



THE STATE OF ONLINE GENDER  
BASED VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA:  
*A Case Study of Women Rights Defenders*

## Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
The impact of OGBV on Women and Girls is varied.....	13
<b>Research Methodology/Design</b> .....	17
<b>Study Site</b> .....	18
<b>Study Participants</b> .....	19
Study Analysis.....	19
<b>How the Current and Evolving Online Civic Space Affects Women and Girls</b> .....	25
<b>Causes Championed by Survivors of OGBV</b> .....	30
<b>Current Strategies : Addressing OGBV</b> .....	32
<b>Existing Response within the Civil Society Organization Space – (funding, resources, initiatives, etc.)</b> .....	35
<b>Legal &amp; Policy Frameworks for Addressing OGBV in Nigeria: Realities &amp; Gaps</b> .....	39
<b>Gaps in Legal and Policy Frameworks</b> .....	42
<b>Frequency of media reporting on OGBV and TFGBV</b> .....	50
<b>What Women Social Justice Crusaders experience during online engagements</b> .....	50
<b>Impact of OGBV on self-identifying Feminists</b> .....	53
<b>Findings from Social Media Platforms</b> .....	57
<b>Statistical analysis of types of OGBV</b> .....	57
<b>Ongoing Incidents of OGBV</b> .....	59
<b>Follow-Up Actions</b> .....	61
<b>Trends, Observations, and Lessons</b> .....	63
Observations and Lessons.....	66
Under-reporting.....	71
Engagement with Social Media Platforms to Address Online Gender-Based Violence.....	72
Organizational Barriers to Supporting Survivors of OGBV.....	73
<b>Suggested best practices and strategies for OGBV Prevention and response</b> .....	75
Recommendations.....	78
Conclusion.....	82

## Executive Summary

The Center for Redefining Alternative Civic Engagement for Africa (RACE Africa), with support from the Joint Civic Defence Fund (JDCF), conducted this study into the state of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) in Nigeria. This research investigates the growing issue of OGBV in Nigeria, mainly focusing on women human rights defenders.

As internet access expands, so too does the prevalence of harmful behaviors like cyberbullying, doxing, cyberstalking, and non-consensual sharing of intimate content, all of which disproportionately affect women. The study explores the experiences of women's rights defenders who actively leverage social media platforms to push their campaigns and messaging. Deploying a mixed method for data collection, RACE Africa the study documented over 200 cases of OGBV across platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, revealing that women in public spaces, especially those advocating for social justice, are frequent targets of abuse. Typical forms of OGBV observed include body shaming, slut shaming, sexist remarks, etc. These incidents not only harm the victims emotionally and psychologically but also threaten their safety and limit their participation in public discourse.

The research highlights gaps in legal protections and enforcement. Despite Nigeria's Cybercrime Act 2015 and Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP Act), laws specific to online violence against women remain underdeveloped. The lack of legal clarity and the challenges in enforcing existing laws mean perpetrators evade accountability. Additionally, social media platforms offer anonymity, which emboldens perpetrators and makes it difficult to track or stop ongoing abuse.

Key findings show that women human rights defenders, feminists, and women in politics are particularly vulnerable to OGBV and such vulnerability are accentuated during specific periods such as elections. The study also emphasizes the underreporting of OGBV, partly due to a lack of awareness about what constitutes this type of violence and the societal normalization of gender-based abuse.

The study suggests workable strategies for combating OGBV through the collaboration of various stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organizations, tech companies, and individuals who must work together to bolster online safety, empower survivors, and ensure perpetrator accountability. As provided in the study, this multifaceted approach requires sustained investment in prevention, response mechanisms, and support services. Stakeholders' initiatives should be tailored to address the specific needs of diverse communities, prioritizing gender equality and digital rights and ensuring a safe online environment for all.

In summary, addressing OGBV is essential for protecting women online and promoting broader human rights and gender equality. Concerted efforts from multiple stakeholders are needed to ensure that digital spaces become safer and more inclusive for everyone.

## CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

The United Nations defines gender-based violence as 'any violence directed against a person because of their gender.' While anyone can be a victim of gender-based violence, many victims are women and girls, leading to the term being used interchangeably with "violence against women."

Nigeria, like many African countries, records high rates of gender-based violence, primarily attributed to its deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, socio-cultural norms, religious tenets, and misogyny. As digital technologies and social media platforms have become integral to daily life, they have also emerged as significant arenas for the manifestation of gender-based violence. This new breed of gender-based violence, perpetrated online, is what is termed Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV). Its frequent occurrence and the dangers to the physical and mental health of Nigerian women and girls necessitate this research.

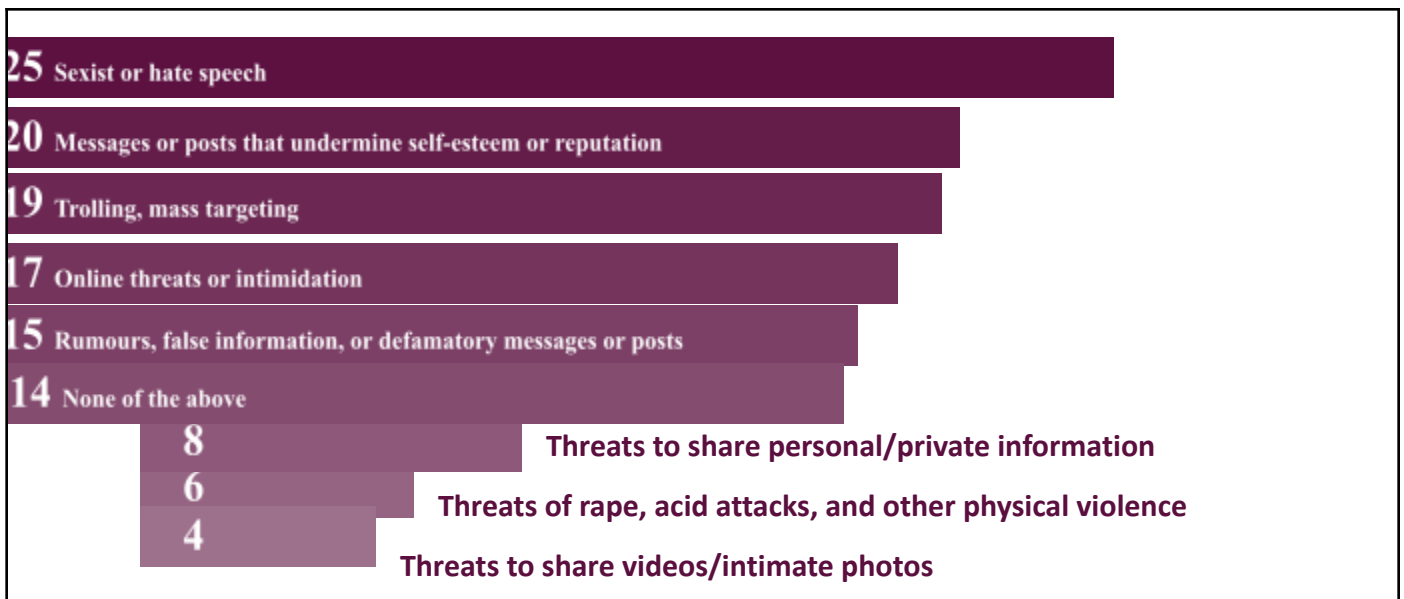
In 2018, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) are more vulnerable to OGBV. He explained that online violence and

abuse are inflicted to reduce the credibility of WHRDs and decrease their presence in public spaces. Other panelists at the event at which his remarks were made noted that OGBV has a direct impact on the human rights of WHRDs. For instance, online violence reduces one’s freedom of expression and participation in public discourse. Other studies concerning the types and impacts of online abuse experienced by WHRDs have made similar observations. One of the earliest studies, conducted by the Association for Progressive Communications in 2013, found that more than 51 percent of individuals surveyed had received “violent messages, threats or offensive comments.”

