

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND THE CULTURE OF IMPUNITY IN NIGERIA: ANALYSIS OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN.

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ABSTRACT

Emergencies escalate crime and insecurity for vulnerable groups like women, whose safety and security were severely threatened by increased cases of gender-based violence during the COVID-19 lockdown. Studies explained the heightened incidence of GBV during lockdown as the effect of economic hardship and the proximity of victims to violators. This paper explored GBV from the standpoint of the culture of impunity, to examine the nexus between them and explain how GBV is normalised in social relationships, giving impetus to impunity. Routine activity and multi-sided violence theories were adopted as the theoretical framework. Secondary data from journal articles and media reports were sourced and analysed descriptively. The study revealed that GBV experienced during lockdown stemmed from the culture of impunity that derived from patriarchal orientation. It raises concern about the persistence of GBV despite existing laws against it. It recommends cultural reorientation of gender roles and patriarchal expectations, among others.

Keywords: *Violence, Lockdown, COVID-19, Gender, Security.*

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence is a longstanding violation that threatens the safety and personal security of people. Although it affects all genders, women and girls are the prime targets, especially in emergencies. A 2018 World Bank report estimated that one in three women around the world will experience gender-based violence (GBV) during their lifetime. In Nigeria, a report indicated that about 30% of females experienced gender-based violence (NDHS, 2018). With the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent lockdown in 2020, GBV assumed an increased dimension, with cases of assault, rape, murder, and domestic and intimate partner violence reported regularly in the media, further escalating the precarious security situation in Nigeria.

Gender-based violence has attracted global attention and has become an agenda item for discussion in international fora. For instance, in 2014, the United Kingdom played host to a global summit to end sexual violence in conflict. Their resolve was to tackle impunity for the use of rape as a weapon of war (Govt. UK 2014). In Nigeria, the government, non-governmental organizations, and a coalition of civil society organisations have been involved in campaigns and advocacy against GBV. In the sequel to the brutal murders of Uwaila Omozuwa, a 22-year-old undergraduate student at the University of Benin; Barakat Bello, an 18-year-old female student killed in her home in Ibadan, Oyo state; and the gang rape of a 12-year-old in Jigawa state (all of which occurred during the COVID 19 lockdown), Nigerians took to the streets to protest the paradoxical increase in gender-based violence during the lockdown. The government has not ceased to enact and reform laws that address GBV, yet, it has remained a daunting challenge to surmount. Its prevalence has been explained by the impact of discriminating norms, religious doctrines, and violence, among others. In the view of this paper, GBV stems from the ubiquitous culture of impunity that has bred insecurity in Nigeria. Also, this culture translates to unaccountability due to the failure of the criminal justice system to timely and effectively prosecute and punish perpetrators of GBV. Given this, this paper is posed to explore gender-based violence from the standpoint of the culture of impunity because, as Zainab Bangura (2013), the UN



Secretary General's special representative on sexual violence in conflict, observed, impunity underlies gender-based violence, and any conscientious effort to curb sexual violence must first target the culture of impunity that underpins it.

Agha and Ukhun (2021) opined that impunity has become a culture in Nigeria. It assumes different forms and twists, ranging from government unresponsiveness to a deficient rule of law, political patronage, a weak criminal justice system, endemic corruption, and reckless immunity that create the ambience for the aberrant culture to thrive (Eke and Tonwe 2016). Suffice it to say, most studies that examined the culture of impunity stemmed from the angle of politics and governance, necessitating this study that links it to the experiences of women and girls. While scholars have extensively examined gender-based violence and have avowed that it heightens in emergencies (UNICEF 2022), their analyses are not exhaustive of a problem that has remained endemic. This paper analyses selected cases of gender-based violence that occurred during the COVID-19 emergency. The aim is to delineate its extremity, highlighting, and examining the nexus between GBV and the culture of impunity and how it is normalised in social relationships, thus giving impetus to the aberrant culture of impunity that intensifies GBV in Nigeria.

