# The Shadow Pandemic: Addressing Surging GenderBased Violence in Nigeria. 

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#### Abstract

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is an age old socio-cultural issue deep-rooted in Nigerian and African societies. Globally, Gender-Based Violence accounts for nearly one quarter of all recorded crimes. Gender-Based violence affects women in Nigeria irrespective of age, class, educational level and place of residence. The Nigerian society is inherently patriarchal. This is due to the influence of the various religions and customs practiced. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered certain exacerbating factors such as economic strain and food insecurity, limited or no access to support/ remedial services and restricted movement, sexual violence through digital technology-and engendered an increase in cases of Gender based violence. This has been labelled the shadow pandemic by the United Nations. This article examines the rise in incidences of Gender-based Violence in Nigeria during the COVID-19 Pandemic and contends that poor implementation of women rights, entrenched gender and discriminatory norms, poverty and loss of income (economic frustration and pressure), lack of good governance and management of resources, lack of adequate social welfare and palliative schemes, in addition to the complications arising from dealing with COVID-19 pandemic are major factors that have resulted in the surge of gender-based violence in Nigeria. This work underscores recommendations to curb gender-based violence in Nigeria during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, and ensure better realization of the rights and welfare of women and girls such as effective implementation of women's rights, re orientation on cultural perception of women, poverty alleviation and economic reforms, establishment of Sexual Assault Referral and Counselling Centres among others.


Key words: Shadow-Pandemic, Gender-Based Violence, Covid-19 Pandemic, Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, like in many other African countries, gender relations have remained patriarchal in nature. The Nigerian society has been suffocated by these stereotypes and gender insensitive customary laws have all engendered violence against women. Cases of Genderbased violence have been on the increase in Nigeria. The media is replete with reports of husbands killing and maiming their wives. Amnesty International (2005) report on
Nigeria indicates: ${ }^{\text {i }}$
"On a daily basis, women are beaten and ill-treated for supposed transgressions, raped and even murdered by members of their family. In some cases, vicious acid attacks leave them with horrific disfigurements. Such violence is too frequently excused and tolerated in communities and not denounced. Husbands, partners and fathers are responsible for most of the violence against
women".
The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered certain exacerbating factors such as economic strain and food insecurity, limited or no access to support/ remedial services and restricted movement, and engendered an increase in cases of Gender based violence. This has been labeled the shadow pandemic by the United Nations.
The 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, offered the first official definition of gender-based violence. Gender based violence (GBV) is defined as "any act of Gender- based violence that results in, 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 in private life"ii
Gender-based violence includes acts of violence in the
form of physical, Psychological, or sexual violence against a person specifically because of his or her gender.iii

## COVID-19 AND INCREASE IN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE.

At least 15 million more cases of intimate-partner violence (for an average lockdown of six months) were predicted around the world as a result of pandemic restrictions, according to a report published by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and other organizations. ${ }^{\text {iv }}$

The United Nations recently raised an alarm regarding the increase in reported cases of domestic and genderbased violence, directly attributed to forced proximity occasioned by lockdowns. v
In June 2020, Minister of Women's Affairs, Pauline Tallen told the public that the number of abuse cases against women and children had tripled as victims were trapped at home. vi

The Director of the Lagos-based Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre, Abiola AkiodeAfolabi, reported that since the lockdown started, the most common gender-based violence reports recorded have been spousal violence, boyfriend- girlfriend violence, violence on widows, police-sex worker violence, visitor-caught-in-lock-down child rape, among others. ${ }^{\text {vii }}$

The Lagos State government-run Domestic and Gender Violence Response Team said it has been inundated with increased reports of sexual and domestic violence since the lockdown started late March. Most states have since relaxed the restrictions but many offices and schools have yet to fully reopen. Titilola Vivour-Adeniyi, who leads the team, said at the peak of the lockdown in Lagos, the group on average received 13 new cases daily. In march alone, it received 390 reports.

