

MAINSTREAMING GENDER-EQUALITY AND COMBATING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA FOR THE ATTAINMENT OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

BY

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ABSTRACT

The issue of gender inequality and gender-based violence is a pressing issue in Nigeria with persistent barrier to the attainment of national development. Women and girls often face discrimination in various aspects of life, such as social, economic and political sphere. Gender-based violence occurrences have become worrisome and alarming with far reaching consequences on the victim's physical, mental, sexual and emotional wellbeing. This paper therefore examines the pressing issue of mainstreaming gender-equality and combating the menace of gender-based violence for the attainment of national development in Nigeria. The paper adopts the feminist theory as its framework of analysis. The method of data collection is documentary and method of data analysis is descriptive. The findings of the study revealed that despite the efforts that have been put in place to promote gender equality and to combat gender-based violence, such efforts are hindered by a number of factors, such as patriarchy, cultural and traditional factors, low reporting of gender-based violence, inadequate social support, socio-economic factors, political factors, and discriminatory legal provisions. This paper recommends women empowerment, domestication and implementation on conventions, gender-equality, girl-child education, aggressive public awareness and advocacy interventions and implementation of policies with strict consequences for offenders.

Keywords: Gender, mainstreaming, gender-equality, gender-based violence, national development

Introduction

Globally, women are key contributors in the development of any country. However, the issue of gender inequality and gender-based violence hinders women's effective participation in national development. Gender inequality refers to the unequal treatment or perception of individuals based on their gender, typically favoring one gender over the other. According to the World Bank (2022a), around 2.4 billion women working age are not afforded equal opportunity. Gender-based violence (GBV) is also described as a global pandemic that affects 1 in 3 women in their lifetime. The World Bank report (2019) reveals that 35% of women have experienced either *physical* or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. Globally, 7% of women have been sexually assaulted by someone other than a partner, as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner, and about 200 million women have experienced female genital mutilation (World Bank, 2019). The issue is not only devastating to survivors of violence and their families, but also entails significant social and economic costs. One characteristic about this menace is that, it knows

no social or economic boundaries and affects women and girls of all social or economic background. This needs urgent attention in both developing and developed countries.

Nigeria like many other countries faces a significant challenge in achieving sustainable development due to persistent issue of gender inequality and gender-based violence. Gender inequality or the gender gap in Nigeria refers to the differences in opportunities, resources, and outcomes between men and women in various aspects of life, such as education, health, employment, and political participation. Gender inequality remains a significant issue in Nigeria, especially in relation to women. Without gender parity, no society can attain meaningful and sustainable development irrespective of prevailing political and justice system. As such, it is imperative to secure gender equality. According a report by the International Monetary Fund (2018), Nigeria suffers from wide-spread gender inequality and is therefore missing out on a key ingredient to economic success. The Global Gender Gap Report (2023) ranks Nigeria 130th out of 146 countries, with a score 0.637. The gender gap or gender inequality in Nigeria is relatively high compared to countries at similar levels of development, and this is because of the inequalities in educational, economic, and political opportunities. Furthermore, Nigeria is a country with a high prevalence of Gender Based Violence (GBV), and women and girls are the most affected. Gender based violence has therefore become a widespread phenomenon. According the Global Gender Gap Report (2022), 16.20% of the Nigerian women population are vulnerable to prevalence of gender-based violence (p.277). Similar development is aptly observed in Nigeria by the National Agency for Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) report which states that “2,100 cases of gender-based violence in 2020 were recorded”. The report noted that between 2019 and 2020, there was increase in sexual and gender-based violence all over the country (Daily Post, 2021).