In another study focused on the Indo-Pacific region, among 115 activists surveyed, predominantly identifying as women, a staggering 78.3 percent disclosed experiencing online violence. The study noted that the most common forms were the receipt of sexist, racist, and homophobic messages, followed by direct threats of attacks.<sup>1</sup>

**The figure below highlights the types of OGBV experienced by survey respondents in the study.**

*As a woman human rights defender, have you ever been subjected to any of the following behaviors over the Internet? Please select all that apply.*



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Online-Gender-Based-Violence-report-final.pdf>

**Data extracted from ONLINE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE And Its Impact on the Civic Freedoms of Women Human Rights Defenders in the Indo-Pacific Report<sup>2</sup>**

**Amb Abdulrahman Yahaya**  
@cardinalabdul

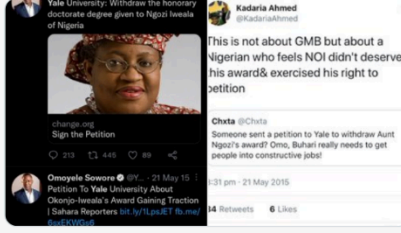
Replying to @KadariaAhmed

Kadaria, you converted to Christianity in London. I was appalled when I heard her describing herself as a passionate citizen of Zamfara. By Islamic tenets, Kadaria is a walking corpse. She's supposed to have been killed as an apostate. She's a condemned soul.

8:43 · 11 Apr 19 · Twitter for Android

**Aji Bussu Onye Mpiawa azu** @AfamDeluxo · Jun 24, 2023

Today is a good day to remind y'all how in 2015, Agbado peasants, BMC, & some of these criminals masquerading as intellectuals wrote a petition to the Uni of Yale to withdraw the honorary doctorate conferred to Madame Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. Today, they want validation from her. 🤔



**Yale University: Withdraw the honorary doctorate degree given to Ngozi Iweala of Nigeria**

**Kadaria Ahmed** @KadariaAhmed

This is not about GMB but about a Nigerian who feels NOI didn't deserve his award & exercised his right to petition

**Chxta** @Chxta

Someone sent a petition to Yale to withdraw Aunt Ngozi's award? Omo, Buhari really needs to get people into constructive jobs!

11:31 pm · 21 May 2015

68 Retweets · 6 Likes

**ochi abu uto** @MadukaKOB


@kadariaAhmed have always been a bitter woman, a super hypocrite. Went about every TV and radio screaming 25% Abuja votes before the election, now she has hibernated.

9:07 AM · Jun 24, 2023 · 909 Views

**Vanguard Newspapers** @vanguardnews - Feb 27

A mid drama played out during Nigeria's Super Falcons Olympics qualifiers clash against Cameroon on Monday.

Suspecting foul play, Cameroon defender Claudine Falonne Mefometou attempted to make contact with the net in Nigeria's goal in a bid to destroy the potency of whatever



**Do you think black magic works in football?**

www.vanguardngr.com

**Editor22** @SURUKAL22

Where is #kadariaahmed, another ethnic bigot of a woman, she only surfaces during elections

5:14 PM · Feb 27, 2024 · 1,267 Views

**Nelo** @NelOsuji · Jul 17, 2023

Kadaria has been silent since the drug lord failed to get 25% in Abuja, I remember her breaking down this important requirement before the elections. How come we have an unconstitutional president and this very loud woman is silent? 25% in #Abuja is sacrosanct!

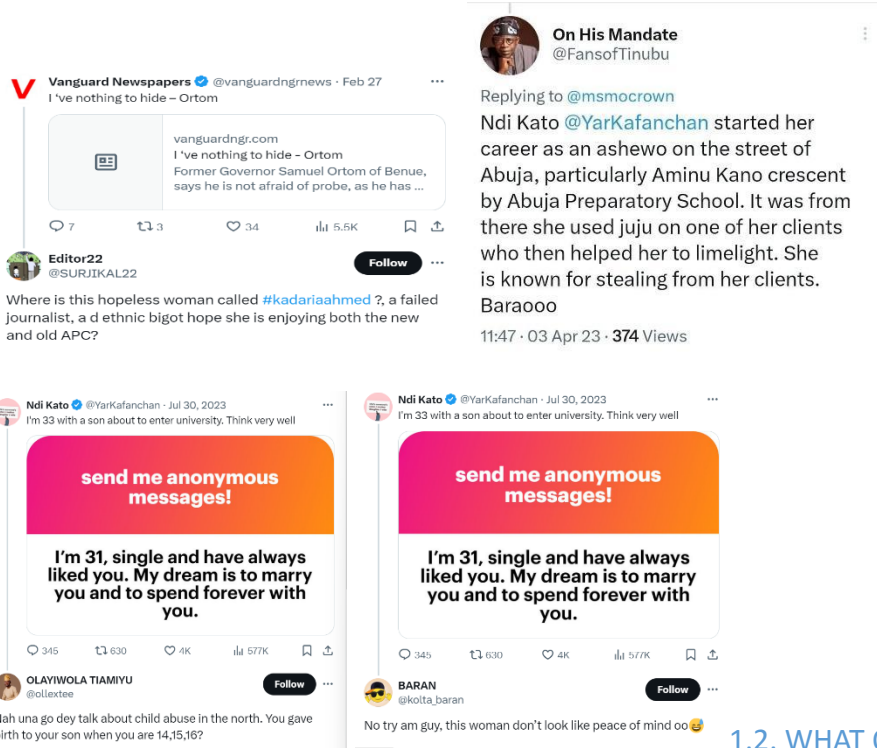
100 Retweets · 1.2K Retweets · 2.2K Likes · 92K Views

**Dr. O** @DrOaikhena

What are you expecting from the loudmouthed @KadariaAhmed? Her mouth is only loud when it comes to people who don't share same tribal or religious affiliations with her. Did she say "pim" all through @MBuhari's abysmal govt of killings even in her own State? Forget her.

4:17 PM · Jul 17, 2023 · 3,198 Views

<sup>2</sup> Supra



## 1.2. WHAT OUR RESEARCH IS ABOUT

A vibrant civic space is one of the indicators of a healthy democracy, and restrictions on the civic space typically arise from tensions between duty-bearers intent on blunting the force of citizen's criticism, scrutiny, and demands for accountability in governance and use of power and citizens intent on engaging on all issues they consider important.

Nigerian women have a long history of organizing around issues that affect them. The most successful and well-known examples include the Aba Women's War, Abeokuta Women's Revolt, Women in Nigeria (WIN), MarketMarch, Bring Back Our Girls, #WomenOccupyNASS, and women's general involvement in the struggle to end military rule and deepen democracy since independence. In recent years, The Internet has opened more opportunities for women to organize. However, the culture of intolerance and gender-based violence has seeped into social media/online spaces, making it easier in some respects to commit gender-based crimes and promote gender-based violence (GBV). Consequently, even though women are starting to organize or campaign more using social media, it has become an unsafe space for women and is gradually stifling women's voices.

Research indicates that the anonymity of social media encourages people to say things and act out in ways they would not in person. Other research suggests that online rage is often carried into the real world, where threats are made good with the ease. As it becomes easier to commit gender-based crimes online, e.g., cyberbullying, cyber stalking, deep fakes, sexploitation, blackmail, and threats of rape and murder, this has contributed to offline violence and the deepening of a permissive culture where verbal and physical violence against women and girls is normalized.

Despite the existence of laws such as the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) law, Cyber Crimes Act (2015), Penal Code, and Criminal Code, most cases of GBV, either online or offline, go unreported. Laws with more robust protections for online privacy might be required, but more is needed to address the challenges of enforcement or society's permissiveness.

Women, particularly young women between the ages of 25 and 35, have been active over the last 15 years in some of the most essential movements in Nigeria, i.e., Occupy Nigeria (2012), the Bring Back Our Girls campaign (2014), and ENDSARs (2020) and Secure Our Lives (2022) #WomenOccupyNASS (2023). The Feminist Coalition (FemCo) played a key role during ENDSAR's organizing to raise funds and social media visibility and provide protesters with food, tents, and financial, medical, and legal aid.

