



Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and the Marginalization of Women in Nigeria's Politics: Implications for Democracy and Development

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Abstract

Gender-based violence is a major socio-political issue in Nigeria that demands urgent attention. Against this backdrop, this study examined gender-based violence and its implications for the functioning of democracy and development in Nigeria. The study utilized secondary and relevant baseline data and Feminism theory was adopted as the study's theoretical lens. The findings of the study revealed that despite progress in gender equality efforts, Nigerian women continue to face physical, sexual, psychological, economic and cyber violence that hinder their involvement in political processes. The findings further revealed that the most dominant forms of gender-based violence are those related to elections. Additionally, it was found that gender-based violence has become a major setback to women's political participation and this has serious implications for the functioning of democracy and development in Nigeria. It was also discovered that the intersection of ethnicity, class, and religion exacerbates the effects of gender-based violence. The study therefore recommends legislative and policy frameworks that will criminalize gender-based violence and mechanisms that will improve women's participation in politics.

Keywords: Gender-based violence ((GBV), Women, Nigeria, Political participation, Gender inequality

I. Introduction

Women's marginalization in Nigerian politics has grown extremely and poses a serious threat to the country's democracy. Although this is seen in all areas, it is particularly noticeable in their

low involvement as elected officials, party executives, and political appointees (Olugbemi, 2004). Due to severe self-reinforcing restrictions on gender participation and the lack of political opportunities for women, Nigeria's democratic transition since 1999 has raised concerns that politicize gender identity (Vanguard, 2011). When it comes to issues that Nigerian women have faced when entering the political sphere, gender-based violence comes out on top.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global issue that transcends borders, cultures, and socio-economic classes. In many societies, it manifests as a critical barrier to gender equality and the empowerment of women. In Nigeria, GBV has not only affected the lives of countless women but has also significantly impacted their participation in the political sphere (Jacob et al, 2023). GBV acts as both a cause and a consequence of the political exclusion of women. On one hand, the fear and reality of violence deter women from participating in politics. Women who venture into the political arena often face intimidation, harassment, and even physical assault, which discourage them from seeking or holding political office (Ibrahim & Salihu, 2020; World Health Organization 2002). The underrepresentation of women in politics perpetuates a cycle of violence, as the lack of female voices in decision-making processes means that issues affecting women, including GBV, are often neglected or inadequately addressed (Ekpenyong & Ikpe, 2022; Yusuf 2022; Watts & Zimmerman 2002; Ugowe 2022; Oshiname et al 2013; Strunk & Locke 2019).

In Nigeria, the political landscape is marked by a culture of violence and intimidation, which disproportionately affects women. During



electoral periods, women candidates and voters are often targeted by political thugs and opponents seeking to undermine their participation. A study by Onah and Odo (2021) found that female politicians in Nigeria are more likely to experience violence, including threats to their safety and that of their families, compared to their male counterparts. This violence is not only physical but also psychological, as women are subjected to sexist and derogatory remarks that question their competence and legitimacy as leaders (Olalekan, 2023).

Furthermore, the legal and institutional frameworks in Nigeria have been criticized for their inadequacy in protecting women from violence and ensuring their full participation in political life. While the Nigerian Constitution guarantees the right to participate in politics, the lack of specific provisions addressing gender-based violence in the political context leaves women vulnerable to various forms of abuse (Nwosu & Nnamdi, 2021). Additionally, the weak implementation of existing laws, such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act of 2015, has done little to curb the prevalence of GBV in the political arena (Afolabi & Adeoye, 2023; Pickard 2015).

Moreover, the marginalization of women in politics has broader implications for democratic governance and development in Nigeria. The exclusion of women from decision-making processes means that the needs and interests of half of the population are not adequately represented, leading to policies that are less inclusive and responsive to the challenges faced by women. As a result, issues such as gender-based violence, maternal health, and education for girls remain underfunded and under-prioritized (Babalola & Oladipo, 2023).

Whereas scholars like Babalola & Oladipo, 2023; Yusuf, Otufale 2013; 2022; Afolabi & Adeoye, 2023; and Olalekan, 2023 among others have considered various dimensions of GBV, this study differs from previous ones as it seeks to explore the complex dynamics of gender-based violence and how it exacerbates the marginalization of women in Nigerian politics and the overall implications for the functioning of democracy and development in Nigeria. Following this introduction, the remaining sections are divided into five parts: conceptual clarification, theoretical framework, methodology, gender-based violence in the context of Nigeria, impact and intersectionality of GBV and conclusion and recommendations.