LITERATURE AND THEORY

Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence has been variously defined. Mittal and Singh (2020) defined it as targeting a person based on the individual's gender. Though the term applies to both genders, most victims are female (WHO, 2017). Hence, Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottemoeller (1999) specifically defined it as any act of verbal or physical force, coercion, or life-threatening deprivation directed at a woman or girl that causes physical or psychological harm, humiliation, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty and that perpetuates female subordination. The terms "gender-based violence" and "violence against women" are used interchangeably. Thus, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017) defined violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life." Their highlights other dimensions other than physical and sexual abuse, which are mostly captured in literature. Deprivation, coercion, threats, and mental harm are all aspects of violence that women experience but are often ignored because they do not result in physical injury. However, they are harmful because they have an impact on self-concept, esteem, and life opportunities in general.

According to statistics, 1 in 3 or 35% of women worldwide have experienced one form of gender-based violence (sexual abuse, physical violence, verbal or psychological abuse, or economic deprivation) in their lifetime (WHO, 2017). In Nigeria, the figure is put at 794 as of April 2020. The coordinator of the Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team (DSVRT) in Lagos reported that their organisation received thirteen (13) cases of GBV daily, totaling 390 incidences in March 2020 alone. She summarised the cases thusly: assault (60%), sexual violence (30%), and child abuse (10%). In two years, the organisation recorded a total of 4,150 cases. The inspector general of police put the number of suspects arrested for rape between January and May 2020 at 799. They were associated with 717 cases. In Ekiti state, the record, according to the Sexual Assault Referral Center (Moremi Clinic), was 139 cases of GBV in 2021. The United Nations Women's Report (2021) indicates that 48% of Nigerian women have experienced one form of violence since the COVID-19 pandemic. The Attorney-General and Commissioner for Justice, Lagos State, said they recorded 10,007 cases between May and August 2022. Suffice it to say that these figures are based on reported cases and may not capture all cases as most go unreported for fear of



stigmatisation and family concerns. Some women conceal their experiences of violence or succumb to settling cases at home rather than reporting them officially, as GBV is also perpetrated by people in close affinity with the victim. Generally, gender-based violence is an instrument of oppression rooted in power dynamics and fueled by the impunity exhibited by males against females, especially unmarried and adolescent girls. The abduction of 276 Chibok girls in 2014; the 66% of 400 people in internally displaced person camps (IDP) in Nigeria; the sexual violation of 59% of Burundian female refugees in a Tanzanian camp in 1996; and the sexual assault of girls in homes under quarantine in Sierra Leone are examples.

Gender-based violence in emergencies

Emergencies and conflictual situations are times when GBV is mostly perpetrated because, at such times, social order is threatened. Whereas emergencies in themselves do not necessarily cause GBV, the chaos, instability, and destabilisation of social equilibrium arising from conflictual situations (war, disasters, insurgencies, epidemics, and pandemics) exacerbate GBV (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Onyango and Regan, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) stated that in situations of crisis, over 70% of women experience gender-based violence, which can be physical, sexual, psychological, or verbal abuse. Studies indicate that violence against women in conflict situations manifests differently. Females are coerced into sex in war situations through rape, exploitation for compliance, or ethnic cleansing. Sex is thus a weapon of war that leaves women bastardized, impregnated, or infested with diseases such as HIV/AIDS. In insurgencies and disasters, the experiences of female refugees and internally displaced persons in camps indicate sexual exploitation for torture or payment as deprived living conditions compel them to engage in commercial sex or use it as a resource for mobility and safety (United Nations Nigeria 2020). Sex has thus become a social currency with which women negotiate access, freedom, or favour. In epidemics and pandemics, evidence from Serre-Leon, Guinea, Liberia, and Nigeria showed that GBV surged drastically, resulting in an increased number of teenage pregnancies, rapes, and incest (Onyango and Regan 2020, UNICEF 2022). Like the Ebola epidemic, when curfews and quarantines were imposed, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated lockdown, which precipitated gender-based violence. Because most countries experienced increased dimensions of gender-based violence during COVID-19, it was dubbed "the shadow pandemic" (Campbell, 2020; Mittal and Singh, 2020). Reports from America, the United Kingdom, China, Canada, and Germany showed an increase in the number of cases of gender-based violence between February and July 2020, when most countries implemented lockdowns (United Nations 2020). In Nigeria, statistics from the Ministry of Women Affairs (from 23 states) summed up the number of cases in March and April 2020 as follows: The Northeast recorded 50 cases in March, rising to 115 in April. Northwest reported cases increased from 52 to 87, while North Central reported cases increased from 67 to 156, respectively. Similarly, in the South, the figure increased from 36 to 92 in the Southeast, 91 to 296 in the Southwest, and 18 to 39 in the South. These tremendous increases in reported cases of GBV include cases of rape, murder, intimate partner violence, assaults, battering, economic deprivation, and verbal abuse, as media reports and evidence from support groups show. Like most conflictual situations, COVID-19 followed the pattern, with physical and sexual violence escalating. Boredom, economic hardship, and uncertainties lead to increased tension and aggression, heightening assaults and battery against women at the least provocation, while sexual violence, such as rape and incest, is visited on adolescents and unmarried girls.