The Nigerian government has recognized the importance of addressing these issues and has implemented several policies and programs aimed at promoting gender equality and preventing gender-based violence. However, much remains to be done to mainstream gender equality and combat gender-based violence in all sectors of Nigerian society. Mainstreaming gender equality and combating gender-based violence are crucial steps towards achieving sustainable national development in Nigeria. According to the International Monetary Fund (2018), promoting gender equality can be economic game changer. Closing the gender gap would mean higher growth and productivity, and greater economic stability. The World Bank (2022b) states that the total estimated forgone earnings stemming from gender gaps in agricultural productivity, firm profits, and wage earnings amount to US\$9.3 billion, equivalent to 2.3 percent of overall gross domestic product (GDP). Therefore, gender equality and combating gender-based violence are essential issues that require significant attention in Nigeria. It is against this background that this paper discusses the importance of mainstreaming gender-equality and combating gender-based violence in Nigeria for national development. This paper underscores the need to improve the understanding of what drives gender inequality and gender-based violence and what can be done to prevent it. It seeks to interrogate those factors responsible for the spate of gender inequality and gender-based violence in Nigeria, and the efficacy of the efforts put in place to address the menace. This paper is divided into seven sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two dwells on conceptual framework and theoretical issues. Section three provides some background on the state of gender equality in Nigeria. Section four provides context on gender-based violence in Nigeria. Section five takes a look at exiting legislations and policies to promote gender equality and combat gender-based violence in Nigeria. Section six explains the factors responsible for gender inequality and gender-based violence and section seven is the conclusion and recommendations.

Conceptual Framework

This section attempts to give understanding to some terms which are germane for better comprehension of some of the key words encapsulated in the title of the paper. These include;

Gender

According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF, 2017), gender is a social and cultural construct, which distinguishes differences in the attributes of men and women, girls and boys, and accordingly refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women. Gender connotes the roles, behaviour, activities, and attributes that a given society at a given time considers appropriate for men and women (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2018). Gender therefore refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, attitudes, and expectations that are associated with being male or female. This concept is useful in analyzing how commonly shared practices legitimize discrepancies between sexes.

Mainstreaming Gender-Equality

Mainstreaming is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic, and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetrated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality (UNODC, 2018). Gender equality refers to the equal rights, opportunities, and treatment of individuals regardless of their gender. It means that all genders have the same access to education, healthcare, employment, and political representation, among other areas of life. Gender equality also means that gender-based discrimination and violence are eliminated. The concept of gender equality and gender mainstreaming is set out in the Beijing Declaration and platform for Action and is also taken in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals, in addition to being included in targeted measures through Goal 5, on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (UNODC, 2018). Mainstreaming gender is essential for promoting gender equality and combating gender-based discrimination and violence. It helps to ensure that policies and programs are designed with a gender perspective and that they address the specific needs and challenges faced by women, men, and gender-nonconforming individuals. Mainstreaming gender is not only a matter of social justice but also a necessary condition for sustainable development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between females and males. The nature and extent of specific types of gender-based vary across cultures, countries and regions. Examples include sexual violence, including sexual exploitation/abuse and forced prostitution, domestic violence, trafficking, forced/early marriage, harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, honour killings and widow inheritance (UNICEF, 2017). According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022), gender-based violence is perceived as the world’s most pervasive violation of human rights, occurring everywhere in the world. It undermines development and is a driver of conflict and poverty. Gender-based violence therefore connotes acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence perpetuated due to gender norms and stereotypes. A number of factors have been advanced as responsible for gender-based violence. These include poverty, cultural norms, traditions and religions, weak enforcement of laws that protects the rights of women and girls, perceptions that promote patriarchy, personality disorders, stigma and the culture of silence.

National Development

National development refers to the process of improving the economic, social, and political well-being of a country and its citizens. According to Okeke and Ifeagwazi (2018), national development refers to nationwide progress in a nation-state, implying the well-being of the majority of citizens of such state. Nwali (2019) submits that national development include growth in social, cultural, political and economic factors which can improve and sustain the social and economic welfare of the people. Adagbabiri and Okolie (2019) posits that national development involves progressive changes and transformation in the economic, social, political, demographic, scientific, ecological as well as technological life of a nation. Thus, national

development involves creating sustainable and inclusive economic growth, reducing poverty and inequality, improving access to education and healthcare, promoting good governance and democracy. Moreover, Asaju and Adagba (2013) maintains that women constitute an indispensable force in the quest for national development of any nation. Gender mainstreaming and combating gender-based violence can therefore be used as a tool for national development in Nigeria, as it ensures gender equality in all aspects thereby leading to a gender-responsive society where women and men equally contribute to and benefit from development process.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the feminist theory as its theoretical framework. Feminism is a mass movement commenced by women of all groups to eradicate all forms of feminist oppressions by men that are prevailing in a patriarchal society. It fights against all types of oppressions on women and also tries to explain the phenomenon of gender inequality (Mohajan, 2022). Feminism manifests into different categories, of which radical feminism is one of them (Jaggar, 1983). For the purpose of analysis in this study, the radical feminism perspective is used to explain gender inequality and gender-based violence in Nigeria. Radical feminism is a movement that was founded in the 1960s during the second wave of feminism by women who had participated in the civil rights and anti-war campaigns, primarily in New York and Boston, before it later spread to the rest of the USA and Europe (Cottais, 2021; Mohajan, 2022).