Women's participation in social justice movements has not gone unnoticed or unpunished; there are always costs to citizens' organized protests for justice, rights, and good governance. Although the resultant costs to the persons of women's and girls' participation in campaigns have not received as much media coverage, following the success of ENDSARS, there were reports about the repercussions faced by the most visible members of the movement<sup>3</sup>. Such repercussions include freezing organizations and personal bank accounts, threats to their person and family members, passport seizure by Nigerian Immigration, and denial of the right

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<sup>3</sup> Two interview Respondents shared anecdotes on the repercussions faced.



to travel. Some had to relocate, temporarily and permanently, out of the country. For instance, Catherine Udeh, also known as DJ Switch, felt compelled to leave Nigeria because she filmed and broadcast live military activities at the Lekki Toll Gate on 20 October 2020. There are multiple stories of female protesters arrested, beaten, abused, and humiliated by the police during ENDSARs and after.

Consequently, as part of protecting the civic space, RACE Africa was commissioned to assess the impact of OGBV and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) on women's online and offline activism, their lives, and their continued online engagement on political and social justice issues. It is essential, as the space for civic engagement is evolving in Nigeria and across the world due to various factors, including a rise in authoritarianism, polarization, artificial intelligence, and a fragmented media landscape, to study and understand the magnitude and complexity of the personal costs of women's involvement in advocacy and social campaigns. In light of increased knowledge of OGBV and TFGBV, RACE Africa wants to understand what is changing about how women and girls engage to better serve the civil society community by mitigating risks, enhancing opportunities, and being proactive about the future of citizens' engagement.

- Specifically, the study explored questions around women's online experiences on the front line of organizing, and how their experiences have influenced their engagement in the terrestrial civic space. Secondly, the study interrogated how online harassment, experienced or witnessed have influenced women's engagement on political and social issues and civic space.

The core objective of the study is to deepen the understanding of the impact of OGBV and TFGBV on women's participation in the civic space in Nigeria and provide actionable insights for stakeholders and policymakers.

### *1.3. Research Methodology/Design*

This study employs an exploratory research design, which facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. This approach establishes a robust foundation for subsequent investigations into more specific aspects of the subject of OGBV. The inherent flexibility of exploratory research allows for adaptability throughout the data collection process, enhancing the study's ability to capture nuanced insights and emerging patterns.

#### *1.3.1. Data Collection Methods and Tools*

A mixed-method approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, was employed to ensure comprehensive data collection. In-depth interviews (IDIs), key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to capture nuanced, contextual data. Complementing these traditional methods, digital ethnography was also performed across five major social media platforms in Nigeria. Substantial datasets were obtained from Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, while data yield from WhatsApp and Facebook was comparatively limited.

All data collection processes were strictly adhered to ethical standards, with informed consent obtained from participants for each interview. Key stakeholders were interviewed both physically and online. The focus group discussions provided a platform for frontline advocates, women's rights activists, and other relevant stakeholders to share personal experiences, promoting peer learning and knowledge exchange. The interviews facilitated an in-depth exploration of individual perspectives on the impact of OGBV and highlighted successful advocacy efforts in driving social change.

### *1.3.2. Study Participants*

The study engaged respondents from diverse regions, including the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Lagos, Kaduna, Kano, Benue, Plateau, Osun, and Nassarawa States. A total of sixty-two (62) participants were involved in six focus group sessions, representing a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including human rights defenders, government organizations, frontline responders, independent consultants, journalists, feminists, male advocates, and women survivors of OGBV from both Northern and Southern Nigeria. Additionally, RACE conducted in-depth discussions with thirteen (13) key informants, whose social media activities reflect a significant presence of OGBV, including women's rights defenders, practitioners, and activists.

### **1.3.3. Study Site for Digital Ethnography**

- (I) **Facebook:** Like WhatsApp, Facebook is a widely used social media platform and is a significant site for OGBV. The platform's public and semi-public nature allows a broad audience to witness and participate in the abuse, making the impact particularly pervasive and damaging. However, retrieving data on incidents proved difficult for two reasons. Firstly, most content on the platform is restricted to only the audience following the author of such content. Secondly, the last few years have witnessed a considerable reduction in active engagement by the Nigerian populace on Facebook, thereby reducing the recorded incidents of OGBV.

Nonetheless, respondents in the study reported facing a range of OGBV behaviors, including harassment, cyberstalking, and non-consensual sharing of personal information on Facebook. Public comments, private messages, and participation in Facebook groups can all be avenues through which OGBV is perpetrated, with women frequently targeted for their gender, opinions, and activism.

- (II) **Twitter (now X):** Twitter's public and highly interactive environment makes it the most prominent source for our data on OGBV. The platform's structure allows for rapid engagement and response, making incidents of abuse obvious and traceable. Nigerian women on X, especially those who are public figures, activists, or vocal

about social issues, are often subjected to severe forms of OGBV. This includes harassment, threats, doxing, and coordinated trolling, all of which can have profound psychological and emotional impacts.

X's peculiarities contribute to the high incidence of OGBV, including its hashtag functionality, which encourages brevity and the viral spread of content. Abusive comments and threads can quickly gain traction, with hashtags often being hijacked to target individuals or groups. The platform's algorithm can inadvertently amplify harmful content, as tweets with high engagement are likely to be promoted regardless of their nature. The ease of creating anonymous accounts further emboldens perpetrators, who can evade accountability and continue their abusive behavior without repercussions.

Women on Twitter frequently face backlash for their opinions, with comments ranging from dismissive and belittling remarks to explicit threats of violence. This environment fosters a culture of hostility and fear, where women must constantly navigate the potential for abuse.

(III) **Instagram and TikTok:** Due to their visual-centric nature, the rate of OGBV is particularly alarming on these two platforms. The content on these social media sites focuses on images and videos, creating unique vulnerabilities for users, especially women and girls. These platforms are designed to highlight personal content, and the emphasis on physical appearance, lifestyle, and individual expression often leads to heightened scrutiny, hypersexualization, and objectification of women.

On Instagram, for instance, where curated images and videos (reels) are the norm, women frequently face body-shaming, slut-shaming, shaming, and sexual objectification. Similarly, TikTok's short-form video format exposes women to a barrage of misogynistic comments.

The culture on Instagram and TikTok also fosters a competitive environment where users constantly seek validation through likes, comments, and reposts. This has the

unfortunate side effect of amplifying OGBV, as abusers take advantage of the public nature of these platforms to target women with degrading and harmful remarks, often under the guise of humor or unsolicited advice.

Algorithms that prioritize trending content can inadvertently amplify harmful videos or comments, spreading OGBV to a broader audience and normalizing abusive behavior as part of the platform's culture.