She further stated that there has been a $60 \%$ increase in domestic violence, $30 \%$ rise in sexual violence, and 10\% increase in physical child abuse. ${ }^{\text {viii }}$

These attacks have also grown in other African countries. In Cote D'lvoire where the government's response to COVID-19 is a partial lockdown, gender violence has increased.

The lockdown itself has become a trigger. This is because women who ordinarily go to work in the morning and come back in the evening are now being locked down with an abuser they've been living with and have been trying as much as possible to avoid overtime.

Existing evidence suggests that during COVID-19 lockdowns, the increase in the incidence of violence against women, especially, IPV, may be because victims remain confined to their homes with perpetrators. The lockdown also meant limited options for women to seek immediate assistance or help (beyond hotline calls), given women's restricted mobility as well as the limited health,
legal, and social service infrastructure available. In addition, COVID-19 lockdown may have decreased informal mechanisms of social support through family and close friends, where in Nigeria (and across the globe), most women are more likely to seek these types of informal support for help with gender-based violence. One of the major factors attributed to the increase in genderbased violence during the COVID-19 pandemic has included economic stress due to disruption of income and earning power, resulting in reduced access to basic necessities and services. ${ }^{\text {ix }}$

Activists say the lock down has made it difficult for abused women to easily and quickly report attacks or reach the police.

The corona virus outbreak has exposed a silent pandemic of violence and inequality. The reality that women and men's need differ, especially in a crisis as existing gender parities deepen, is still something that many don't understand. Current data suggests that women in the world's poorest countries are more exposed to the virus because of the roles they typically take on like serving as healthcare workers and caring for sick family members. Not only this but, as we have witnessed in Nigeria, Covid19 has caused a significant surge in domestic violence around the world. ${ }^{x}$

In Nigeria, a series of high-profile cases of violence perpetrated against women during the four-month lockdown sparked nationwide protests by activists both online and at in-person rallies, this led to the Governors of Nigeria's 36 states unanimously declaring a state of emergency on GBV in June 2020.

As part of their declaration, the governors also called on all states to immediately launch sex offender registries and push for tougher federal punishment for abuse and violence against women. there has been other high-level engagement with the legislature to put in place strong laws against GBV in Nigeria. ${ }^{\text {x }}$

In December 2019, while lunching the Sex Offenders Register as part of the government's strategy to deal with the issue of rape, Mrs Pauline Tallen, the Minister of women Affairs and Social Development claimed that about two million Nigerians (mainly women and girls are raped every year).

## FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR INCREASE IN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

## Poor Implementation of Women Rights

Nigeria has well equipped policy frameworks to achieve gender equality and social inclusion. The country is a signatory to a number of key global and regional instruments to tackle gender inequality and social exclusion. Some of these include: The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
(CEDAW 1979); The Beijing Platform for Action (1995); The Millennium Development Goals (2000); The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2005); and The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006). Nigeria also passed the Child Rights Act in 2003, which has been domesticated so far in 18 states. Above all, Nigeria's National Gender Policy (2006) was agreed to and adopted by all states in Nigeria to promote gender equality and inclusiveness in development.

The challenge however, is that many of these policies have not spelt-out appropriate sanctions against certain societal misconducts and infringements on the rights of womensuch as gender-based violence against women in clear terms. The Ministries Departments and Agencies (MDAs) have the task to translate policy proclamations to programmers of action, budget for them and ensure their implementation. However, the reality on ground is that, the policies are yet to be translated into programmers to benefit the people for whom they were formulated. It is therefore important to give full financial and material support to the relevant sector MDAs to design programmers that will make the policies real for the people.
There are several laws in Nigeria that protect the rights of women in Nigeria. Despite these laws, women and girls suffer abuse of their rights on a daily basis. This is due to ignorance of the rights of women and lack of political will by the government to implement the rights of women.