The radical feminism perspective was pioneered by Kate Millet (1970) in her work “Sexual Politics”. While Millet’s work laid the foundation for the movement, it stretched far beyond her works and has continued to evolve today. Other notable radical feminists include Alice Walker, Andrea Dwokin, and Catherine Mackinnon (Armstead & Teasly, 2021; Mohajan, 2022). Radical feminist goes to the root of women’s oppression, which is a structural problem and calls for a global change of the system (Cottais, 2021). The theory believe that patriarchy is the root cause of gender inequality, and seeks to restructure society in order to eliminate male dominance and traditional gender roles. Radical feminists believe that men wage war on women through physical or sexual violence, such as domestic violence and rape. They argue that violence or the threat of violence is a way for men to control, dominate and perpetuate women’s subordination. By subjecting women to violence, women are reminded of their subordinate status. Thus, radical feminists oppose sexual and gender-based violence, as it reinforces women subjugation (Cottais, 2021).

The main objective of radical feminists is the abolition of patriarchy, which is viewed as a fundamental source of discrimination and oppression against women (Millet, 1970; Vukoičić, 2017). Radical feminism holds that the patriarchal system that oppresses women must be completely eliminated and that women should be free to exercise total sexual and reproductive freedom (Tong, 2001). The adoption of the feminist theory, particularly the radical feminist perspective to this study provides a valuable lens for comprehending and explaining gender inequality and gender-based violence in Nigeria. It helps uncovers the underlying power structures and societal norms responsible for perpetuating these problems. It also provides insights into how the factors driving gender inequality and gender-based violence in Nigeria can be resolved to promote national development.

Gender Equality in Nigeria

Gender inequality is a significant problem in Nigeria, with women facing discrimination in various aspects of their lives. The Statistical Report on Women and Men in Nigeria by the National Bureau of Statistics (2021) highlights the inequalities and differences that exist in the lifestyles and livelihood of women and men across Nigeria. Women and girls face significant challenges in the educational, economic and political aspects of life. This assertion is consistent with the report of United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF, 2022) which indicates that there are 18.5 million out-of-school children, 60% of whom are girls. In terms of employment, women are often concentrated in low-paying jobs and informal sectors, such as

agriculture and domestic work. A report by World Bank (2022b) reveals that significant gender gaps exist in labor force participation and labor supply in Nigeria. The report shows that at the national level, fewer women work than men, 55 percent of working-age women work, which is 14 percentage points fewer than the 69 percent of men. The political representation of women in Nigeria is also low. Okafor and Ileyemi (2023) asserts that from 1999 till date, only 157 women have been elected into the 469-member National Assembly (38 Senators and 119 members of the House of Representatives), compared to 2,657 men (616 Senators, 2,041 members of the House of Representatives) during the same period. UN Women (2020) posits that the underrepresentation of women in politics contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality in Nigeria. These differences in opportunities between men and women in the educational, economic and political aspect widen the gender gap in Nigeria.

The Gender Gap Index was developed by the World Economic Forum (WEF) and is included in their annual Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR). The Global Gender Gap Report captures the magnitude of gender-based disparities and tracking their progress overtime. The report examines the gap between men and women in four fundamental categories (sub-indexes), namely; Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and survival and Political Empowerment.