Conceptualizing Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence is defined by the United Nations as "any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (UN Women, 2023). This broad definition encompasses a wide assortment of harmful practices, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, and early forced marriages, all of which are prevalent in Nigeria. GBV is not only a violation of human rights but also a significant obstacle to achieving gender equality, as it reinforces the subordination of women and perpetuates their exclusion from political and public life (Aina & Oyediran, 2022).

This definition contains some crucial components for comprehending gender-based violence. It's important to remember that violence can exist simply because there is a possibility of harm occurring; actual harm need not occur. It is crucial to distinguish violence from injury or harm that may arise from accidents or unintentional actions by emphasizing the intentional or purposeful use of force or power against another individual or group. The effects of violence on development and physical and mental health are taken into account; consequently, both the violent act and its effects are not always readily apparent.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a particular form of violence that has been defined as "violence that is committed against someone based on their gender identity, gender expression or perceived gender" (Cotter & Savage, 2019). Similarly, the European Commission's (2014, p. 47) Gender Equality in Sport: Proposal for Strategic Actions 2014–2020 provides the following definition: "violence directed against a person because of that person's gender (including gender identity/expression) or as violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately".

Given its prevalence in both developed and developing nations, GBV is acknowledged as a global human rights concern (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2019; Russo, 2019). Because it acknowledges gender inequality, particularly the historical dominance of men and women and girls' subordinate status in society that maintains an uneven balance of power, gender-based violence needs to be a separate and distinct category of violence (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2019; Russo, 2019; Watts & Zimmerman, 2002; Ogunipe & Adeniyi 2020). This male-dominated role in Western societies is unique to white men because men who identify as racialized, Indigenous,



or sexual minorities, as well as those with disabilities, are frequently victims of gender-based violence. Accordingly, women and girls who belong to equity-deserving groups make up the majority of GBV victims (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2019). Due to the influence of historical and cultural understandings, conceptualizations of gender-based violence are not universally understood or depicted (Hayhurst & del Socorro Cruz Centeno, 2019).

Theoretical framework

This study embraced feminist theory, which emphasizes the role of patriarchy in upholding women's oppression by examining the reinforcement of gender roles and inequalities through the conflict approach (Thompson, 2006). The four main categories of feminism are postmodern, liberal, Marxist, and radical. However, liberal feminism provides a useful framework for analyzing the problems of violence against women in Nigerian politics. The liberal feminist theory holds that gender discrimination harms both men and women and that society's culture and values—rather than its institutions and structures—are the cause of gender inequality. Accordingly, rigid expectations of men and women are produced by socialization into gender roles (Thompson, 2006).

The liberal political philosophy of the Enlightenment age, which was based on the fundamental concepts of democracy, equality, freedom, and universal rights, is where the theory originates (Tong, 2009). Therefore, Liberal Feminists do not support radical changes in a democratic context as a remedy for gender discrimination, in contrast to Radical Feminists. Rather, they support specific modifications, like laws and constitutional amendments, to the current political system to promote gender parity in all aspects. The main goal which is the focus of this study is to fully engage women in the development process by improving their share of income, employment, and resource distribution, as well as by significantly improving their living conditions and

their participation in politics without violence (Peet and Hartwick, 2009; Norris & Inglehart 2004).