A culture of impunity

A culture of impunity has thrived on the assumption that one can do whatever one likes and go unpunished. It also includes violations of human rights, disregard for law and the rule of law, abuse of social order, and a lack of access to effective justice delivery, as Human Development



Initiatives (2014) puts it. Thus, it is an uncontrolled and absolute emancipation, free will, and free choice. The term has been used in the political sphere to explain the government's insensitivity and unaccountability (Eke and Tonwe, 2016). It is absolute and uncontrolled emancipation, free will, and free choice (Rooney 1999). Impunity underlies the belief of individuals that they are "exempt from punishment, harm, or recrimination" (Eke and Tonwe, 2016). It is the feeling that one cannot be questioned for one's actions, offences, or misdeeds perpetrated, hence the axiom "impunity breeds contempt."

Impunity has permeated most spheres, as scholars (Eke and Tonwe 2016, Agha and Ukhun 2021) have opined. Both the government and the citizens act with impunity, and this has led to permissiveness and indiscipline in the country. Impunity underlines violations of human rights and the rule of law; bad governance; corruption; unaccountability; embezzlement of public funds; police brutality; evasion of justice; insecurity; and other vices common in Nigeria. Immunity and plea bargaining are concepts used to absolve political officeholders of accountability and punishment. So, they violate rules with impunity because immunity shields them from questioning for as long as they are in office. Agencies of the government entrusted with the instrument of power to checkmate or punish violations misuse the power allocated to them to violate the rights of citizens. The End SARS protest by Nigerian youths against police brutality in 2020 could be said to be an example of a nationwide outcry against impunity. The gruesome massacre of peaceful protesters at the Lekki toll gate further illustrates the blatant display of the culture of impunity. To date, the perpetrators of the gruesome killing of peaceful protesters have not been prosecuted. So, impunity thrives due to a lack of political will to effectively implement enacted laws and timely prosecute and punish offenders and violators. Similarly, the insecurity, extortion and bribery, tax evasion, election rigging, insurgencies, herdsmen attacks, abduction and kidnapping, ritual killings, and violence in Nigeria are premised on a lack of political will and a failure to deal with the aberrant culture of impunity because perpetrators can avert or buy justice because the judicial system is merchandised, as Agha and Ukhun (2021) stated. The failure of the court to prosecute perpetrators of impunity creates an enabling environment for impunity to thrive because the court is the instrument for the reversal of impunity (Eke and Ukhun 2021).

Theories

. The prevalence of GBV against women during the COVID-19 lockdown has been explained from different theoretical perspectives. According to Cohen and Felson (1979), crime victimisation is based on situations that reflect individuals' daily routines. It is proposed that the presence of a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of guardianship facilitate victimization. Increased GBV during the COVID-19 lockdown reflects the tenants of this theory. The targets of GBV were mainly women and girls who were trapped at home as schools, offices, and businesses were closed owing to the pandemic. This brought them into close contact with offenders who were variously motivated by boredom, idleness, hunger, frustration, economic hardships, and anger vented on vulnerable females because lockdown also implied limited access to capable guardians like parents, teachers, police, the court, NGOs, and other support groups. This theory was employed to explain the cases of rape and murder presented in this paper. While the theory explains rape cases, it does not clarify situations where supposed guardians, like parents, spouses, caregivers, or law enforcement agents, that should prosecute offenders exonerate them. Hence, Menjivar's (2011) multisided violence theory provided insight into other cases of GBV. The multisided theory explains violence from the angles of structural and socio-cultural settings, cognitive orientation, and interpretations that normalise violence. It explains that when experiences of violence are understood from a structural or cultural perspective, they are normalised and lose their gravity. This alludes to the culture of impunity in Nigeria, which has



taken different twists and turns—corrupt practices, violations of constitutional or human rights, violations of the rule of law, insecurity, and violence—because impunity is normalised to the extent that people perceive, understand, and accept it as a norm or social reality.