## Entrenched Gender and Discriminatory Norms

Overtime, women's rights have been underrated, ignored and trampled upon. xi The African woman is only to be seen and not heard. Culture has been a tool to justify the denial of women's rights many times. While every community has traditions it upholds dearly, some customs have proven to be quite detrimental to women, examples of which are, female genital mutilation (FGM), wife beating, early marriages, denial of property rights and inheritance and so on. In the Nigerian culture, women are seen as secondclass citizens and inferior to men. Some practices and gender role assignments ensure total submission of the woman to male dominance and control at home in ways that perpetuate gender inequality. .iii
Gender-Based Violence often occurs when the abuser believes that abuse is an entitlement, acceptable, justified, or unlikely to be reported. Some religions practiced in Nigeria contribute to domestic violence. Some religious expectation of women requires unquestioned submission to the authority of their husbands. The women are pretty much at the mercy of their husbands.

## Poverty and Loss of Income (Economic Frustration and Pressure)

Poverty is the mother of crime. It can be defined as the
lack of some fixed level of material goods, necessary for survival and minimal well-being. The widespread of poverty in Nigeria has been a root cause of so many vices and women are at greater risk of the scourge as a result of their gender. Due to poverty and economic frustration prevalent in Nigeria, many men cannot adequately provide for their families. Some of them take out their frustration on their wives and transfer their aggression on them.
The emergence of the novel Corona virus (COVID-19) in 2019 led to the lockdown or movement restrictions in countries worldwide, which meant spouses spend more time together at home resulting in stress and uncertainties which have led to increased aggression at home. This has also led to a great increase in domestic violence as both perpetrator and victim are under stress of the pandemic and their means of livelihood is affected especially in a developing country like Nigeria. The Honorable Commissioner for Social Development and Gender issues, Edo State, Nigeria, Mrs Maria Omozele Edeko in a webinar organized by the Nigerian Bar Association Women Forum, ${ }^{\text {,iv }}$ stated that there was a $40 \%$ increase in domestic violence during the covid-19 lockdown and this domestic violence ranged from intimate partner violence to cases of incest, defilement of children by family members and neighbors and so on.
Poverty is linked to both the perpetration of Violence against Women and the risk of being a victim of it. Bourgois, opined that lack of resources puts immense pressure on men. Many men in Africa grapple with little or no available employment. They are unlikely to attain models or expectations of masculine success. Various forms of violence against women are normalized, as men turn their aggression against women they can no longer control or support economically.

## Lack of Good Governance and Management of Resources

Good governance refers to the exercise of authority through political and institutional processes that are transparent and accountable and encourage public participation.
Without good governance, human rights cannot be respected and protected in a sustainable manner. The implementation of human rights relies on a conducive and enabling environment. This includes appropriate legal frameworks and institutions as well as political, managerial and administrative processes responsible for responding to the rights and needs of the population. States are responsible for delivering a variety of services to their populations, including education, health and social welfare services. The provision of these services is essential to the protection of human rights such as the right to housing, health, education and food. Human rights principles dictate that public services should be available, accessible and culturally acceptable in order to secure the rights of the poorest and most marginalized. Good governance
contributes to this goal by approaching individuals as actors in and not just beneficiaries of economic and social development. ${ }^{\mathrm{xv}}$
There is no doubt that nurturing good governance is essential to ensuring respect for human rights. Without the rule of law, independent courts and other institution of modern society- essential components of good governance- the promise of human rights may remain just that: a promise unfulfilled. Enforcement of fundamental freedoms when it matters may be impossible. The lesson of history is that transparent, responsible, accountable and participatory governance is a prerequisite to enduring respect for human dignity and the defense of human rights. xvi

Bad leadership refers to greedy and selfish political leaders who only pay lip service to the welfare of its citizens without showing any political will to implement and enforce laws that will better the lives of the people.