II. Methodology

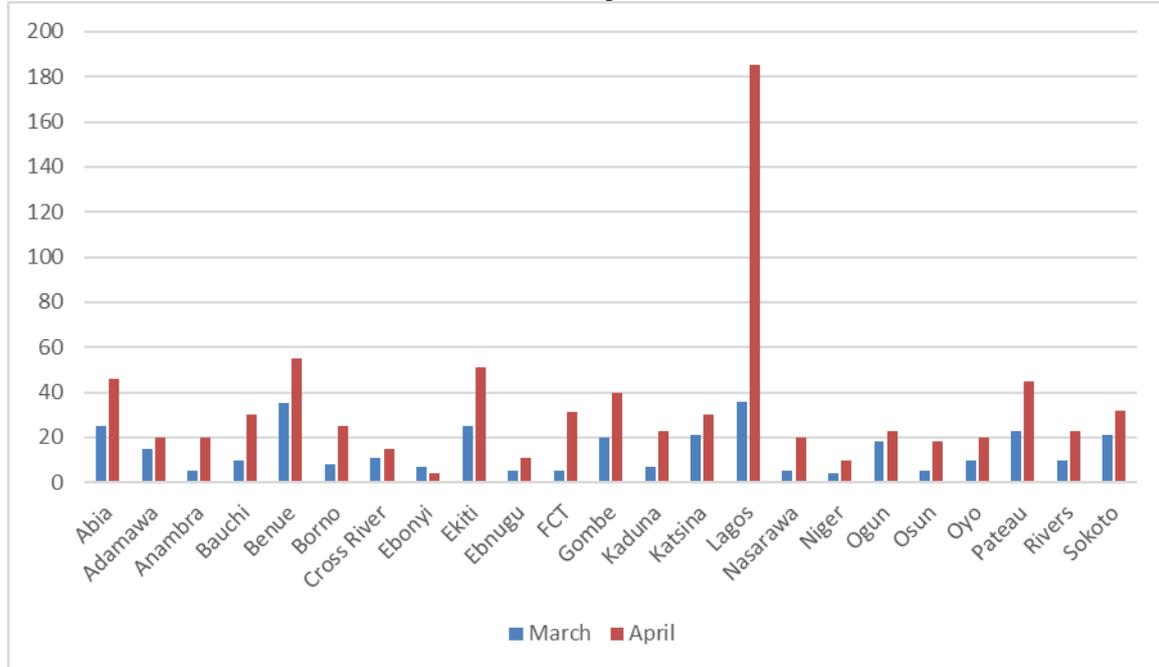
In order to address gender-based violence and its consequences for the growth and operation of Nigerian democracy, this study used both qualitative and baseline data. The qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis. The causes and remedies for this recurring phenomenon in our political history were also examined using literary excerpts. Content analysis is defined as "the systematic analysis of the content of a text (regarding who says what, to whom, why, and to what extent and with what effect)" Bhattacharjee (2012:115).

Gender-based Violence in the Nigerian Context

Most Nigerian women have experienced gender-based violence. The UN (2020) states that the increase in GBV in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic poses a serious threat to women's and girls' lives and has a significant effect on their opportunities and life paths. These effects have the potential to split communities. The majority of Nigerian women, according to Airaoje et al (2022), have experienced GBV, which includes forced marriage, early childhood marriage, rape, physical and verbal abuse, denial of food, and incest. In Nigeria, gender-based violence is a major public health and human rights issue, claims Okwundu (2017). The two most common forms of gender-based violence in Nigeria are rape and intimate partner violence (IPV). In Nigeria, it is common to justify beating a wife. This is worsened by the poor implementation of policies against GBV in Nigeria (Okwundu, 2017; Adetokunbo & Adekoya (2023)). According to the UN (2020), gender-based violence recorded a sharp increase across Nigerian states during the COVID-19 lockdown with Lagos being the most affected. This can be illuminated in the data in Fig. 1 below:



Figure 1: Increased Number of Reported Cases of Gender-Based Violence from 23 States in Nigeria Between March and April 2020:



Source: (UN, 2020)

According to UNEFPA (quoted in Okwundu, 2017), insurgent activity is causing the incidence of GBV in Nigeria to rise, particularly in the northeastern regions. According to the same source, by the time they are 15, roughly three out of ten Nigerian women have been victims of physical abuse. In Nigerian society and among victims, there is a great deal of silence surrounding GBV issues. About 47% of women in the Niger Delta would defend intimate partner violence (IPV) for at least one or two reasons, according to Antai and Antai (2009). The most common ones are going out without telling the husband, neglecting the children, fighting with him, refusing to have sex with him, and burning food.

Similarly, Iliasu et al. (2011) noted that alcoholism and drug abuse are contributing factors to gender-based violence. Reporting rape is stigmatized in Nigeria, which frequently encourages gender-based violence, particularly forced sex (rape) (Oshiname et al, 2013). According to Okwundu (2017), there are three main types of gender-based violence in Nigeria: physical, sexual, and psychological. These types of violence can occur at the state, community, and domestic levels.

Impact of Gender-Based Violence on Women's Political Participation in Nigeria

The impact of gender-based violence especially in the political arena on women's political participation in Nigeria has been widespread. However, many occurrences of violence against women in politics have been under-reported by the media, this notwithstanding, scholars have offered empirical evidence on the role of gender-based violence on women's political participation in particular and democracy in general. According to Ameh (2023), gender-based violence has a significant, often devastating impact on women's political participation and these manifest in the form of reduced representation, marginalization in decision making, psychological and emotional trauma, deterrence in future participation, drawback to the gains of gender equality efforts, cyber violence and reduced online participation and overall undermining of democratic values.