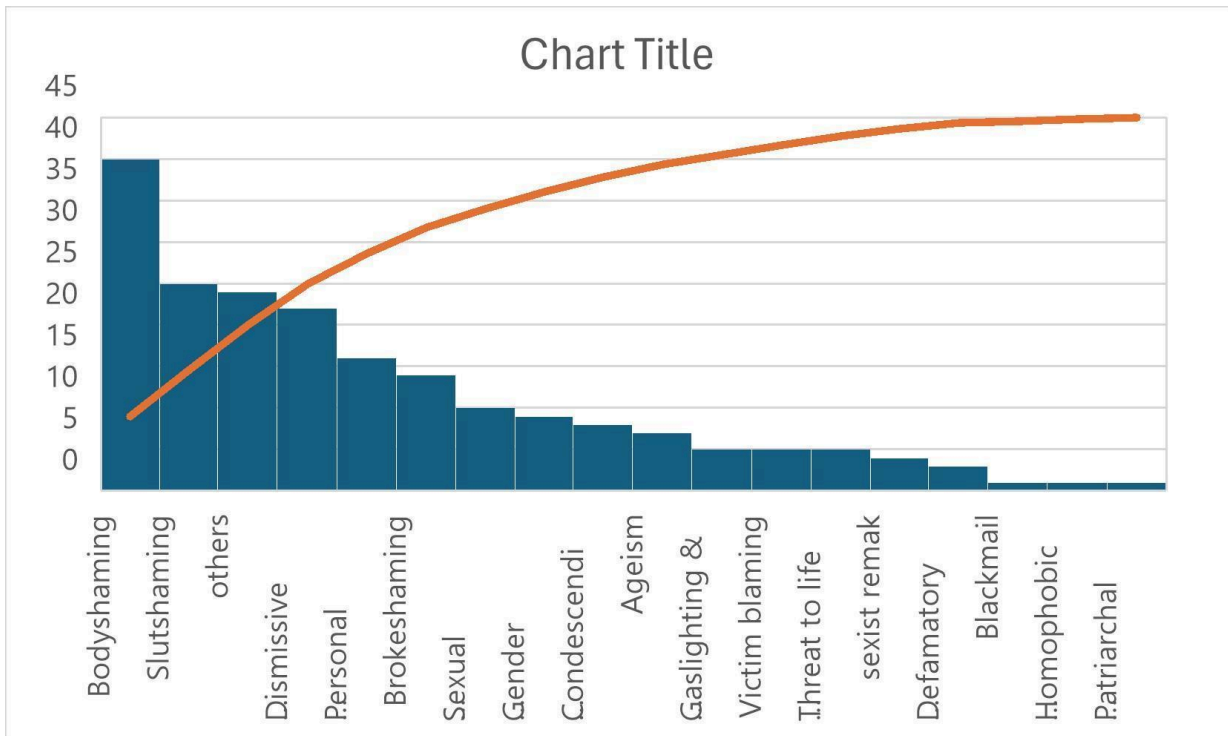
## **CHAPTER TWO - STUDY FINDINGS**

### **2.1. Findings from Social Media Platforms**

Research and analysis of 200 documented cases of OGBV across Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok revealed that offensive remarks often involve body shaming, slut shaming, sexual objectification, broke shaming, gaslighting and victim-blaming, dismissive remarks, gender stereotyping, condescending remarks, personal attacks/ad hominem, victim blaming, threat to life or bodily harm, defamatory comment, blackmail, homophobic comments, patriarchal

norms enforcement, ageism, sexism and others. Instagram and TikTok were particularly prone to body-shaming and slut-shaming due to their visual content focus. Twitter exhibited a broader range of attacks, including personal insults and sexist remarks.

The bar chart below illustrates some of the most typical forms of violence perpetrated across social media.



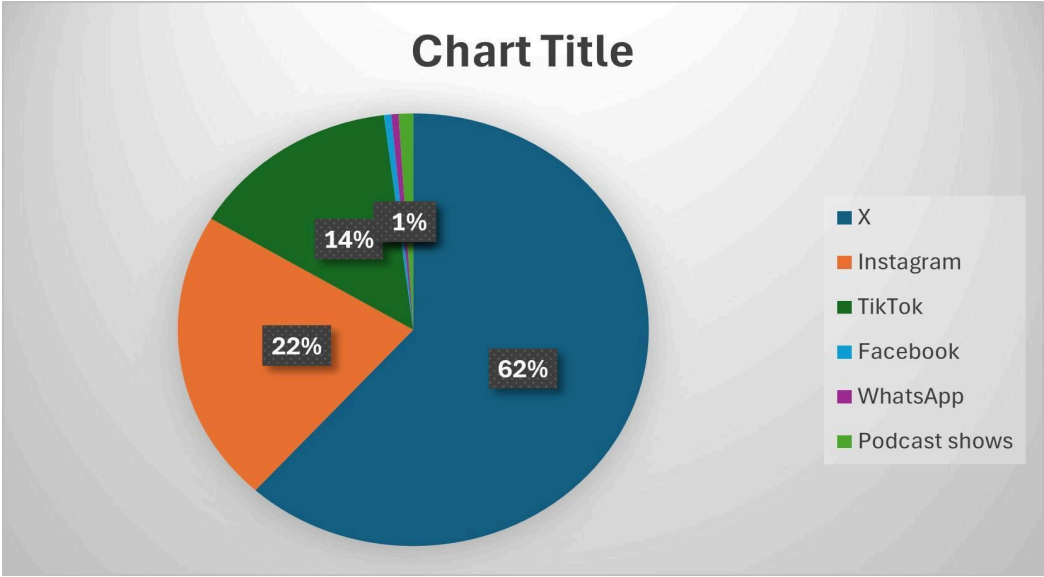
**Statistical analysis of types of OGBV**

Based on 200 instances, the breakdown for each type of abuse experienced online is as follows:

Body shaming: 20.0%	Slut shaming: 12.5%	Dismissive remark: 11.0%
Personal attack/ad hominem: 8.0%	Broke shaming: 7.0%	Sexual objectification: 5.0%

Gaslighting: 2.5%	Gender stereotyping: 4.5%	Condescending remark: 4.0%
Victim blaming: 2.5%	Threat to life or bodily harm: 2.5%	Defamatory comment: 1.5%
Blackmail: 0.5%	Homophobic comment: 0.5%	Patriarchal norms enforcement: 0.5%
Ageism: 3.5%	Others: 12.0%	

The chart below shows the distribution of OGBV data across the different platforms considered.



## 2.2. OGBV Prototypes

Specific OGBV experienced by these groups of individuals may include:

- **Harassment and Threats:** Women activists frequently face online harassment, including abusive messages, threats of violence, and intimidation
- **Doxing:** Perpetrators may engage in doxing, which involves publicly releasing personal information about activists, such as their home address or phone number, to incite harassment or physical harm.
- **Revenge Porn:** In some cases, women activists may be targeted with the non-consensual sharing of intimate images or videos, commonly known as revenge porn, as a means of humiliating and discrediting them.
- **False Information and Smear Campaigns:** Perpetrators may spread false information or launch smear campaigns against women activists, tarnishing their reputation and undermining their credibility as advocates for social justice causes
- **Online Stalking:** Women organizers may also experience online stalking, where individuals repeatedly monitor their online activity, invade their privacy, and engage in intrusive or threatening behavior.
- **Sexualized Abuse:** Women activists may be subjected to sexualized abuse and objectification online, including sexually explicit comments, unwanted advances, and degrading imagery or language.
- **Cyberbullying:** Cyberbullying tactics, ranging from rumors to mocking or excluding women activists from online spaces, can also be used to undermine their advocacy efforts and cause emotional distress. Activists consider cyberbullying to be the most common online risk that they are currently facing, and it takes place on social media, messaging platforms, and mobile phones. It is repeated and willful behavior aimed at scaring, angering, or shaming those who are targeted.
- **Manipulation or alteration of information and photos with the intent to malign:** This type of OGBV included the non-consensual dissemination of pictures and videos of a person, morphing, spreading rumors or false information with malicious intent, and misrepresenting facts or taking statements out of context.



- **Mass Trolling:** Mass trolling is characterized by frequent, consistent messages with sexual, and often degrading, connotations. It also involves comments attacking an individual's identity, including their gender. For instance, women have reported being bombarded with comments saying that they should be raped, describing the behavior of an ideal woman, criticizing their appearance or choice of clothing, or targeting their religion.
- **Identity theft:** Women who organize for social justice face fake social media profiling, where personal information and photos are used to reach out to partners and stakeholders under pretenses.
- **Sexual harassment** is the most common offline and online risk faced by women activists.

These forms of online gender-based violence not only harm individual activists but also have a chilling effect on women's participation in social justice movements and the public discourse on important issues; the aim is typically to discourage women's activism.