Table 1: Summary of Nigeria’s Global Gender Gap Index, 2015 - 2023

S/N	Year	Global Index Rank	Economic Participation and Opportunity	Educational Attainment	Health and Survival	Political Empowerment
1	2015	125 (0.638)	61 (0.691)	137 (0.0802)	133 (0.961)	111(0.097)
2	2016	118 (0.643)	52 (0.700)	134 (0.814)	135 (0.961)	109 (0.097)
3	2017	122 (0.641)	37 (0.728)	136 (0.813)	94 (0.972)	135 (0.052)
4	2018	133 (0.621)	79 (0.661)	140 (0.0806)	132 (0.964)	139 (0.052)
5	2020	128 (0.635)	38 (0.738)	145 (0.806)	135 (0.964)	146 (0.032)
6	2021	139 (0.627)	78 (0.687)	146 (0.806)	104 (0.967)	149 (0.047)
7	2022	123 (0.639)	50 (0.724)	134 (0.826)	97 (0.967)	141 (0.040)
8	2023	130 (0.637)	54 (0.715)	137 (0.826)	99 (0.967)	142 (0.041)

Source: Compiled by Authors from the World Economic Forum Global Gender Report, 2015 - 2023.

Table 1 shows Nigeria’s ranking on the Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) from 2015 to 2023. The GGGR is a useful tool for understanding the relative progress Nigeria has made in advancing gender equality. In 2023, Nigeria ranked 130 out of 146 countries in terms of gender equality with a score of 0.637. The scores are presented on a 0-to-1 scale, towards gender gap and achieving full gender parity. The rankings for each sub-index are, economic participation and opportunity - 54 (0.715), educational attainment - 137 (0.826), health and survival - 99 (0.967) and political empowerment - 142 (0.041). Nigeria’s ranking on the GGGR has fluctuated over the years but has generally remained towards the bottom of the rankings. The scores suggest that there is still a significant gender gap in Nigeria, particularly in terms of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and political empowerment.

Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a serious problem in Nigeria. According to Oguonu (2009), Gender-based violence takes various forms, causes a lot of harm and help in complicating the problems of women and girls. Gender-based violence promotes gender role inequalities, encroach on women’s right and serves as an impediment to women’s contribution to development process. This indirectly affects everyone because

when women are injured and prevented from putting in their very best, the nation is affected. A subdued woman will have negative influence on her children on whom the development of a nation depends.

Table 2: Summary of Gender-Based Violence Cases in Nigeria

Reported Cases	Fatal Cases	Closed Cases	Open Cases	Convicted Perpetrators
23,750	957	1,481 (15.7%)	7,935 (84.3%)	297

Source: Data obtained by Authors from the National Gender Based Violence Dashboard (11/09/2023 at 2:23pm) <https://reportgbv.ng/#/home>

Table 2 above shows the National Gender-Based Violence Situation Room dashboard as of 11th September, 2023. The National Gender-Based Violence Situation Room dashboard is an innovative management platform of Nigeria’s Federal Ministry of Women Affairs which provides quality data for response to issues of violence against women and girls in Nigeria. The initiative relies on the use of data and technology to inform and checkmate all forms of violence against women and girls in the country. The dashboard shows that there are 23,750 reported cases of gender-based violence from across Nigeria out of which 957 are considered as fatal cases. Also, there are 7,935 open cases, representing 84.3% while closed cases are numbered 1,481, representing 15.7%. The dashboard also indicates that only 297 persons have so far been convicted. Women and girls experience various forms of gender-based violence, including physical, sexual, and female genital mutilation (FGM), forced/early marriage.

Physical Violence and Sexual Violence

Physical violence manifests in beating, burning, strangling, beating, kicking, punching, biting, killing or maiming or the use of objects or weapons. It results in injuries, distress and health problems and may even lead to death in certain circumstances. Sexual violence on the hand involves any form of unwanted sexual contact or behavior, including rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. Sexual violence can occur in both public and private spaces, and it is often perpetrated by acquaintances or strangers. Rape and sexual assault are widespread in Nigeria, with many cases going unreported and unpunished. Data from the National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS, 2018) shows that approximately one-third (33 percent) of women aged 15 to 49 in Nigeria have endured physical or sexual violence.

