

SEXUAL AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE/HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS ACROSS NIGERIA

Gender Based Violence: Harmful Practices Against Women and Girls

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the gravest human rights violations affecting women and girls globally. In Nigeria, GBV has assumed a crisis dimension, with cultural traditions, patriarchal structures, and weak legal enforcement contributing to its persistence. Despite national and international legal instruments designed to protect women and girls, harmful practices continue to threaten their physical safety, mental well-being, and fundamental rights.

The Spectrum of Violence

The forms of violence faced by Nigerian women and girls are varied and widespread:

1. **Sexual Violence:** Includes rape, attempted rape, and coerced sexual acts. Reports indicate that during the COVID-19 lockdown alone, hundreds of cases were documented across states. Survivors often experience severe psychological trauma, stigma, and rejection.
2. **Domestic Violence:** Perpetrated mainly by intimate partners, this includes physical assault, emotional abuse, and economic deprivation. Many victims suffer in silence due to social stigma and law enforcement's reluctance to interfere in "family matters."
3. **Harmful Traditional Practices:**
 - **Female Genital Mutilation (FGM):** Still practiced despite legal prohibitions, leading to serious health complications.
 - **Early and Forced Marriages:** Girls, some as young as 12, are married off, exposing them to sexual violence and maternal health risks like vesicovaginal fistula (VVF).
 - **Widowhood Rites:** Women are subjected to degrading treatment after the death of their spouses.
 - **Denial of Inheritance:** Many women are stripped of property rights, especially in communities where male offspring are prioritized.
4. **Human Trafficking and Survival Sex:** Economic hardship drives trafficking, with women and girls trafficked for sexual exploitation or domestic labor.
5. **Educational Inequality and Almajiri System:** Girls are more likely to be withdrawn from school due to menstruation, family caregiving, or early marriage, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependence.
6. **Infanticide and Stigmatization:** Some communities still practice the killing of twins or stigmatize children labeled as "witches," often targeting girls.

Root Causes

The root of gender-based violence in Nigeria is a deeply entrenched patriarchy, reinforced by cultural norms, religious beliefs, and economic inequalities. Many communities consider violence against women a disciplinary measure, thereby legitimizing abuse. Even more

troubling, women themselves sometimes become enforcers of these harmful traditions, believing they are preserving cultural heritage.

Health and Social Consequences

Victims often suffer:

- **Physical injuries** (broken bones, lacerations, genital trauma)
- **Mental health issues** (depression, PTSD, suicidal ideation)
- **Sexually transmitted infections**, including HIV
- **Unwanted pregnancies**, often leading to unsafe abortions

Due to stigma, many survivors do not report incidents or seek medical help within the crucial 72-hour window for rape care. Access to treatment is limited, especially in rural areas, where clinics lack trained staff and resources.

Response Efforts

The **National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)**, in collaboration with stakeholders like FIDA, NBA, CSOs, and faith-based organizations, has led advocacy efforts during the annual **16 Days of Activism**. Key interventions include:

- Legal advocacy for the domestication of the **Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act** in all states.
- Establishment of **Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARC)** in 25 states to offer free medical, legal, and psychosocial services.
- Community sensitization campaigns to change harmful cultural attitudes.
- Call for **sex offender registers** and enhanced police responsiveness.

Policy and Legal Framework

Nigeria is signatory to international treaties including:

- CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women)
- The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Maputo Protocol)

Nationally, the **VAPP Act**, **Child Rights Act**, and **National Gender Policy** provide a solid legal foundation. However, enforcement remains weak, and many states have yet to adopt or implement these laws effectively.

Conclusion and Call to Action

Gender-based violence in Nigeria is not merely a social issue—it is a systemic failure to protect the rights and dignity of women and girls. Eliminating harmful practices requires collective

action: from legislative reform and enforcement, to grassroots education and survivor support systems.

The fight against GBV must be holistic, intersectional, and unrelenting. Women and girls deserve a Nigeria where their rights are respected, their voices are heard, and their lives are safe from harm.