The political leaders must develop robust interest in the welfare and wellbeing of their citizens as a demonstration of fulfilling the mandate freely given to them during elections. Unfortunately, it appears one of the major issues that have encouraged lack of political -will by the leaders is the pervasive influences of public corruption which has been endemic since the onset of democracy in Nigeria.
An Elder Statesman, Banji Akintoye, aptly captured the adverse effect of corruption in the country. He said "This is how we have become what we now are- namely, a country where public officials steal trillions of naira, where some politicians pocket billions of naira or even dollars in loot, where powerful citizens buy million-dollar houses for their concubines abroad, where governors and their cronies buy jet aircrafts for their personal use, where federal legislators earn more than the President of America, where more than $70 \%$ of citizens live in absolute poverty, where the lack of infrastructures massively discourages enterprise, where more than $70 \%$ of youths are unemployed, where crime had virtually destroyed all sense of security, etc">vui

The welfare of citizens which is one of the primary purposes of government is jettisoned by the governors as they get involved in aggrandizement and personal enrichment, thus creating a class mentality for themselves and their children at the expense of the ordinary citizens.

Closely linked to the foregone is the issue of poor management of natural resources. Nigeria is the largest oil producer in Africa and the tenth largest producer of crude oil in the world. It is quite amazing that the stupendous resources gained from oil have not been reflected in the rate and level of development in Nigeria. Rather, such resources have not been properly managed but wasted. These factors have created a situation of poverty, reduction in the quality of lives of citizens and a general sense of financial tension. Many men are unable to meet all their financial obligations. Consequently, a man could abuse his wife or partner at any slightest real or perceived provocation.

## Lack of Adequate Social Welfare and Palliative Schemes

In a bid to slow the rate of the spread of the virus, the Federal Government of Nigeria, on several occasions, imposed targeted lockdown measures in areas with rapid increase of Covid-19 cases. To alleviate the effects of the lockdown, the Federal Government of Nigeria rolled out palliative measures for targeted groups. However, lamentations have trailed the distribution of government palliatives by the masses. Nigerians allege that the process of distribution of the palliatives had been politicized. The Federal Government had earlier said that the palliatives were for the most vulnerable in the society, though there were no laid down parameters for determining the most vulnerable. The questions that loomed large and which both the federal and state governments are unable to answer is: who are the vulnerable? Is it that the federal government was unable to evolve a transparent process to ensure fair distribution of the palliatives? Is the idea of undefined vulnerability a ploy by the governments to hijack the palliatives for their party loyals? What about those people that lost their jobs or income, are they to be regarded among the vulnerable?xviii
The lockdown and poor distribution of palliative items simple brought to the fore the lack of adequate social welfare and efficient palliative schemes in Nigeria. This resulted in untold hardship on the citizens and led to frustration in many homes. Various forms of violence against women became rampant, as men turn their aggression against women they can no longer control or support economically.

## RECOMMENDATIONS/CONCLUSION

## EFFECTIVE ENLIGHTMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

There are several laws that protect the rights of women in Nigeria. However, many women and girls are ignorant of their rights. There is a need for massive orientation on the rights of women. In addition, the Government should show a greater commitment and will to protect and enforce the rights of women.

## RE ORIENTATION ON CULTURAL PERCEPTION OF WOMEN

There is an urgent need for cultural re-orientation and enlightenment on the status of women. Legislation alone will not be sufficient to eradicate longstanding practices which are deeply rooted in customs. Nigerian men should not be taught to realize that the custom denying the rights of women is no longer sustainable nor are they of practical significance in the 21st century. Women should not be viewed as objects or property, but as human beings who
have feelings and rights. They should be seen as members of the society who can contribute to the national development. Many Judges are now on the progressive path and have taken the bull by the horn in upholding justice for women. ${ }^{\text {xix }}$ Early and forced married should be discouraged and outlawed. In states where this practice has been outlawed, the provisions of the law should be effectively implemented. The provisions of Article 5 of the CEDAW are instructive. It provides as follows:
States Parties shall take all appropriate measures:
(a) To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women;
(b) To ensure that family education includes a proper understanding of maternity as a social function and the recognition of the common responsibility of men and women in the upbringing and development of their children, it being understood that the interest of the children is the primordial consideration in all cases.