Widows Disinheritance

In some states in Nigeria, widows are dehumanised and deprived of their rights. In most instances, in-laws antagonise and debar widows from inheriting their late husband’s properties. Some of the women also do not have rights to their father’s properties (Alabi, Umo, Bello, Ogbonnaiye & Eyo, 2022). In fact, widows are shared as one of the man’s properties (Oguonu, 2009). This practice is more prevalent in the South East states of Nigeria, where the Igbo native law and custom disinherit female children (Silas, 2020). Widow Disinheritance is a form of GBV against women and threatens their security. It is also a violation of their constitutionally guaranteed rights to freedom from discrimination as provided in section 42 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), which says that no citizen of Nigeria shall be discriminated regardless of their place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion. Widows do not have equal inheritance rights, and they may be stripped of their land, evicted from their home, or even separated from their children. They may be denied access to inheritance, bank account and credit which can have significant financial impacts for them and their children, thereby making them to live in extreme poverty (Ogundare, 2022). According to Ogundare (2022), it is estimated that there are some 258 million widows around the world, with over 115 million (nearly one in 10) of them living in extreme poverty.

Female Genital Mutilation

Female genital mutilation is a form of gender-based violence. It is a traditional practice inflicted on girls and women worldwide and it is regarded as a violation of human rights, which is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and perceptions over decades and generation (Ezigbo, 2022). The procedure of FGM, which involves the cutting or altering of the female genitalia, is carried out to prevent girls from being promiscuous. The logic is that, if the sensitive external part of a girl's sexual organ is mutilated, her pleasure from sexual intercourse will reduce, thereby preventing any tendency for sexual immorality. However, it is regarded as a procedure that violates victim's human rights, putting their lives at risk and increasing their risk for health complications. The health consequences of FGM include bacterial, viral and tetanus infections, complications with pregnancy and child delivery, and psychological issues. These consequences are associated with the unhygienic condition in which the procedure is carried out, the crude and unsterilized implements used and the lack of participation of trained health professionals in the exercise (Tribune, 2022). This is consistent with the report of United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) (2022), which states that Nigeria has the third-highest number of women and girls who have undergone FGM worldwide, with an estimated 19.9 million women and girls affected, especially among girls aged 0-14 years. Another report by Ezigbo (2022) reveals that Nigeria has the highest number of FGM cases in the world, accounting for 115 million out of 130 million circumcised worldwide. According to the report, the South-South zone has the highest prevalent practice and accounts for 77% among adult women. This is followed by the South-East zone with 68% and the South-West zone with 65%. FGM denies women and girls the right to quality education, opportunities for decent work and their health, particularly sexual and reproductive health. Eliminating FGM is therefore crucial to realizing many of the sustainable development goals, (SDGs), including targets on health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, decent work, and economic growth (Ezigbo, 2022).

Forced/Early Marriage

Child marriage is defined as marriage before the age of 18. Under the Child Rights Act 2003, the minimum legal age for marriage is 18 years. However, out of the 36 states of the federation, only 34 have domesticated the Child Rights Act, with Kano and Zamfara states being the two states that are yet to domesticate the Act (Aya, 2022). According to Musawah (2017), states that have not domesticated the Act are reluctant because they do not want to be tied down by any age limit for marriage. In many Sharia-legislated states in Nigeria, child marriage is justified on religious and traditional grounds, with the age of adulthood based on puberty. The practice is generally backed by the interpretations of Islam which allows for child's betrothal as early as puberty (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Child marriage is a big challenge in Nigeria and has enormous adverse effects on education, health, including sexual and reproductive health, and on the overall development of adolescents and youths. According to the United Nations Population Fund and United Nations Children's Fund (UNPFA and UNICEF, 2018), an estimated 22 million child brides live in Nigeria which accounts for 40% of all child brides in the West African region. Another report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2022), reveals that Nigeria remains the country with the highest number of child brides in West and Central Africa, with numbers of girls and women who married before the age of 15 reaching 10.3 million, while 23.6 million women and girls married before the legal age of 18. The Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning (2021) also indicates high prevalence of child marriage, particularly in the North-West and North-East regions where 48% of girls are married by age 15. One fundamental difficulty about child marriage is that girls and women are financially dependents on their husbands and therefore lacks the power to make upon them. Child marriage has many effects on the girl's health such as increased risk for sexual transmitted diseases (STDs), cervical cancer, death during child birth, and obstetric fistula (Osakinle & Tayo-Olajubutu, 2017). A child bride is denied of her right to education which is the bedrock on which the greatness of every society is founded, restricting her from contributing to society building. It also places restriction on her labour market participation and compounds

global efforts to eliminate poverty. Early child marriage places the child brides at risk of widowhood at early age as they are significantly younger than their husbands. The risk subjugates them to economic and social challenges for a greater portion of their lives, compared to women who married as adults (This Day, 2022).