### 2.3. The impact of OGBV

- **It discourages women from participating in online spaces, including social media and other forums, thereby increasing the digital gender gap.** *".....It has always been hard to be a self-identifying feminist online because feminists face a lot of backlash..." (KING R11)*
- **Self-censorship** has enormous implications for women because it promotes a culture of silence. It leads to a situation where women cannot boldly express themselves and self-censor before expressing themselves online. This is precisely what abusers want: to keep women silent. This was also reported by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) to be a problem in 48 percent of cases of OGBV. Where OGBV involves female journalists, it becomes a massive problem for society as it is a direct attack on the freedom of information. Some research respondents recorded that:

*"... when you promote sexual reproductive health and rights, you get told that you're trying to bring out things that are not supposed to be in the open because*

*women are supposed to suffer in silence. People say on social media, 'Oh, you're not supposed to be talking about this.' 'Why are you promoting this?' 'You're not allowing girls or young people to have dignity...' (FGD IDI R5)*

- **Poor mental health** is a direct cause of psychological, mental, or emotional stress. According to RSF, 79 percent of harassed women suffer from anxiety and 49 percent fear for their life. According to OSCE:

*".....Online violence, including rape threats against women journalists, violates a range of human rights, including psychological, physical, and sexual integrity, the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, privacy, and autonomy. The right to be free from violence, discrimination, torture, and other cruel treatment, and the right to freedom of expression. Rape threats online result in, or are likely to result in, psychological harm that is manifested by depression, anxiety, and fear..."<sup>4</sup>*

- **Reputational Damage and Insecurity** lead to anxiety, paranoia, and fear for personal safety. OGBV results in reputational damage and encourages a silent culture among survivors.

Another critical issue and consequence of OGBV highlighted was the resultant mental health trauma and the increasing culture of silence in the online space, leading women to feel the need to hide in closed groups to speak for themselves, managing the fears of speaking online about their many challenges within the civic space. A respondent said:

*"While OGBV makes women and girls withdraw and reluctant to engage and be quiet online, which in a way is shutting down and closing the space for women to engage on critical issues, women have begun to grow tough skins and now openly*

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/f/522160\\_0.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/f/522160_0.pdf)

*identify as feminist. Social media has inspired many more people that the insults will not change anything." (KII NG R7)*

Another added:

*"Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society where women are more exposed to scorn and abuse. There is a constant group of men online who are always attacking women. OGBV makes people self-censor – this is disadvantageous because it's not about being careful about putting out facts and truths, but it's self-censorship that holds people back from engaging for fear of being abused and attacked; it's self-censorship driven by intimidation. OGBV leads to anxiety, depression, burnout, lack of motivation- huge psychological impact." (KII NG R9).*

While the online space has created an excellent avenue for women to further their work in some instances, the implication of OGBV by several feminists, particularly on their mental health, has resulted in women slowly reducing their voices in championing their rights.

*"The online space has been both positive and negative for women. Positive because online engagement gives young women a platform to share their views and speak about their work. It also connects people to opportunities in the SM space. However, it does not allow for critical conversations that foster system shifting that question power or engage public officials genuinely. Mostly, young feminists as a group are always targets of harassment by men, fellow women, and systems like the police, schools, and workspaces. As long as you are part of a collective or feminist collective, you are a target of animosity." (KII NG R10).*

These discourses that women push online were highlighted to include advocacy against femicide, environmental justice, reproductive health rights, and gender equality. However, these deep-rooted traditional and social beliefs invade the civic sphere, subjecting women who push these conversations to trolling and harassment without adequate protective measures from the platforms they utilize or from institutional safeguards. This reality is

gradually crippling reporting and escalating necessary situations, as women are now being careful not to offend men while fighting for their rights.

*"Young women are toeing the line; they are advocating, but without crossing the red lines, without offending men especially, and one way they do this is by only engaging in policy and again within peers. This way, they avoid Response, which is the most difficult part of advocacy, i.e., responding to survivors of SGBV. The reports are now 'bland' and stripped of the words indicating they are working on SGBV. They also don't speak about the experiences of victims but instead couch their advocacy without saying this was the situation." (KII NG R4)*

A notable repercussion of OGBV highlighted in this analysis is its exacerbation of the digital gender gap, dissuading more women from engaging online and harnessing the multitude of digital tools and technologies available in the digital era. Women live in perpetual fear of damage to reputation, professional derailment, and loss of funding for their work and their ability to lead good lives.

*"Women used to have the space to engage on issues particular to women, but now many don't want to do so in public spaces and would rather talk on closed WhatsApp groups. This makes it harder to share experiences and expand collaborative networks. Because OGBV is such a public spectacle sport, it leads to organizations wanting to stay away from targets of OGBV. Survivors of OGBV whose abuse has been particularly public and consistent get told, 'we don't want to taint our work/our reputation/ to disrupt our work' by CSOs, donors, multilateral, and others. This is an extra burden for women who face OGBV- they lose fellowships and funding, suffer damage to their professional reputation, and so on." (KII NG R9).*

And

*"The online space has presented women and girls in a different light that isn't positive. Everyone has something to say when a girl or woman is in the picture, and they often have nothing good to say. It is harder to be a self-identifying feminist online because you can't air your opinion or talk about a matter without a person (both men & women) tagging you names like bitter; so much name-calling and trolling." (KII NG R5)*

The costs of OGBV highlight the need to address OGBV through concerted efforts to raise awareness on the issue and find workable solutions to patriarchy. Some respondents also cited the importance of having legislative frameworks that clearly and specifically address issues of OGBV, adding that:

*"We do not only have issues of sex shaming and body shaming; we do have a whole lot of OGBV, and I think as the conversations go on, we can begin to look for solutions in these areas like legislative perspective and enforcement perspective on how to tackle these issues in our society." (FGD LS R7)*

## **2.4. Causes Championed by Survivors of OGBV**

Women advocating for social causes or identifying as feminists often face severe backlash, as their activism challenges the status quo and patriarchal norms. However, even those who do not engage in activism are not spared. Online vendors, for example, may receive violent comments or threats for simply promoting their products or services. This extends to professionals and children, who may encounter derogatory remarks or harmful content aimed at undermining their confidence and well-being.

Respondents' feedback accentuates the strategic use of social media platforms in advocating for social justice, gender equality, and human rights. Advocates can maximize their reach and impact by leveraging the unique features and audience demographics of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and TikTok. Social media's dynamic and interactive nature facilitates real-time engagement, campaign promotion, and information dissemination, making it an indispensable tool for modern advocacy efforts.

The respondents prefer Facebook and Instagram for their wider reach and control features.

Some opined:

*"I use my social media platform to create awareness around my work. I engage in issues of menstrual hygiene for girls, so whenever I carry these activities in a certain location, I post them on my social media platform. I mostly use Facebook and Instagram because they give me a wider view or audience reach." (FGD LS R2)*

Another said:

*"I engage on social media mainly through Instagram; however, I also use Twitter occasionally. I prefer Instagram because it's faster and less complicated. Also, unlike on Twitter, I can control who has access to my page. I like to share content on feminism, equality, social justice, LGBTIQ+ issues." (KII NG R2)*

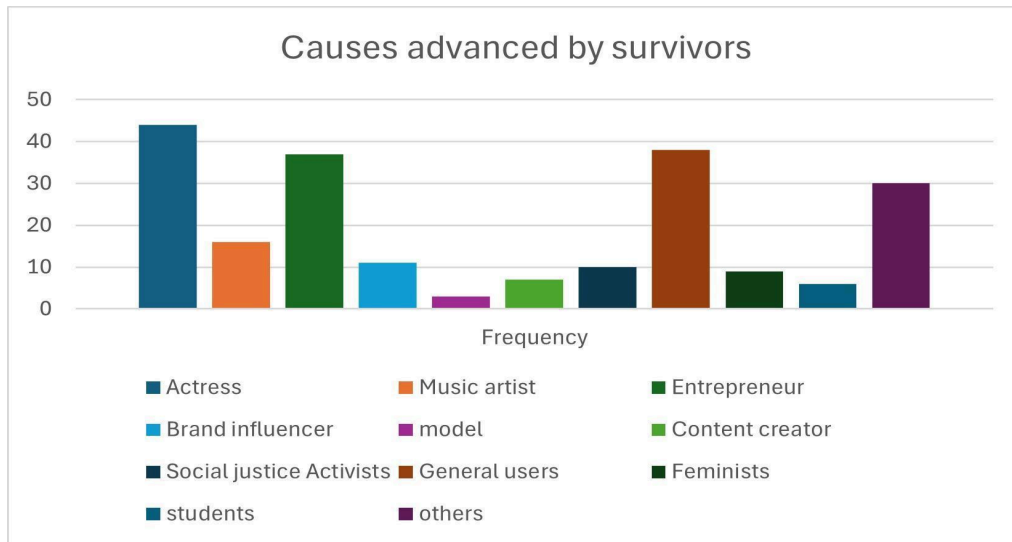
Some others preferred using Twitter for its immediacy and conversational nature.