Ibizugbe (2023) posits that women who comprise half the population will withdraw from participating in political processes because of the fear of violence. Their perspectives and interests will not be factored in, in policy making. Therefore, decision-making will be skewed in the favour of men only. This corroborates with the views of Jannamike, (2023) who maintained that women often withdraw from running for office or participating in political activities due to threat of violence, fear of physical harm, harassment, or even



death. Gender-based violence reduces the number of women willing to contest elections or pursue leadership positions within political parties and government institutions thereby leading to a wider gap of gender inequality in the political space. Kelly (2019) opined that exposure to constant verbal abuse, threats and cyberbullying are major causes of long-lasting psychological trauma, which include depression, anxiety and loss of confidence which many female Nigerian politicians face, this is often in addition to threats to personal lives and families of female politicians. According to Arum et al (2024), democracy's core principle is popular participation, where this is under threat, it becomes a dangerous trap for the overall democracy and development of a state. They further argued that the exclusion of women from politics due to GBV undermines democratic ideals of equal representation and participation, therefore reducing the legitimacy of democratic institutions and perpetuating inequality. Jimoh (2023) pointed out another crucial dimension of the impact of GBV on women's political participation as he identified fear of stigmatization and lack of role models as a major setback to upcoming women politicians. UN Women (2018) submitted that violence against women in politics would deprive women of their political rights while they will be underrepresented in the process of decision-making. Thus, gender-based violence fosters violation of human rights in Nigeria.

Intersectionality: The Role of Ethnicity, Class, and Religion

According to Fadare (2023), the intersection between class, ethnicity and religion in the Nigerian social system has reinforced gender-based violence and gender inequalities. Thus, these intersections have an overarching impact on women's political participation in the prism of gender-based violence. Folorunso–Francis (2023), identified that during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, women from minority ethnic groups faced more gender-based violence than those from majority ethnic groups. He further noted that women from Tiv, Ogoni, and Fulani have the lowest number of women aspirants and election winners and that ethnic conflicts amplify gender-based violence, especially in conflict-prone areas like the Northern region and the Niger Delta. Women politicians from minority groups often face a greater threat of violence in regions dominated by other ethnic groups (Fadare, 2023; Enyioko 2021; Ezeigbo 2023; Garcia-Moreno et al 2005; Hayhurst et al 2019; Henry 2018; Ishola 2016; Krug et al 2002; Mergaert

et al 2016; Miller-Perrin & Perrin 2013; Msheila 2021).

Adeleye et al (2014) argue that women from lower socio-economic classes often face greater difficulties in accessing political power and gender-based violence acts as a further barrier. Ibokessien, (2020) posits that religion is a crucial factor in Nigeria, especially with the dominance of Islam in the North and Christianity in the South. This often reinforces patriarchal essentialism that limits women's political participation. Ibokessien further noted that particularly in northern Nigeria women find it challenging to engage in politics due to conservative religious views on gender roles because sometimes a violent approach is used to implement religious beliefs. Indeed, the net effects of these overlapping factors of ethnicity, religion, and class on gender-based violence have compounded the vulnerabilities of Nigeria's female politicians belonging to marginalized ethnic groups, economically disadvantaged groups and minority religious groups (Atewelogun et al, 2016; Adigun et al 2024; Akintoye 2023; Al-Alosi 2017; Antai & Antai 2009; Brackenridge et al 2010; Calub 2015).

Hyde et al (2020) opined that the combined effects of gender, ethnicity, class and religion create an endemic form of gender-based violence which may be difficult to eliminate through policies. Indeed, the intersectionality of ethnicity, gender-based violence, class and religion has increased the level of underrepresentation of women in political and leadership roles in Nigeria (Arum et al, 2024). According to Fajana et al (2011), ethnicity and religion are very important when conceptualizing inequalities and the praxis of violence faced by women, and the main drivers of cultural stereotyping of women as "inferior" humans as well as the limited access to justice by women, especially those from the lower class. Indeed, the crux of the argument from these empirical studies is that the intersection of ethnicity, class and religion increases the effects of gender-based violence on women's political participation.

III. Conclusion and recommendations

From the foregoing, Gender-based violence is a major socio-political issue in Nigeria, it appears more widespread in the political arena and has serious implications for the development and functioning of democracy in Nigeria. To effectively combat gender-based violence in Nigerian politics, a comprehensive approach is required. This includes but is not limited to legislative reforms, financial support, capacity-building initiatives, and targeted interventions for marginalized women are essential



in this regard. Moreover, the active involvement of civil society, international organizations, and the media will ensure that policies are effectively implemented, monitored, and enforced. These efforts will help create a safer, more inclusive political space for women, fostering democratic governance and gender equality in Nigeria.

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