distribution can be achieved by enacting legislation that recognizes the socioeconomic barriers that prevent women from participating in politics, such as illiteracy, poverty, and political apathy (Berker, et al., 2015).

The Affirmative Action bill, which sought to ensure that women hold at least 35 per cent of administrative and appointment positions in political parties at both the federal and state levels, was sponsored by Nkeiruka Onyejeocha, a female lawmaker from Abia State. On March 1, 2022, the bill was one of five gender-related bills the National Assembly rejected during the constitutional amendment review (Leach, 2023). In response, Nigerian women protested for several days. It was witnessed how Onyejeocha's support for the gender bills as she walked with women and vowed to speak to her colleagues on their behalf. The Governors' Wives Forum and all seven female senators then also backed the Nigerian Women Occupy NASS movement. All these are measures that can resolved polarized leadership in Nigeria.

The Crossroad between Female Political Participation and Ending GBV

The direct link between reduced gendered violence and women's inclusion in politics is in the emphasis female leaders typically place on the rights, development, and well-being of women and children. Such leaders can raise these issues in relevant spaces and recommend practical solutions. Women's participation in politics and proximity to political power has played a crucial role in reducing gendered violence in Nigeria in the past. The first legislation in Nigeria to combat human

trafficking, a form of gender-based violence, was pushed by Titi Abubakar, the wife of then-vice president, Atiku Abubakar. She set up a committee to draft the anti-human trafficking law, which was approved and put into effect in July, 2003. The National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons and Related Matters is currently responsible for enforcing the law (Ojo & Bidemi, 2018).

Equal Right Advocacy

Equal rights for men and women in terms of inheritance and access to land, increased access to finance for women, and the creation of decent jobs are all outlined in Rwanda's *National Strategy for Transformation 2017–2024 for example*. Nigeria as a country can as well practice this and this will no doubt given women equal right with their men counterparts. All of these points to how having inclusive governance strengthens women's economic power to make healthy decisions. Politics plays a major role in ending gendered violence, as it does with many things. Notable efforts have been made by the few women holding or associating with political power and civil groups like Elect HER, which unveiled eight female aspirants running for state and federal legislative seats at the 2023 general elections. Even though, these efforts are not sufficient, they aid in the effective implementation of policies to end gender-based violence in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence (GBV) is an umbrella term for harmful acts of abuse perpetrated against a person's will and rooted in a system of unequal power between women and men. This is true for both conflict-affected and non-conflict settings. Gender-based violence (GBV) is present in every society around the world, including Nigeria and this takes many forms. Harm caused by GBV comes in a variety of visible and invisible forms, it also includes the threat of violence. GBV can manifest in a variety of ways. Some of these include: physical violence, such as assault or slavery; emotional or psychological violence, such as verbal abuse or confinement; sexual abuse, including rape;

harmful practices, like child marriage and female genital mutilation; socio-economic violence, which includes denial of resources; and sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse. In crisis, whether conflict or natural disaster, the risk of GBV increases, and so does our collective need to act to prevent GBV before it happens or respond to the needs of women and girls when it does. In the light of the above, it is important every individual have a moral imperative to stop all forms of violence against women and girls.

Suggestions

It is therefore important for university authorities and other stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations, to develop and implement risk reduction and health-promotion programmes directing efforts at making campuses safer through appropriate no-tolerance policies, effective redress mechanism and improved counselling of victims of GBV.

To prevent violence against women and girls, it is important to ignite awareness, drive policy changes, and mobilize communities. This campaign needs to employ diverse strategies, including radio programmes, community dialogues, rallies, and collaborations with stakeholders. Through these efforts, one aimed to foster a collective commitment to preventing and responding to gender-based violence, advocating for a safer and more equitable world for women and girls.

In Northeast (NE) Nigeria, GBV sub-sector plays a significant role to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place for immediate provision of GBV services at the onset of emergencies due to internal displacement, floods, drought, fire outbreaks and other public health risks such as cholera outbreak and malnutrition. In this regard, contingency planning is an opportunity for GBV to develop key anticipatory actions for GBV response, whilst contributing to the core functions of the GBV i.e., to build national capacity in preparedness and contingency planning and support robust advocacy. The purpose of this strategy is to provide technical guidance to humanitarian actors, including members and partners of the Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Sub-Sector in North-East Nigeria, in order to implement and coordinate effective interventions to prevent and respond to GBV.

There should be intensive efforts to ensure standard operating procedures for GBV Interventions in Humanitarian Settings in Northeast Nigeria. The purpose of this GBV SOPs resource package is to support the development of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for gender-based violence (GBV) interventions in humanitarian settings. When multiple organizations are providing GBV prevention and response services in humanitarian settings, it is crucial to adopt a coordinated approach. GBV SOPs are specific procedures that are agreed among organizations in a particular context, outlining the roles and responsibilities of each actor in preventing, mitigating the risks, and responding to GBV.

In addition, gender-based violence awareness creation programmes, legal protection and implementation of an effective redress mechanism are recommended to curb this menace.

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