Overview of Existing Legislations and Initiatives for Promoting Gender Equality and Combating Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria

This section of the paper provides highlight on the existing legislations, policies and strategies that promote gender equality and prevents gender-based violence in Nigeria. There are several policies and frameworks at the international, regional, and national levels that promote gender equality in Nigeria. At the international level, there is the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Nigeria ratified CEDAW in 1985, which obligates the country to take all necessary measures to eliminate discrimination against women. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is another global policy framework for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 5 also calls for achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls by 2030.

At the regional level, Nigeria is a signatory to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, which contains provisions on gender equality and prohibits discrimination based on sex. Nigeria also signed and ratified the Protocol to African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), which is also a regional legal framework that seeks to protect women's rights and promote gender equality. At the National level, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), guarantees equality and right to freedom from discrimination on the basis of sex. Others include:

Child's Rights Act 2003

The Child Rights Act prohibits discrimination against the girl child and provides for equal access to education and healthcare. Nigeria adopted Child's Right Act in 2003, giving legal consent to both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and African Charter. The Act has been domesticated and adopted by 34 States of the 36 States in Nigeria. However, children in those states are still subject to practices like early marriage, female genital mutilation and streets begging. According to Assim (2020) some of the setbacks bedevilling the effectiveness and domestication of Child's Rights Act in Nigeria include the ethnic, religion and cultural diversity.

Violence Against Persons' (Prohibition) Act (VAPPA) 2015

The VAPPA provides protection and remedies for victims of gender-based violence, including sexual violence, domestic violence, and harmful traditional practices. Since its domestication, pundits of gender-based violence have continued to canvass for its domestication. This Act represents a milestone in the fight against gender-based violence in Nigeria because it is the only law in Nigeria that criminalizes female genital mutilation, a violation that has gone unchecked for several years due to its cultural backing. It also expands the frontier of the definition and scope of violence and abuse beyond sexual violence to domestic violence and recognised that men too can be victims of rape but also rape can be perpetuated with parts of the body and objects. However, despite being widely adopted by the majority of the States of the Federation, there have not been much uptick and significant increase in the number of culprits being charged for gender-based violence due to paucity of finance to provide enabling environment such as sexual assault referral center structure, equipment's and facilities to conduct forensic examinations, treatment and medical care for the victims of sexual abuse, sexual assault and even domestic violence are not in place in most of the States of the Federation.

National Gender Policy

The National Gender Policy was developed in 2006 to provide strategic policy guidance for mainstreaming gender at all levels as well as address the inequalities that exist in the socio-economic sphere in Nigeria. However, a revised National Gender Policy (2021-2026) was approved in 2022 by the Federal Executive Council (FEC). The policy is a document that outlines the government's commitment to promoting gender equality and empowering women in Nigeria. The policy is based on the recognition that gender inequality is a major obstacle to achieving sustainable development and that gender equality is essential for the social, economic, and political development of the country. The National Gender Policy is informed by the guiding principles of social justice, human rights, equality and equity, good governance, accountability, transparency, and participation. However, the implementation of the policy will require the involvement and cooperation of all stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organizations, and the private sector.

Factors Driving Gender Inequality and Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria

Gender inequality and gender-based violence in Nigeria have multiple causes, some of which are deeply rooted in the country's cultural and societal norms. These include the following:

Patriarchy

Nigeria has a patriarchal culture that gives men more power and control over women, leading to unequal opportunities and decision making. Patriarchy which legitimises violence to ensure the dominance and superiority of men exacerbate gender-based violence in Nigeria. In a patriarchal system, father holds authority over women, children and property. It is therefore, the institutions of male rule and privilege and is dependent on female subordination. Patriarchal systems and institutions are the underlying causes of the denial and discrimination that women experience with respect to property and inheritance. Patriarchal cultural norms therefore cause economic, legal and political and social discrimination against women and girls within household and at the community level.

