

## **GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND THE CHALLENGE OF POLICY AWARENESS IN NIGERIA**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Gender based violence has been on the increase in Nigeria with women suffering the most violence on the basis of their gender. This record negates the existence of multiple policies and legal frameworks that prohibit the act of gender-based violence in the country. This paper investigates the challenge of policy communication and its impact on gender-based violence in Nigeria. Social marketing theory is adopted as a heuristic device which explains the importance and steps to create awareness about government's policies and agenda to the targeted audience or general public. Literatures were reviewed thematically, and data were

collected via secondary method while documentary content study was deployed for analysis. The study reveals that nonchalant disposition of government overtime on gender-based violence has led to poor policy communication and awareness. It concludes that poor communication and awareness of policies and legal framework has contributed to the increase of gender-based violence in Nigeria, and recommended amongst others an aggressive awareness programme on policies and legal frameworks prohibiting gender-based violence, and a complimentary role by relevant civil society organizations.

**Keywords:** Gender-based violence, Policy, and Social marketing theory.

## Introduction

In Nigeria, gender-based violence (GBV) is still a major problem that can take many different forms, including trafficking, sexual assault, domestic abuse, and destructive customs. The high frequency of GBV in the nation, despite its vast cultural diversity, is a result of deeply ingrained gender stereotypes and social practices that uphold the subjugation of women and girls.

The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) 2018 reports that 10% of women aged 15 to 49 reports having experienced sexual assault, while about 30% report having suffered physical abuse. These figures point to a larger social problem in which violence against women is not only accepted but also frequently goes unpunished. In Nigeria, cultural norms that uphold male dominance, poverty, and illiteracy are some of

the main causes of genderbased violence.

The combination of these elements produces a setting in which women are disenfranchised from reporting abuse or seeking assistance, which feeds the cycle of violence.

Nigeria has made excellent progress in developing laws to combat gender-based violence, particularly the Child Rights Act of 2003 and the Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) of 2015. The purpose of these laws is to give people legal protection from different types of abuse and violence. The general public's limited understanding of these laws, particularly among women who are the major victims of GBV, hinders their effectiveness. A large portion of the public is unaware of their legal rights and the channels or reporting abuse, which greatly reduces the potential influence of these laws.

There are various reasons why policy awareness in Nigeria is difficult. First off, there is a notable disparity between the outreach and communication tactics used by governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Many awareness programs have a narrow focus and do not reach vulnerable communities, which are most in need of assistance and education. Comprehending and interacting with these policies might be made more difficult by the unfamiliar language and terminologies used in legal documents.

Furthermore, the social shame associated with gender-based violence is a major barrier that keeps victims from learning about the resources that are out there. Crime victims may be discouraged from reporting violent

crimes due to fear of being shunned, victim-blaming, or a lack of confidence in law enforcement. A judiciary that frequently lacks the expertise to handle GBV matters promptly and sympathetically contributes to this culture of silence by undermining public confidence in the legal system.

In order to effectively implement and comprehend the laws and policies already in place to address this urgent societal issue, there are systemic hurdles that must be addressed. This study aims to investigate the difficulties in raising policy awareness and its impact in tackling GBV in Nigeria.

### **Statement of Problem**

In Nigeria, gender-based violence (GBV) is a serious problem that impacts millions of people, mostly women and girls, and presents enormous obstacles to the advancement and well-being of the society. The prevalence of GBV remains high despite the existence of comprehensive legal frameworks like the Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) of 2015. This highlights a clear gap between the creation of policy and the real-world experiences of victims. The general public's lack of awareness of these policies, especially among those who are most at risk of violence, exacerbates the issue.

A culture of silence where violence is frequently tolerated as the standard rather than an affront to human decency arises from the fact that many victims of GBV are ignorant of their rights and the legal safeguards

available to them. In addition to keeping people from asking for assistance, this ignorance feeds the negative gender stereotypes and social shame associated with victims. Victims are further discouraged from reporting occurrences or utilizing available support services by a mistrust of law enforcement, fear of victim-blaming and social exclusion.

Furthermore, the communication and outreach tactics used by non-governmental and governmental organizations have not been successful in spreading knowledge about GBV policies. Many times, campaigns have a narrow focus and do not involve underrepresented communities, which leave a lot of people without the information they need to seek justice or navigate the legal system. This lack of knowledge eventually impedes attempts to lower the prevalence of GBV and is a major obstacle to maximizing the benefits of current policies.

In addition, there is a glaring deficiency in the GBV training that law enforcement and court staff get, which causes them to handle cases with bias and insensitivity. This shortcoming discourages victims even more from pursuing legal action since they might worry that their cases will not be treated fairly or seriously enough.