Relating it to GBV beyond lockdown reveals that patriarchal structures, gender roles, and normative ethos, which have been normalised as cultural expectations, underpin GBV as social relationships are construed and interpreted based on them. Similarly, since human behaviour and knowledge stem from their cultural predilections, those who should prosecute and punish perpetrators of GBV derive their understanding from the same socio-cultural context that exacerbates it. They interpret and normalise GBV from the same cultural perspective that underlies it, making it difficult to eradicate.

METHODS AND DATA

This study adopted an exploratory design because the lockdown was temporary and an emergency. Secondary data was used. It was sourced from online resources, including news reports, published articles, and data-based sources on GBV and related topics.

The case-study method was adopted. Cases were sourced from refereed journals and media reports of incidents of GBV perpetrated mainly during the lockdown. The Microsoft Edge and Google search engines were used to identify cases. Keywords like gender-based violence, wife battering, intimate partner violence, child abuse, violence during emergencies, sexual assault, COVID-19 lockdown, and lots more were used to identify cases. The search produced several results, from which five cases were purposively selected. The five cases presented occurred in Nigeria and were selected based on the extremity of the violence following Gerring's (2007) "extreme case method," which highlights extreme outcomes. Utilizing this method enabled us to highlight impunity as the causal factor, which may be latent or normalised in experiences, interactions, or relationships, and the extreme outcome (violence) that results from it. Five cases were selected to represent various aspects of gender-based violence: rape, murder, incest, paedophilia, and spousal violence perpetrated during the lockdown. The cases were chosen because of the public outcry over the increased incidence of GBV. This led to peaceful protests by human rights and civil society organisations. They were also chosen because studies have raised concerns over the paradox of heightened GBV and insecurity during the lockdown implemented to contain the spread of COVID-19 and thus ensure the safety and security of lives. Findings were analysed using content analysis, which allows rich and detailed meaning to be drawn from data through the emergence of patterns of violence. The interpretation and discussion of the findings were presented as narratives.

Ethical consideration

Ethical considerations were duly observed. To ensure ethical standards are maintained, pseudonyms were used in all the cases presented. This is to ensure privacy. However, the cases are verifiable as the stories are available online. Some of them were reported to organisations that support victims, and in such cases, verbal or informed consent is often obtained from victims by the organisations beforehand, recognising that such information is sought for research purposes.

Presentation of cases

Case 1: Spousal/intimate partner violence



Bala Abdullahi allegedly abused his wife Hamzat in Yobo State, northeast Nigeria, one of the areas plagued by violence and insecurity because of Boko Haram attacks.

The report stated that in April 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, 22-year-old Bala Abdullahi, in a fit of anger, chopped off Hamzat's right hand with a machete on the excuse of "immoral disobedience to marital ethics." Her offence was that she attended the marriage ceremony of a relative in the Kasaisa community. He alleged, "She has been travelling without my permission." For fear of a repeat attack, she vowed never to return to her husband, noting that he is quick to anger. "If he can cut off my hand, then he can easily kill me."

Case 2: Battery and physical violence

Tessy was trapped in Tony's (her boyfriend's) house due to restrictions on movement during the lockdown. One day, they argued over food shortages and Tony's drinking habit. After the argument, he locked her up in the house and went out for hours. On his return in the evening, he was drunk and launched a physical attack on Tessy, leaving her battered with black eyes, a cut on her lips, bruises, and swellings all over her body. With the support of her aunty, Tessy reported the incident to the police, but they were told to go home and resolve their differences. Her aunt was not happy that Tony was let off lightly, so, with her help, Tessy was linked with an NGO that took up her case and reported it again to the police.