*"I use Twitter most. I have an NGO, and I mostly post on Twitter and LinkedIn sensitization messages on GBV and posts of women and girls we rescue from domestic violence on my organizational and personal page. I use LinkedIn and Twitter. Also, I post about the things I like generally and the people I support on social media." (FGD LS R1)*

*"I led campaigns to advocate for girls' right to quality education in Maiduguri; the campaign was tagged "Madubi." The campaign was launched to increase awareness of access to education for the girl child. Using my Twitter space to promote the campaign led to a wider audience reach that later identified me as an influencer to promote gender equality in education." (FGD NN R6)*

*"Online advocacy concerning GBV cases is carried out via Twitter space so that content reaches a wider audience. Retweets have proven to foster wider reach. Part of the downside, however, is the lack of support from the male folk and persistent stigma around reporting an abusive spouse." (FGD NN R5)*

This strategic use of multiple platforms allows for a diversified approach to advocacy, maximizing engagement across different demographics.



However, the challenge arises when women step out of the traditional discourses expected of women. A respondent shared her sentiment thus:

*"I had seen on an Arewa group where a woman had posted that women should forget about feminist issues as women would always be under their fathers, and when their fathers are done with training them, they will hand them over to their husbands, who will handle them. And in the event of their husband's death, it falls on their brothers to keep taking care of them. So, whether women liked it or not, they would remain under a man. I saw comments from women saying "Yes" and "Tell them." So, the kind of conversations people want women to have online are about marriage, family, and issues that are traditional, and any division from these issues becomes a problem. (FGD ABJ R3)*

## 2.5. Current Strategies for addressing OGBV

Individuals, organizations, and governments in Nigeria have taken various actions to address OGBV as follows:

- **Legal Advocacy:** Activists and legal experts have advocated for stronger legal protections against online GBV and better enforcement of existing laws. This includes lobbying for the inclusion of provisions addressing cyberstalking, cyberbullying, and revenge porn in relevant legislation, as well as pushing for improved access to justice and support services for survivors. A women's rights organization, "Equality Now."<sup>5</sup> released a report in November 2021 calling for the end of sexual exploitation and abuse of women and girls online through increased regulations and accountability from governments and digital service providers.<sup>6</sup> Zainab Naseer Ahmad, a social media activist whose role is to influence people on social media, has raised the bar of activism and opened the doors for women to contribute their ideas and suggestions for societal development on social media platforms. From 2019 to the present, she has toiled through the toxic infiltrated space to support the development of beneficial government policies for the larger society in Kano State and beyond.<sup>7</sup>

Cynthia Mbamalu, the program director at YIAGA Africa, in a webinar organized by Plan International Nigeria in March 2021 to mark International Women's Day, used the medium to call for law enforcement by government agencies to deter would-be perpetrators of online violence against children and girls.<sup>8</sup>

- **Media Engagements:** The media is critical because of its ability to reach people at both top and grassroots levels and the capacity to create awareness on a particular issue by clearing up common misconceptions, sensitizing about its negativity, or sharing its importance. Organizations like CITAD have participated in T.V. and radio programs under the theme "Countering Gender Violence Online: Towards a Gender Digital Inclusion in Nigeria," which is targeted at amplifying voices about OGBV in Nigeria.
- **Government Interventions:** The Nigerian government has addressed online GBV through legislation, policy initiatives, and stakeholder collaborations. This includes

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<sup>5</sup>

<https://equalitynow.org/resource/ending-online-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-of-women-and-girls-a-call-for-international-standards/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/tips-to-help-women-girls-stay-safe-online/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://africachinareporting.com/women-in-nigerian-advancing-over-cyberbullying-on-social-media-platforms/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://plan-international.org/nigeria/news/2021/03/10/nigerian-activists-seek-laws-and-education-to-end-online-violence/>



enacting laws such as the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention) Act of 2015, which criminalizes various forms of online abuse and implements national action plans to combat gender-based violence, including online forms.

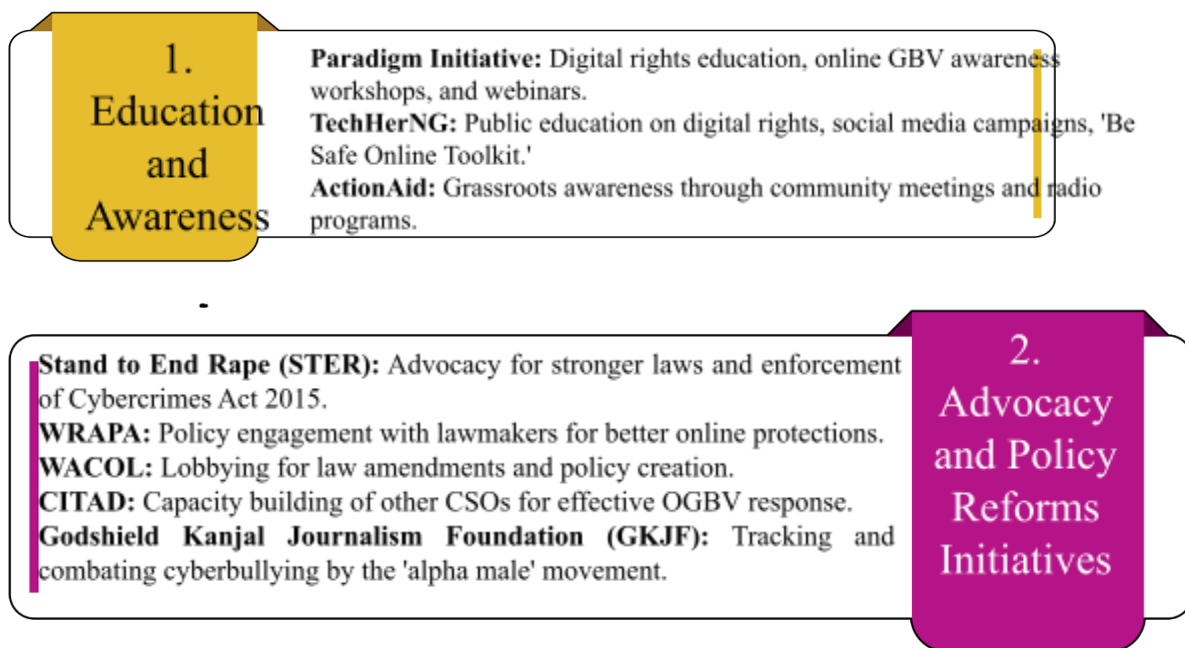
*"A lot of the cases my organization handled, especially regarding OGBV cases, have mostly been around cyberstalking, blackmail, online extortion, distribution of intimate images, which I think are the (3) three popular OGBV cases. My organization has partnered directly with the police commissioner, and blackmail cases are directly referred to the office of the Kano state police commissioner, and he takes swift action on cases of blackmail whenever such cases are brought before the office." (FGD NN R9)*

*"Lagos State has a pretty solid response system, including OGBV. I have done a great deal of work around GBV, including OGBV, that helps people report to the Domestic and sexual violence agency, which is very responsive." (FGD LS R3).*

- **Tech Industry Engagement:** Collaboration between government agencies, civil society organizations, and technology companies has led to initiatives to enhance online safety and combat online GBV. Tech companies have developed reporting mechanisms and tools to address abusive content while also working to improve platform policies and user education on online safety.
- **Capacity Building:** Training programs and capacity-building initiatives have been conducted to enhance the capacity of law enforcement agencies, judiciary personnel, and frontline responders to address online GBV effectively. This includes training on relevant laws and procedures, as well as skills development in digital forensics and victim support services.
- **Research and Data Collection:** Efforts have been made to improve understanding of online GBV through research studies, surveys, and data collection initiatives. This includes documenting the prevalence, nature, and impact of online abuse, as well as identifying gaps in knowledge and response efforts to inform evidence-based

interventions. For example, some of CITAD's research projects include "Towards a Gender Digital Inclusion Agenda for Nigeria, Promoting Greater Access to Internet for Female Students of Secondary Schools, Internet for Men? The Digital Marginalisation of Women in Northern Nigeria, Overcoming Gender-Based Digital Exclusion in Northern Nigeria: a strategy document".<sup>9</sup>

**2.5.1. Existing Response within the Civil Society Organization Space – (funding, resources, initiatives, etc.)**



<sup>9</sup> <https://www.citad.org/download/towards-a-gender-digital-inclusion-agenda-for-nigeria/>

### 3. Support Services

**Mirabel Centre:** Counseling services for OGBV victims.  
**WARIF:** Safe spaces and psychological support for online GBV victims.  
**Dorothy Njemanze Foundation:** Virtual assistance through helplines and social media support.