Cultural and Traditional Factors

Nigeria has a diverse population with hundreds of ethnic groups, each with its own culture, traditions and religions. Harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting, child marriage, and widowhood practices can contribute to gender-based violence and reinforce gender inequality. Gender-based violence has continued to increase due to family background, societal norms, illiteracy, access to properties and lack of unity among the womenfolk. This is consistent with the view of Farran (2022) who asserts that, "in all societies, women and girls have less power than men-over their bodies, decisions and resources". Social norms that allowed men's deployment of violence as a form of discipline and control reinforce gender-based violence. Survivors are often subjected to victim-blaming or ostracized from the families and communities due to social norms. In some societies, a victim of gender-based violence is described as shameful and weak, with many women still being considered guilty of attracting violence against themselves through their behaviour. Again, the concept of ownership in turn, legitimises control over women's sexuality which according to many legal codes has been deemed essential to ensure patrilineal inheritance. Norms around sexuality can help escalate mass rape of the women (Franklin, 2022). This development accounts for enduring low levels of reporting and investigation.

Low Reporting of Gender-Based Violence Cases

The low reporting of gender-based violence cases remains a significant challenge. This makes it difficult to accurately determine the prevalence of GBV, which in turn hampers efforts to prevent and efficiently address the menace. The incidences of the crime have been on the rise because it is down-played by under-reporting of cases by victims. Other reason for the low reporting of GBV in Nigeria is the social stigma and shame associated with being victim of GBV. Many victims may be reluctant to come forward

and report abuse due to fear of reprisals, judgement, or ostracization from their community. Some survivors are forced to marry their perpetrators. Others face retaliation for reporting their experiences or seeking support including at the hands of family members. At its worst, gender-based violence can result in death, like in situations of honour killings. Oyinye, Obinna and Chinonyelu (2022) posits that significant numbers of gender-based violence occurring in the rural areas go uninterrupted as victims in the rural areas could be less likely to speak up. This is fuelled by the fact that gender-based violence remains masked in a culture of silence to seek justice are blamed, face retribution or ostracized from their families.

Inadequate Social Support

Despite the existence of laws and policies to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, weak implementation and enforcement of these laws and policies is a significant barrier to achieving gender equality and ending violence against women. Women and girls who experience violence often lack adequate social support and access to services, such healthcare, legal aid, that can help them recover and seek justice. Nwogugu (2014) argues that women subjected to gender-based violence are unwilling to lodge formal complaints with the police against their partners. Most victims of gender-based violence are not willing to approach the police due to a lack of trust in the force. That police “characteristically exhibit bias and discriminatory attitudes in their treatment of female victims of violence which is infirmed by cultural beliefs and notions which devalue and subjugate women.” Also, many victims of gender-based violence in Nigeria do not believe that the justice system will be effective in prosecuting perpetrators, or that they will receive adequate support or protection from authorities. Tallen (2023) aptly summarises the trend and situation of gender-based violence thus;

“When cases are reported and nothing is being done, people get tired and say there is nobody watching and that is why we are emphasizing and calling on the justice system to deal with perpetrators, to serve as a deterrent and victims will now have the confidence to report. If you that you are reporting a case and something will be done, then you will be happy to do it. But if you report a case and nothing is being done or the victim is allowed to go scot-free then, people will say there is no point. People die of depression, die of frustration which is not acceptable. Justice delayed is justice denied”.

This is consistent with the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2022) assertion that there are enough laws to give legal protection for women and deal with the scourge of gender-based violence but the lack of structures to enforce and prosecute the culprits enhanced the menace.

Socio-Economic Factors

Poverty, unemployment and other social inequality such a lack of education also contribute to gender inequality and gender-based violence. A recent report estimated 133 million Nigerians enmeshed in multi-dimensional poverty (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The lack of means of livelihood and or lack of economic resources made some women vulnerable to gender-based violence, as well as other forms of violence and exploitation. It makes women to be vulnerable to violence and further make it extremely difficult for the victims to extricate themselves. Poverty therefore, impedes economic empowerment and prevents women from being able to cater for themselves. According to Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2022) poverty is a key driver of the prevalence of child-marriage across the globe. Often poorer families see marriage as the only way for young girls to have financial security and ease their own financial burden from costs such as school fees and upkeep expenses. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund, women and girls in Nigeria have limited access to education and compared to men (France-Presse, 2022). This lack of access limits the economic independence and perpetuates gender inequality. This is consistent with the

view of Russell (2022) who alluded that girls and women may also experience gender-based violence when they are deprived of nutrition and education. Lack of education can lead to a cycle of poverty. Girls who acquire education are more likely to lead health, productive lives, earn higher incomes, participate in decisions that affect them, and build a better future for themselves and their families. Girls education strengthens economies and reduces inequality in society (Alabi, et al., 2022).