This emphasizes the fact that there is a need to take measures to eliminate cultural and social prejudices against women and carry out regular re-orientation on the role and status of women in the society. The Mass media should project programmes and views that support equality for all Nigerians. They should assist in educating and enlightening all Nigerians that investment in girls and women is an investment in Nigeria's future development. The media should be used to sensitize the public both in the urban and rural areas of the hazards of these practices. Social institutions and nongovernmental organizations should also be employed to sensitize the public on the effects of these practices. The government can through its instrumentality reach out and amend the cracked bricks of a potentially viable custom and put an end to a potentially destructive one for the sake of humanity. It is thus recommended that government and non-governmental organizations collaborate and implement far reaching programmes on women's rights that will bring about the desired changes through public awareness, enlightenment and education. ${ }^{\text {xx }}$

## POVERTY ALLEVIATION AND ECONOMIC REFORMS

The economic impact of the pandemic has been severe. The Government made efforts to ensure that necessities like food were provided for people who lost their jobs or income during the COVID-19 lockdown, but its efforts were not sufficient. The government initially distributed food and other critical goods but mismanagement and miscommunication kept these goods from reaching everyone in need. Under these strained economic
conditions, parents and their female children in particular were forced to choose between safety and survival. The economic assistance announced by the government exposed the inadequacies in Nigeria's social protection systems and increased risks of violence for the poor, especially women and girls.

The economic impact of the pandemic has been severe. There is an urgent need for effective poverty alleviation programs and economic reforms to boost the economy and mitigate the effects of the lockdown. The Government should also put futuristic palliative/ emergency measures in place to prepare in case of future lockdown situations. This is to prevent the economic effect from been severe on citizens. And to also prevent a surge in gender-based violence.

## ESTABLISHMENT OF SEXUAL ASSAULT REFERRAL AND COUNSELLING CENTRES AMONG OTHERS.

The establishment of many Sexual Assault Referral and Counselling Centers also known as One Stop Centers in every state, should be encouraged, where all criminal justice services and other welfare services, including prompt free medical care, support, free legal aid, counselling and rehabilitation services can be rendered to victims to sexual offences at the same place to reduce secondary victimization and increase the rate of reporting sexual offences. ${ }^{\text {xx }}$
These centers should be sustainably funded and supported by relevant government agencies of health, law enforcement and social welfare; there should be criminalization and prompt state-led prosecution of Sexual Gender Based Violence (SGBV) cases, irrespective of requests or interference by the victim's family or other interested parties; there should be functional Family Support Units and Force Gender Units as well equipped to address SGBV cases among others. xxii
Dr. Olumuyiwa Ojo, the WHO Nigeria National Professional Officer for Maternal, Sexual and Reproductive Health, stated that there is a need for mainstreaming GBV services and linking survivors to other services.xxiii This is what the Sexual Assault Referral Centers would achieve.
Presently there are sexual assault referral centres in Lagos, Borno, Kaduna, Adamawa, Jigawa, Niger, Enugu, Akwa- Ibom, and Kano.

There is a need to create more centres all over the nation to handle the increasing number of sexual and domestic violence cases. The centers should be equipped with hotlines and other ICT enabled gadgets to be able to reach out to women and girls virtually in cases of lockdown and restricted movements.
The Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team created under the Lagos state government to provide sensitive services to victims of domestic and sexual violence has had to rely on creative alternatives, such as
tele-interventions, to support victims under lockdown. The Team also employs the use of Conference calling to speak with couples together. And there is the option of temporary shelter provided by partners of the Team. This is a laudable step and it is worthy of emulation by other states.

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