Therefore, insufficient channels for efficient communication and education and a severe lack of public policy knowledge contribute to Nigeria's gender-based violence issue. The purpose of this study is to investigate these issues and emphasize the necessity of community involvement and extensive awareness campaigns to guarantee that GBV regulations are not

only understood but also actively applied in the ongoing battle against this widespread problem. In order to empower victims, promote social change, and eventually remove the structural obstacles that allow GBV to continue, this issue must be addressed.

## **Research Questions**

The two main research questions of the study are:

- 1) What are the major factors that contribute to the lack of awareness of existing policies on gender-based violence amongst vulnerable population in Nigeria?
- 2) How has lack of awareness of policies on gender-based violence impacted on the ability of vulnerable population in Nigeria from seeking help and access support services?

## **Research Objectives**

The research objectives of the study are:

- 1) To identify key factors that contribute to the lack of awareness and understanding of existing policies on gender-based violence amongst vulnerable population in Nigeria
- 2) To ascertain the extent to which lack of awareness of policies on gender-based violence have impacted on the ability of vulnerable population in Nigeria from seeking help and access support services.

## **Methodology**

The study adopted qualitative research method as relevant materials were reviewed and data obtained through secondary sources. The data obtained were analyzed using documentary content analysis approach. The theory was used to explain and give perspective to the study.

## **Conceptual Review**

Gender-Based Violence is considered a global pandemic that affects vulnerable individuals especially women and children. It is an umbrella term used for harmful actions or abuses perpetrated against individual's will and rooted in a system of unequal power between men and women, or old and young. United Nation (UN) sees it as an act 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, (UN, 2014). The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) in a similar vein sees gender-based violence as a consequence of gender inequality. For them, it is a phenomenon deeply rooted in gender inequality and continues to be one of the most notable human rights violations within all societies (EIGE, 2017).

It then means that violent act perpetrated against a person because of his or her gender is known as gender-based violence. It is imperative to note that both women and men experience gender-based violence but statistics indicate that the majority of victims are women and girls. This has resulted in the terms being often used

interchangeably as “violence against women”. The EIGE holds that – 1 out of 3 women has experienced physical or sexual violence, 1 out of 2 women has experienced sexual harassment, 1 out of 20 women has been raped, 1 out of 5 women has experienced stalking, while 95% of victims trafficked for sexual exploitation are women (EIGE, 2017).

Similarly, World Bank Group (2019) corroborates the above statistics as it asserts that – 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non partner sexual violence; globally 7% of women have been sexually assaulted by someone other than a partner; globally as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner, while 200 million women have experienced female genital mutilation/cutting.

In another dimension, Anyanwu (2024) identified any physical, psychological, sexual, economic harm, and any suffering of women in the form of limiting their freedom in their social or personal life as constituting gender-based violence. In no doubt, most authors consider gender-based violence to be violence against women due the global statistics and the patriarchal nature of our society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social Marketing theory was proposed by Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman, and propagated in 1970 (Orsula, 2015). The theory emanated communication theory with more emphasis on the importance and how socially valuable information can be promoted to reach the targeted audience. The socially valuable information

could be public policies, Laws, government decisions and Executive Orders and Ordinances. The theory has often been adopted by social and welfare organizations to help promote or discourage various behaviours. The theory focuses on outlining the framework that could be adopted for designing, implementing and evaluating information campaigns. It emphasizes the need for government or private agencies to scientifically identify target audience for information, which will entail packaging and distributing the information in a manner that will be easily accessible to the intended audience.

The major assumptions of the theory include – creating audience awareness, identifying the right audience, targeting the right audience; reinforcing the message, cultivating images and impressions, stimulating interest or dissuading interest. Creating awareness is one of the gaps observed in the government's effort in curbing gender-based violence. Laws and policies against GBV have been established but are not known by majority of Nigerians, and therefore, are not aware of legal implication. In line with this assumption, the relevant agencies of government including – Ministry of Information, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Women Affairs, National Orientation Agency and other agencies at state and local levels are deficient in identifying the right audience, targeting the main audience, and packaging the information in a simple comprehensible manner that is easily accessible to the target audience in order to dissuade them from the habit of perpetrating GBV.

## **A Review of Policies on Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria**

Nigeria as a member of United Nations (UN) has endorsed and ratified a number of international laws and treaties which deal on curbing GBV and abuses against children. Nigeria ratified the Maputo Protocol which urges the member states to protect and promote the rights of women and girls, these rights include – propertyrights, protection against child marriage,, rights to a consensual marriage, widow’s rights, inheritance rights and protection against all forms of violence, (Anyanwu, 2023).

Nigeria is also a signatory to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights which calls for total abolition of discrimination against women and the protection of the rights of women and children. It is pertinent to note that domestication of these international laws and treaties is crucial for their implementation. This is only possible according to the Nigerian constitution when the 36 states approve and domesticate such laws and treaties. Eniola and Aremo (2023) maintain that some critical international laws are hardly approved and domesticated by all 36 states of the federation. This is one of the gaps in the legal framework around GBV.

Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPPA) in its section 44 in identifying GBV as that which is constituted by discriminatory action base on ones gender suggest that the sub-nationals should take measures towards preventing and responding to violence against persons, while in section 1(4), a register should be

created on sexual offence and offenders. This notwithstanding, there are notable critical gaps in the laws and policies that deal on GBV in Nigeria. Beginning from the 1999 constitution as amended which lacks specific provisions and stipulations on the protection of women and girl child from every form of violence, and recognizing every married woman as “of full age”. The National Gender Policy of 2007 which is quite robust but is yet to be reviewed and updated to meet the current challenges. The VAPPA of 2015 which does not criminalize domestic violence, does not acknowledge the need for prevention approach, education and awareness initiative, critical professional trainings, establishment of GBV centers at sub-national levels, funds for rehabilitation support, and budget provision and implementation. The CRA of 2003 has limited domestication by some states on the ground of culture and religion. In spite of the inherent shortfalls of these policies, the challenge is compounded by the lack of awareness of polices by most Nigerians, and especially the targeted audience.

### **RQ1: Factors Contributing to the Lack of Awareness of Policies on Gender-Based Violence**

The interview granted by five senior staff of two main federal government’s agencies that are responsible for dissemination of information – Ministry of Information and the National Orientation Agency acknowledged the deficiency in policy awareness especially regarding gender-based violence in Nigeria. The interviewee who chose to be reported in anonymous held that there are identified factors that lead to the lack of awareness of the

various policies and laws against gender-based violence in Nigeria. They identified such factors as follows:

- 1) **Insufficient Resources and Education:** A large number of government agencies and groups lack the manpower and funding necessary to successfully raise public knowledge of gender-based violence regulations, and these has result to inadequate outreach, training, and support services.

A significant number of people, particularly in rural regions, do not have a high level of literacy, which makes it challenging for them to obtain, comprehend, or interact with written policy papers or educational materials about gender-based violence, however, the ministry and the Agency acknowledge this reality but lack the resource to innovate a package through which the information can get to and be understood by the local communities.

- 2) **Cultural Norms and Stigmas:** Deeply rooted cultural customs and beliefs have encouraged taboo topics and silence surrounding gender-based violence. In some communities, such cultures and traditions have impeded the awareness of policies on GBV. Conventional perspectives contribute in stigmatizing victims, deterring them from contacting support agencies; however, adequate awareness campaign would help to overcome this challenge.

- 3) **Inadequate Information Dissemination:**

Organizations including government ministries and agencies do not have efficient communication plans

to reach a variety of communities; and as such, policies are not sufficiently communicated through easily accessible means, including community meetings or local languages. In some countries there are official centers established in local communities exclusively for this purpose, the center dedicate efforts in investigating such reported cases and take them up to logical conclusion.

This view reflects in the study conducted by Okolo and Okolo (2018) on GBV in Nigeria, 72.1% of victims interviewed, responded of not being aware of laws and policies against GBV in Nigeria. In the study carried out by Chime, Nduagubam and Orji (2022) on prevalence and patterns of GBV in Nigeria, the 710 victims interviewed in the GBV unit in a tertiary hospital Enugu, 89.9% of the victims and 72% of perpetrators are not aware of the existing laws and policies prohibiting the act of GBV in Nigeria. As such, the victims are ignorant of their legal rights to ensure the perpetrators face the law

**4).Political and Social Instability and Poor Training of Law Enforcement:** Prolonged disputes, difficult economic times, and political unrest deflect funds and attention from campaigns against gender-based violence, and have made policy awareness a neglected area. This is because most ministries and agencies focus on activities that satisfy the political gains of government in power rather than carrying out their actual responsibilities.

Encounters and observations by some staff of the agency show that law enforcement officials, including

police, lack the necessary training to deal with gender-based cases, and educate victims on current policies, which leaves victims in the dark and without assistance (Interview, 2024).

## **RQ2: The Impacts of Lack of Awareness of Policies on Gender-Based Violence**

Lack of awareness of policies has significant impact on gender-based violence in Nigeria, (Okolo and Kolo, 2018) observed that inadequate policy awareness has led to under-reporting of events and increased victimization, because victims are not aware of the laws and support networks that are available to them, they fail to report GBV events, which feed the cycle of violence and make it more challenging for authorities to deal with the problem. This has made victims continue to live in abusive environments if they are unaware of their legal rights and protections, which raise the incidence of violence and victimization. They argued that 80% of GBV victims are not aware of the policies that protect them and processes and procedures to seek justice.