Case 3: Pedophilia

Four-year-old Sola stepped out of the class in her madrassa school, Durul Taleem, to drink water when Mr. Tolu Bakari, her religious instruction teacher, and a Muslim brother who worshipped in the same mosque as Sola's family, called the minor. He enticed her away from public view and into the restroom, where he sexually abused her. At the time of the report, Bakari was arrested and remanded in Kirikiri correctional facility in Lagos. Trial and conviction could not be attained as of the time of the report due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

Case 4: Incest

Sexual abuse is generally traumatic for victims, but it becomes more demoralising when it occurs at home and is perpetrated by a father who ought to protect the victim. Such was the fate of thirteen-year-old Rita, who was raped and impregnated by her father. The despicable act had started long ago when her mother left the marriage, but it became aggravated with the lockdown since they were confined to their one-room apartment in Lagos. Her father, capitalising on the closure of schools due to the pandemic, sexually violated her every night, adding physical assault whenever she resisted or raised objections to his advances. Respite came when their neighbours reported the abuse to their landlord, who eventually reported the case to Partner for Justice, an NGO at Mirabel Centre, Lagos. Rita's medical examination revealed that she was pregnant. The father was taken into custody, as the report stated.

Case 5: Rape and Murder



The home was not safe enough to secure 18-year-old Busola Akinde from the attack of hoodlums who raped and murdered her at home. Busola was alone when she was attacked, gang-raped, and macheted to death. Her younger sister, upon her return from Ile Kewe (the Quranic school), found her dead in the pool of her blood at the back of their house. Her father, Mr. Kola Akinde, was contacted by neighbours who urged him to return home urgently. It was when he returned that he learned of the incident.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The above cases are only the tip of the iceberg in the numerous reported cases of GBV against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Studies have explained the heightened incidence of GBV during lockdown as a result of economic strain, job uncertainty, emotional stress, and the outcome of restrictions that forced vulnerable people to stay close to their violators. While we concur that bringing abusers and victims together precipitates GBV, we also argue that the culture of impunity underlines the extremity of the cases presented here.

The impunity is multifaceted and stems from the patriarchy that subjugates women to the dominance and control of men. It also relates to the lack of political will to enforce enacted laws and the indifference and inefficient justice system that show little or no commitment to timely investigation, trial, and prosecution of perpetrators of gender-based violence, affirming the findings of Eke and Ukhan (2021). It also depends on the impunity of perpetrators who have no regard for law and order because they know that they can easily get away with it due to corruption, a weak justice system, cultural permissiveness, or victims' unwillingness to report incidents of violence due to fear of stigma or family concerns.

Lack of political will accounts for the failure of the government to adequately punish minor offences, which leads to the perpetration of more crimes, as the "broken widows" theory suggests. Taking case 2, for example, the demand to desist from drunkenness infuriated Tony and made him lock up his girlfriend for hours, depriving her of freedom. He also physically assaulted and injured her, a tactic he deployed to shy away from responsibility. This callous attitude is indicative of impunity based on the assumption that he can do whatever he pleases without accountability. To compound the problem, when Tessy reported the case to the police, she was urged to go and settle with her abuser at home. The response of the police is typical of law enforcement agencies and other justice systems in Nigeria. It derives from the belief that domestic violence or spousal abuse is a domestic affair that should be settled at home. This, of course, accounts for the low reporting of cases of violence by abused women because there is no justice for them. Rather, the case could be turned against them. Bringing the case home is a subtle way of trivialising violence and exonerating offenders from punishment under the guise of family matters, which normalises GBV, as the multisided violence theory suggests. This jeopardises efforts at curbing this social menace because when cases such as theirs are normalized or handled with levity, it reinforces abusive behaviour and can aggravate severe cases like Bala and Hamzat's (Case 1).

Hamzat was a victim of Bala's assault and uncontrolled anger, presumably because it attracted no consequence since spousal abuse is permissible by law. For instance, Section 55(1)(d) of the Penal Code of Northern Nigeria deems it legal for a man to assault his wife for "correction" purposes. Correction is relative, as abuse could be justified as a form of correction. It's all based on the cultural milieu in which it is construed.