Political Reasons

Perpetual inequality and under-representation of women and people in power and politics means that they have fewer opportunities to shape the discussion and to affect changes in policy or to adapt measures to stem the tide of gender-based violence and support. The menace of gender-based may not be on the front-burner and adequately funded because of unequal representation.

Discriminatory Legal Provisions

There are several laws in existence in Nigeria that are discriminatory against women. These include provisions on citizenship, assault and battery, spousal rape among others. For instance, section 26(2) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) provides that a female foreigner can become a Nigerian citizen when married to a Nigerian man, but there is no similar provision for a male foreigner who marries a Nigerian woman. Regarding spousal rape, by the combined provisions of section 357, section 6 of the Criminal Code, and section 282(2) of the Penal Code, sexual intercourse between legally married couple is not classified as rape, except where the wife has not attained the age of puberty. Furthermore, Section 360 of the Criminal Code applicable in the Southern part of Nigeria makes indecent assault of a woman a less serious offence, carrying a lower penalty than the indecent assault of a man. The Penal Code applicable in Northern Nigeria in section 55 gives room for men to beat their wives as a corrective purpose as long as it does not result in grievous bodily harm. The Marriage Act in section 18 requires the written consent of the father of either party intending to get married if he or she is below 21 years of age and the mother's written consent is only permitted when the father is dead or of unsound mind or out of Nigeria (Olabimtan, 2022). These discriminatory laws reinforce gender inequality and create an environment where gender-based violence against women remain pervasive.

Conclusion

This paper examined the importance of mainstreaming gender equality and combating gender-based violence in Nigeria for the attainment of national development. The finding of the paper shows that Nigeria has high rates of gender inequality and gender-based violence. Despite the existence of legislations, policies and strategies that promote gender equality and prevent gender-based violence in Nigeria, the gender gap remains wide and gender-based violence cases remain high with far reaching consequences, not for individuals alone, but also for communities and the country as a whole. Therefore, gender inequality and gender-based violence are major obstacles to Nigeria's development as they limit the potential of women and girls to contribute to the country's economic, social, and political growth. The paper contends that by mainstreaming gender-equality and combating gender-based violence, Nigeria can ensure that women and girls have equal access to education, healthcare, employment, and political participation. This will enable them to fully participate in the development process and contribute their skills, knowledge, and resources to the country's development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the study makes the following recommendations;

1. The Federal and State governments should strengthen existing policies and legislations to ensure the protection and prevention of gender-based violence and all forms of abuse against women and girls. This includes the implementation and enforcement of laws such as the Violence Against Persons' Prohibition Act, the Child Rights Act and the National Gender Policy.

2. The Federal and State governments should show more commitments toward ending the patriarchal power structures and harmful practices, through aggressive advocacy and awareness campaigns and should put in place punitive measures for holding perpetrators of Gender-based violence to account, as well as safe houses for victims.
3. There is a need to break the cultural cycle of silence and encourage survivors to speak out and give them all the necessary supports they need to ensure that justice prevail, and advocacy interventions with religious, cultural and traditional leaders to tackle deep-seated negative norms and harmful gender stereotypes and practices towards fully realizing women's human rights potential.
4. There is a need for renewed commitment by government at all levels to eradicate poverty, child-marriage, reducing inequalities and exclusion and supporting the empowerment of all women and encouraging girl-child education so that the aspirations of the girl-child would be attained.
5. Strengthen institutional capacity and effectiveness to enhance delivery of results on gender equality and empowerment of women should be maintained while Federal as well as State Governments are to ensure that sexual assault referral center structure are adequately funded and equipped to combat gender-based violence.

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