Anyanwu (2023) maintained that poor awareness campaign on GBV policies has orchestrated a restricted access to support resources and perpetuation of stigmas as victims are not aware of the existence of critical resources like shelters, legal counsel, and counseling, which are vital to their safety and rehabilitation. Cultural stigmas surrounding talking about or reporting violence endure when communities are ignorant about GBV legislation, which discourages candid communication and group action against GBV. The study of Women for Society of Nigeria (WSN) across the geo-political zones

in Nigeria indicates that most victims of GBV are not aware of the laws and policies on GBV in Nigeria. This is contained in the table below:

**Table 1**

Number of GBV victims that are not aware of GBV policies in Nigeria

| S/N   | State    | Geo-Political Zone | Total No. of Victims | No. of Victims that are aware of GBV policies | No. of Victims that are not aware of GBV policies |
|-------|----------|--------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| 1.    | Adamawa  | North East         | 203                  | 15                                            | 188                                               |
| 2.    | Yobe     | North East         | 157                  | 9                                             | 148                                               |
| 3.    | Kano     | North West         | 166                  | 23                                            | 143                                               |
| 4.    | Zamfara  | North West         | 234                  | 12                                            | 222                                               |
| 5.    | Benue    | North Central      | 109                  | 23                                            | 86                                                |
| 6.    | Kogi     | North Central      | 111                  | 29                                            | 82                                                |
| 7.    | Enugu    | South East         | 67                   | 21                                            | 46                                                |
| 8.    | Imo      | South East         | 41                   | 17                                            | 24                                                |
| 9.    | Ondo     | South West         | 38                   | 12                                            | 26                                                |
| 10.   | Osun     | South West         | 43                   | 19                                            | 24                                                |
| 11.   | Rivers   | South South        | 87                   | 21                                            | 66                                                |
| 12.   | AkwaiBom | South South        | 69                   | 18                                            | 51                                                |
| Total | 12       | 6                  | 1,325                | 219                                           | 1,106                                             |

(Source: WSN, 2022)

The above table indicates that most victims of GBV in Nigeria are not aware of the policies that provide for their protection and procedures to seek justice.

In similar vein, Mutiullah and Anyanwu (2020) argued that policy unawareness has often created ineffective law enforcement and disadvantage to policy implementation, as without the right training and awareness of current policies, law enforcement personnel are usually not prepared to handle GBV cases compassionately or effectively, which results in insufficient responses to victims. This experience has made most victims not to have the disposition to report their cases to law enforcement agencies. The inadequate knowledge can lead to gaps in the application of current rules and regulations, impeding efforts to stop GBV and hold offenders accountable.

Chime, Nduagubam and Orji (2022) identified that poor GBV policy awareness has encouraged social acceptance of violence. They argued that when communities do not know about GBV policies, violence against specific groups may become more commonplace, which can reinforce negative gender norms and behaviours. This challenge can as well lead to impediments to advocacy and change. Eniola and Aremo (2023) corroborated this in their argument that if the public is unaware of the seriousness of the problem and the existing frameworks for policy, activists and organizations may find it difficult to rally support for GBV activities. This in no doubt creates a Long-term Psychological Effects. Victims who are uninformed of their rights and accessible support may endure lasting mental health issues; including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

## **Research Findings**

The study identified insufficient resources and education as the major factor contributing to the lack of public awareness on the laws and policies on GBV in Nigeria. This challenge has to a large extent, rendered the institutions responsible in creating public awareness redundant and inefficient, making GBV to continuously thrive in Nigeria.

The study reveals that the level of unawareness and ignorance of the people on policies on GBV in Nigeria is very high, both the victims and perpetrators. This is largely caused by the nonchalant attitude of the government both at the center and the sub-nationals. The study reveals that the challenge has led to the continuous perpetration of GBV in Nigeria, impacting in the psychological and mental disorder of the victims.

## **Conclusion**

For people to feel empowered to take action and for social attitudes regarding GBV to change, education and awareness campaigns are essential. A better educated public can be promoted by extensive education initiatives that teach people about their rights and the resources that are accessible to them. Furthermore, specific efforts that involve local groups, religious institutions, and community leaders can aid in the destruction of detrimental gender norms. These cooperative initiatives can help close the gap between the development of policies and their execution by fostering a community that takes an active part in the battle against GBV.

## **Recommendations**

The study recommends the following:

- 1) The government should revive the institutions responsible in creating public awareness on the laws and policies on GBV to enable them embark on aggressive campaign.
- 2) The relevant ministries and agencies should synergize and also collaborate with Non-governmental Organizations including Civil Society Groups to identify the target audience and design easy accessible and comprehensible information for the audience.
- 3) Government should establish GBV centers across local governments to collate information and provide socio-economic and psychological support to victims, and bring to book the policy violators

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