Also, the patriarchal structure of society encourages discriminatory gender norms that subjugate women to the control and corralling of their husbands. "Marital ethics," as Bala puts it, demands that Hamzat seek and obtain her husband's permission and approval to attend any event, including family functions. Her failure to adhere to or submit to Bala's dictates incurred his wrath because, as Aina (1998) asserts, marriage subsumes subservience and veneration to the husband. So, it is tantamount to losing her freedom, akin to enslavement, in which the slave's right of choice is sold to the whims and caprices of the master. A Yoruba adage captures this: "*eni ti oleru, loni eru*," meaning that he who owns the slave also owns her property. Property, as implied here, includes her will, choices, desires, time, and everything else she owns. Marriage in most parts of Nigeria is like acquiring property: her name, possessions, will, and body are all surrendered to the man because the language of marriage is the language of ownership. For example, it is not uncommon for Yoruba women to address their spouse as *olowo orimi*, meaning the owner of my head. This assumption in the theory of multisided violence stems from the cognitive orientation instilled through socialization. This orientation is reinforced by patriarchal ideology, which establishes boundaries for social action and relationships. *Olowo orimi indicates ownership rather than partnership, as does marriage*. But transferring ownership of oneself to another in this regard is willful enslavement, as Chineyemba (2020) noted. However, in the context of marriage, this is complicated because marriage in Africa has a cultural connotation. The act of paying the bride's wealth symbolically confers the right of ownership that requires that wives submit to their husbands. Osezua (2012) collaborates on this, noting that the marriage relationship is relegated to a master-slave relationship in which women are acquired as commodities to gratify the cravings of men. The woman has no life of her own with this cultural understanding. This explains why Bala could justify his cruelty by blaming it on his wife's "disobedience to marital ethics." This blatant display of impunity is justified by patriarchy, which subjugates women to the control and corralling of men.

Cases such as theirs are not uncommon, but they often go unreported for reasons such as family concerns, religious indoctrination, and societal expectations that place the responsibility of ensuring marital success on women and evaluate them based on their marital status or success. So, even when they are abused in a marital relationship, they tolerate it for fear of criticism or negative conceptualization. Many women have paid the supreme price of death by enduring spousal violence rather than ending abusive relationships. The report indicates that Nigeria ranks high as one of the countries where intimate partner violence results in the murder of victims (DSVRT, 2020). Family concerns, cultural expectations, and societal evaluations of women based on the success of their marriages have kept many in perpetual bondage, thus sustaining the culture of impunity.

Spousal abuse is not the only form of GBV that claims the lives of victims, as reports of rape and murder dominated the news during the lockdown. Prominent among them was the rape and murder of Uwalia Vera Omozua, a Microbiology undergraduate student at the University of Benin, who was raped and murdered in a church in Benin City. Busola, case number 5 presented above, is like Uwa's; she was raped and murdered during the lockdown. Busola's story fits into the model of routine activity theory, as COVID-19 disrupted the routine of school, necessitating a mandatory closure to contain the spread of the virus. The environment was just right for the motivated offenders who took advantage of her because she was young, defenceless, and alone. So, the absence of capable guardianship, as routine activity theory postulated, made it easy for the perpetrators to rape and murder her in their homes. Her case illustrates the height of impunity and insecurity people contend with in Nigeria. The audacity to commit the act right in their house clearly shows the extent to which the culture of impunity has permeated this country.



While the Busola case was perpetrated by unknown strangers, Rita (case 4) was violated by her father, whose duty it is to protect her. Her situation also explains the routine activity theory. Without the daily routine of school due to the lockdown, Rita's father found her irresistibly alluring for the sexual gratification of his inordinate affection. Of course, the GBV Guidelines Reference Group (2020) noted that girls not in school are more susceptible to sexual violence from relatives. Rita, being out of school, became a victim of sexual exploitation. The absence of her mother to offer capable guardianship, as routine activity theory stipulates, provided the latitude for her father to perpetrate the despicable act. Because GBV is associated with inequality and power imbalances, he took undue advantage of his vulnerable daughter because GBV is deployed at the expense of the weak. Rita had to endure sexual and physical violence because the cultural norm and societal expectation of a child toward her father were that of obedience and compliance to his will and instructions. Also, the patriarchal structure bestows authority and control on the father. As the authority figure and head of the home, his instructions and decisions are binding on family members. This (mis) representation and generalisation of the cultural status of headship breeds impunity, as is evident in Rita's case. Hers is indicative of the extent of perversion in society. Respite only came through their neighbours and their landlord, who reported the case, but not before the abominable act of impregnating his daughter had been done. Rita is one of the numerous cases of sexual violence against children following the closure of schools due to the pandemic. The executive director of Partnership for Justice (an NGO) noted that 85% of the cases of sexual abuse handled by the Center during lockdown involved children. This report complements the findings of the national survey on violence against children conducted in 2014, which showed that one out of four girls and one out of four boys experience sexual violence in Nigeria. Adding that six out of ten children experience other forms of violence—physical, emotional, and verbal—before age 18, it is pertinent to note that Nigeria also had an emergency in 2014 with the outbreak of the Ebola epidemic, confirming that GBV heightens in emergencies or crises. The study further showed that violence often happens in places like homes and schools where children are presumed to be safe. More worrisome is that less than 5% of such children get help to recover, as the report noted. This, we presume, is because such cases are mostly perpetrated by parents or caregivers and occur in places where they can be easily concealed.