### 4. Legal Assistance

**FIDA Nigeria:** Pro bono legal support for OGBV victims, case filing assistance.

### 5. Capacity Building

**YIAGA Africa:** Digital literacy and safety training for women in leadership.  
**She Leads Africa:** Training sessions on digital safety, data protection, and online abuse management.  
**NWTF:** Online National Institute for Leadership and Ending Violence Against Women (NILEVAPP) training.  
**CITAD:** Resource provision and training for CSOs on supporting survivors.

### 6. Monitoring and Reporting

**GKJF:** Training GBV Tracker volunteers to monitor and report cyberbullying.  
**DEVATOP Centre for Africa Development:** TALKAM Phase 6 Project, tech-based monitoring of online sexual exploitation and abuse.

## 7. Technological Solutions

**TechHerNG:** ‘Kuram’ digital response platform for reporting digital violence.

**Gender Mobile:** ‘Campus Pal’ app for anonymous reporting and tracking of sexual harassment cases on campuses.

**The *FlagIt App*:** is a mobile application developed by AFF to report corruption, particularly the activities of rapists and cyberbullies in society.

These responses to Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) through the efforts of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in addressing the issue, advocating for victims, and pushing for policy changes.

The Paradigm Initiative and TechHerNG work to educate the public, especially women and girls, on their digital rights and the dangers of online GBV. They organize workshops, webinars, and social media campaigns to raise awareness about the forms, impacts, and legal implications of online GBV. TechHerNG hosts a digital response website designated to receive and tackle violence perpetrated in digital spaces. The initiative named ‘Kuram’ which translates to ‘keep me safe’ in Tiv Nigerian language, is designed to provide an avenue for women and other vulnerable groups to report cases of digital violence perpetrated against them. TechHer also developed the Be Safe Online Toolkit with support from the Digital Defenders Partnership (DDP) as part of its efforts to ensure the protection of women, girls, and other vulnerable groups from tech-facilitated gender-based violence. The toolkit was designed to create awareness of the vulnerabilities women and girls are exposed to when they go online. Using case studies, the toolkit shows users what to do when they experience violence online.<sup>10</sup>

Stand to End Rape (STER) and Women’s Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) advocate for stronger laws and policies to protect women and girls online. They engage with policymakers to push for the enforcement of existing laws like the Cybercrimes Act 2015, which criminalizes online harassment. Mirabel Centre and WARIF (Women at Risk International Foundation) provide counseling services to victims of online GBV. They offer safe spaces for victims to report incidents and receive psychological support.

<sup>10</sup> <https://kuramng.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/TechHer-Be-Safe-Online-Toolkit-1.pdf>

FIDA Nigeria (International Federation of Women Lawyers) provides legal support to victims of online GBV, helping them navigate the legal system to seek justice. They offer pro bono services and assist in filing cases against perpetrators. YIAGA Africa and She Leads Africa to conduct training sessions on digital literacy and safety, particularly for women in leadership, activism, and journalism. These sessions focus on how to protect personal data, manage online abuse, and safely engage in digital spaces.

Initiatives like those by CITAD (Centre for Information Technology and Development) focus on building the capacity of other CSOs to effectively respond to online GBV. They provide resources and training on how to support survivors and advocate for better online protections. The Nigerian Women Trust Fund (NWTF) hosts an online National Institute for Leadership and Ending Violence Against Women (NILEVAPP) which trains and conducts research to understand the scope and impact of online GBV in Nigeria against women running for office. They publish reports and data that inform advocacy and policy efforts.

Women Aid Collective (WACOL) lobbies policymakers to influence the creation and amendment of laws related to online GBV. They work closely with legislators to ensure that the legal framework in Nigeria adequately protects women and girls from digital violence. Some organizations monitor the implementation of laws and policies related to online GBV, ensuring that they are enforced effectively and advocating for improvements where necessary. ActionAid works with local communities to raise awareness about online GBV. Through community meetings, radio programs, and local outreach, they bring the conversation to the grassroots level, ensuring that rural and less-connected communities are not left behind.

In addition, Devatop Centre for Africa Development (DEVATOP), a CSO is implementing the TALKAM Phase 6 Project funded by the United States Embassy in Nigeria. The project is aimed at using technology, capacity strengthening, and campaign to counter OSEA, Sextortion, and online human trafficking (OHT) is seeking to contribute to breaking the culture of silence, strengthening the response system, and disrupting the activities of perpetrators in FCT, Plateau State, and Nasarawa State in Nigeria. Under the project, DEVATOP developed an online platform titled “**Talkam**” – an initiative targeting Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OSEA) and Sextortion reportage in Nigeria.

Similarly, in response to the alarming issues of sexual harassment, Gender Mobile in April 2021 launched a feature-rich mobile application called ‘**Campus Pal**’. The Campus Pal mobile app is a component of the Ford Foundation-supported Campus Initiative project. The project aimed at supporting tertiary Institutions to address sexual harassment from a policy, technological, and bystander intervention standpoint. The Campus Pal app has been designed primarily to enable users within the campus community to report and track cases of sexual harassment confidentially and anonymously, thus addressing the issue of under-reportage. It serves as a tool for data generation, case-tracking, information escrow, and perpetrator matching, and contains a learning center to learn about policies.<sup>11</sup>

A media nonprofit-based organization in Cross River State, Godshield Kanjal Journalism Foundation (GKJF) in 2023 launched an initiative to track cyberbullying of Nigerian single women by the ‘alpha male’ movement. The “Alpha Male Mentality” is a brotherhood of social media knights who mostly post disparaging comments about feminism and women. The initiative with the Codename GBV Tracker is aimed at tackling the trend of bullying of women on the internet by some group of pseudo-social media account operators under the aegis of ‘alpha males’. The foundation undertook to train many GBV Tracker volunteers who will track and monitor these social media accounts, report them, or call on the public to sign petitions against such accounts for a complete ban.<sup>12</sup>

SGBV service providers such as the Dorothy Njemanze Foundation, and Women at Risk International Foundation (WARIF), have links on their websites reassuring survivors that they would provide virtual assistance through 24-hour confidential helplines, and support services deployed via text messages and social media. Other initiatives include evidence-based research attributed to studies and surveys conducted on the subject matter by several CSOs and donor partners including the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, the United Nations Population Fund, UNWomen, etc.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gendermobile.org/blog/post-9e0b1f32-0437-4212-a16c-ae1ebf7aef9>

<sup>12</sup> <https://crossriverwatch.com/2023/08/gbv-foundation-launches-initiative-to-track-cyber-bullying-of-nigerian-women/>

Despite these efforts, challenges remain, including limited funding, societal stigma, and inadequate legal protections. However, the CSO space continues to evolve, with increasing collaborations and innovations aimed at more effectively tackling online GBV in Nigeria. The ongoing efforts of these organizations are critical in shaping a safer digital environment for women and girls in the country.