Further, reports indicate that Nigeria has a high rate of child abuse, ranging from child witches to child brides, domestic servitude, child trafficking, baby factories, and a variety of other cases of abuse to which children are subjected. Regrettably, accurate data on child abuse is lacking, as children are voiceless and dependent and may not have the courage to report abuse or the resources to pursue justice.

Sola's (Case 3) indicates that children were not spared the social malady. Hers shows that children, like women, were on the receiving end of GBV during the pandemic. It is thus an offence against the vulnerable and voiceless in society. Hers, as with most cases, should have gone unreported, but fate brought the perpetrator their way the following day when the traumatised child ran under the protective arm of her mother for fear of a repeat of the horrendous act at the sight of Mr. Bakari, her abuser.

Sola's abuse was perpetrated by her religious instructor, who entrusted the little girl with moral and religious lessons. But trust was not enough to dissuade Mr. Bakari from engaging in the despicable act of paedophilia. Trust is betrayed when caregivers—parents, teachers, guardians, and clergymen—as moral entrepreneurs, throw their integrity into the wind and engage in immorality with those under their care and protection. Bakari's example indicates the extent of moral decay in society. When a minor begins to hold an attraction for a man charged with the responsibility of instructing her in the way of God, Denis Onoise, a UNICEF child protection



specialist, bemoaned a situation where GBV against children is perpetrated by those who know them. Mr. Bakare's impunity climaxed when he heedlessly passed by their house the following day on his way to his bricklaying job. Multisided violence theory explains that violence is normalised when it no longer attracts the severity it deserves. For instance, when Bakari, who should bury his face in shame and disgrace for the fear of persecution, mindlessly went about his business, normalising his obnoxious act, it depicts reckless impunity. Though he was eventually apprehended, as the report indicated, the concern is whether justice will be done given the relationship between the perpetrator and the family of Sola. Also, the justice system in Nigeria is unpredictable, as justice could be compromised when bribery and corruption are involved. Furthermore, the cost (both money and time) of pursuing justice is high, and government support for victims of GBV in Nigeria is poor. Support mostly comes from NGOs, which have limited resources to support the increasing number of victims of abuse and violence in Nigeria.

The peaceful protest convened by the coalition of civil society organisations and human rights activists in Abuja and Lagos in June 2020 to demand justice for victims of GBV was a wake-up call to the government to support the victims and act towards eradicating gender-based violence. While there is existing law and policy against GBV, efforts to address GBV must go beyond laws, as President Buhari stated in his 2020 Democracy Day address. The social and cultural contexts—belief systems, societal norms, gender roles, and institutional structures that support them—must be overhauled. Furthermore, the cognitive orientation, patriarchal structure, and socialisation processes that infected it must be reversed. It can also come about by altering people's perceptions of equality and, as Paul Starr indicated, by concretely demonstrating that people can and should be held accountable for their actions to ensure justice.

Speaking of justice, it is presumed that GBV has thrived in Nigeria because of a weak and inaccessible justice system. For instance, the cases presented happened in 2020, during an emergency when access to justice was limited owing to the pandemic. At such times, attention is focused on the pandemic, so other problems like GBV receive minimal attention. Since access to justice or assistance from support groups was restricted, it became difficult to report cases of abuse, especially in rural communities where only physical reporting is feasible. Even when cases were reported, prosecution of offenders was slow. As a result, perpetrators took advantage of the situation because they were barely held accountable for their actions. Unaccountability is one factor that encourages impunity. People break rules when they know they can avert justice. The inability to access justice in emergencies is a major challenge and points to the failure of the government, as it is the government's responsibility to ensure the rule of law.

Beyond accessibility, another thing that has encouraged the culture of impunity in Nigeria is the ineffectiveness of the justice system to timely prosecute and punish offenders. The reasons range from bribery and corruption to poor investigation by the police, adjournment of cases by the court, and administrative bureaucracies that delay justice. As often said, justice delayed is justice denied. Denial could be through trivialising or normalising the situation, as was the case with Tessy and Tony (case 2). Instances abound where victims are denied justice because prosecutors normalise the violence or demand tips from victims before they can investigate the case. The court may demand unrealistic evidence to ascertain the burden of proof or turn the case against the victims when the offender is influential or can buy or bribe his way to justice. A functioning legal and justice system is essential for protecting citizens, preserving social order, and establishing predictable laws and norms. Additionally, it is vital to safeguard private property and establish unambiguous prohibitions and penalties.



Regarding laws, Nigeria is a signatory to international conventions protecting human rights. Also, laws prohibiting GBV exist in Nigeria. For instance, as of December 2021, 30 out of the 36 states in Nigeria had enacted laws prohibiting GBV. The Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP 2015) was designed to address all forms of violence against persons in public and private lives, ensure victim protection and effective remedies, and punish offenders.

However, though these laws exist to address GBV and other forms of violence, laws alone cannot change behaviour, as Ewick et al. (1999) rightly noted. Therefore, there is a need for the government to be decisive in enforcing existing laws and consciously address the culture of impunity by prosecuting and punishing offenders, because, as United Nations Special Rapporteur Louis Joinet alludes, impunity is a consequence of the failure of states to adequately investigate violations, prosecute, and duly punish offenders to serve as a deterrent to others and provide reparation and justice for victims. When perpetrators are not punished, impunity is strengthened. As a result, if GBV and the aberrant culture of impunity are to be eradicated in Nigeria, the court and other justice systems must step up to the plate. According to Eke and Tonwe (2016), courts have a crucial role to play since they serve as the public's conscience and as instruments for ending impunity. Therefore, the culture of impunity thrives in all its forms when the legal system and law enforcement institutions fall short of expectations.

Conclusion

This paper examined some cases of GBV perpetrated during the COVID-19 lockdown and affirmed that GBV increases in situations of emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it argues that, beyond the uncertainties of lockdown, the culture of impunity underlies the cases examined. It was posited that GBV derived from the culture of impunity that stemmed from patriarchal structure, cultural orientation, societal norms, gender roles, and expectations that underpin the subordination of women. Furthermore, some of the cases presented were perpetrated by people in close affinity with the victims, which places them in the domestic domain, where the abuse can be easily concealed under the disguise of a family affair that should be settled at home, making prosecution of offenders difficult.

Also, reporting family issues to outsiders may earn the victim a label and attract secondary victimization because, when the perpetrator is punished, the victim will most likely suffer rejection, criticism, and a negative public image. Consequently, many women endure abusive relationships or pay with their lives.

The paper submits that while GBV is attributable to the culture of impunity, it alludes to the fact that culture is dynamic and subject to change. Therefore, to change the aberrant culture of impunity, efforts must go beyond laws on books to effective implementation of laws, public enlightenment, and cultural reorientation to change the societal expectation of equality and socialisation processes that reinforce gender disparities.

Recommendations.

The following recommendations, if implemented, can reduce gender-based violence in Nigeria.

- Legal reform is recommended for laws such as Section 55(1)(d) of the Penal Code of Northern Nigeria in the interest of gender equity.
- The government should establish and fund more support services like shelters and legal and financial aid for victims of GBV.



- The government and NGOs should collaborate to create awareness about GBV and educate members of the public on the dangers of engaging in it.
- Measures should be critically evaluated to ensure their suitability before implementation during emergencies.
- Automation of the filing system and general reformation of the judicial system to ensure prompt dispensation of justice are highly recommended.
- Cultural reorientation is required to address patriarchal structures and societal values through which the culture of impunity is imbued.
- Prompt response and adequate protection of victims will serve as an encouragement to report cases of GBV.



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