## 2.5. Legal & Policy Frameworks for Addressing OGBV in Nigeria: Realities

- **The 1999 Constitution of The Federal Republic of Nigeria** (as amended): The Constitution is the grundnorm in Nigeria and forms the basis of the rights and obligations of every citizen. Sections 33 to 44 of the Constitution guarantee fundamental human rights for every citizen in Nigeria, including the right to privacy.<sup>13</sup>, right to hold, impart, and receive information/opinions, freedom of expression<sup>14</sup>, right to life, personal dignity, and freedom from discrimination. The Constitution also limits the guarantee of these rights to the extent that an action interferes with or causes specific harm to the State or the rights of others. The establishment of these provisions sets the standard for women's right to expression, right to privacy, and the protection of women against interference with these rights.
- **Criminal Code/Penal Code**: The criminal code applicable to the Southern States and the Penal Code applicable to the Northern States criminalizes the act of publishing or threatening to publish sexual or embarrassing images for extortion. The inclusion of the 'extortion' element to this provision might, however, exclude publishing/threats of publishing revenge porn without the intent to extort.
- **Cybercrime Act 2015**: The Cyber Crime Act of 2015 provides a legal and regulatory framework for the prohibition, prevention, detection, prosecution, and punishment of cybercrimes in Nigeria. Under Section 24 of the Act, cyberstalking, cyberbullying, blackmail/extortion, and revenge porn are criminal offenses. However, the Act does not explicitly criminalize cyber violence against women, gender-based slurs, or misogyny online.

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<sup>13</sup> Sec. 37 of the 1999 Constitution

<sup>14</sup> Sec. 39, *ibid*

- **Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023** provides a framework for protecting sensitive personal data.<sup>15</sup>
- **Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 (VAPP ACT):** The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act was enacted to prohibit all forms of violence against persons in private and public life. The VAPP Act covers many offline offenses that seem to cover similar crimes online. Provisions of the VAPP Act criminalize coercing another person to act to the detriment of an individual's physical or psychological wellbeing, placing a person in fear of bodily injury, causing emotional, verbal, and psychological abuse on another, intimidation, indecent exposure, and stalking.
- **Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women:** In 1985, Nigeria ratified the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, charged with monitoring the Convention, adopted general recommendation Number 19, which expanded the definition of discrimination to include gender-based violence, that is, violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. The Convention has since been domesticated, and certain governmental agencies have been tasked to achieve its objectives.
- **African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) & Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa:** The African Charter on Human and People's Rights and the Protocol on Women's Rights in Africa have both been signed and ratified by Nigeria. The African Charter on Human and People's Rights has been domesticated into the Nigerian Law under Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution. Many of the Articles outlined in both documents seek to promote women's safety and development in Africa by covering issues such as violence against women. Article 5 of the Protocol to the African Charter expressly enjoins parties to prohibit and condemn all harmful practices that negatively affect women's human rights.

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<sup>15</sup> Nigeria Data Protection Act, 2023. Retrieved from <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/ng/pdf/nigeria-data-protection-act2023.pdf>



- **The Digital Rights and Freedom Bill** is currently before the legislature and contains provisions that ensure online privacy protections, freedom of information, and rights of assembly and association online. It is less than ideal that in 2022, with rapid technological advancements occurring, such legislative safeguards for women online are still being considered instead of those that are already being established.<sup>16</sup>
- **Judicial Precedents:** The ECOWAS Community Court of Justice held in **Amnesty International Togo and Ors v. The Togolese Republic** that the right to the internet is a derivative right, that is, a component of the exercise of the right to freedom of expression.<sup>17</sup>

The Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) held that the Togolese government violated the Applicant's right to freedom of expression by shutting down the internet during protests in September 2017. The Court found that access to the internet is a "derivative right" as it "enhances the exercise of freedom of expression." As such, internet access is "a right that requires protection of the law," and any interference with it "must be provided for by the law specifying the grounds for such interference." There was no national law upon which the right to internet access could be derogated. The Court concluded that the internet was not shut down following the law and that the Togolese government had violated Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The Court subsequently ordered the Respondent State of Togo to take measures to guarantee the "non-occurrence" of a future similar situation, implement laws to meet their obligations with the right to freedom of expression and compensate each Applicant to the sum of 2,000,000 CFA (approx. 3,500 USD).<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, in **SERAP v. the Federal Republic of Nigeria**, the same ECOWAS Community Court of Justice held that the Nigerian government violated the Applicant's right to

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<sup>16</sup>

<https://kuramng.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/UNDERSTANDING-TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED-GENDER-BASED-VIOLENCE.pdf>

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<https://lawpavilion.com/blog/online-violence-against-women-a-reflection-of-the-offline-peculiarity-of-our-society-and-the-averse-effect-on-digital-equality/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/cases/amnesty-international-togo-and-ors-v-the-togolese-republic/>

freedom of expression, access to information, and the media by suspending Twitter's operation on 4 June 2021.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.6. Legal & Policy Frameworks for Addressing OGBV in Nigeria: Gaps

The legal and policy frameworks for addressing online GBV in Nigeria are often inadequate or outdated, failing to keep pace with evolving forms of digital abuse and harassment. There is a lack of consistency and clarity in laws across jurisdictions, and enforcement mechanisms may be ineffective or insufficient to hold perpetrators accountable.

*"...The limitations of the Penal and Criminal Code are that they are restrictive and have not moved with time..." (FGD ABJ R10)*

*"Nigeria has produced generic laws that we are expected to apply to cyberspace; I feel like that's an aspect that should also be considered..." (FGD LS R5)*

For some, Nigeria has the legal frameworks and policies required to tackle OGBV. However, implementation remains a critical issue resulting from structural inefficiencies, inadequacies, and corruption.

*"We have enough laws, but the implementation is the problem in Nigeria. So, we have the penal code law with provisions for defamation and slander. There are instruments/sections that you can use to prosecute a matter..." (FGD NN R1)*

*"We have the Cybercrime Act; we have the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, which prohibits OGBV to an extent and has been adopted nationally. However, many states need to domesticate the Act. The penal code operates in the northern region, and the criminal code operates in southern Nigeria. Even when some OGBV cases come up in Court, the authorities are not fully able to follow through with it, and most times, with services to follow up with OGBV cases, it is easier for survivors who belong to prominent families to access and pay for these services, for example, the Police." (FGD NN R4)*

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<sup>19</sup> <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/cases/serap-v-federal-republic-of-nigeria/>

Others cited legal empowerment as critical, and the lack thereof has resulted in the under-reporting and paucity of data observed in the space. Many individuals do not understand or have information on the available legal framework and institutions responding to Online violence. A few respondents said:

*"Citizens are unaware of a department of cybercrimes within the Nigerian police force. Many women are not informed; the Nigerian Orientation Agency (NOA) has a critical role in promoting sensitization". (FGD ABJ R7)*

*"It's mostly ignorance of the law on the part of citizens; many people are not keen on knowing their rights, which is an issue..." (FGD NN R4)*

*"People are ignorant of existing legal frameworks; the law enforcement officers are unaware of these laws ."(FGD ABJ R6).*

*"There is a challenge with implementing laws because of knowledge gaps. There are several acts of OGBV going on, but people do not see it in that light as they consider them as normal practice. When women become aware of these abusive practices, then they can use the law in seeking redress..." (FGD ABJ R10)*

Where cases are taken up based on available legislation, the legal system poses a hurdle in bureaucratic adjudication structures and several identified technical inadequacies that make getting convictions tedious.

*"Our court system is overcrowded with litigation, and an average case takes seven years for a court to decide. So how do you keep a girl child who has been abused online for seven years to get a pronouncement that what was done to her online was wrong and punishment meted out to the person." (FGD LS R4)*

*" There is the issue of interpretations by the Court. I know of a case where a girl said, "This uncle put his bum on my bum bum, and the court ruled it out, saying a bum on a bum is illogical." (FGD ABJ R7)*

Respondents advocated for stronger legal protections against online GBV and better enforcement of existing laws. This includes pushing for improved access to justice and support services for survivors, as well as ensuring young children have the words in their dialect to describe sexual abuse.

### ***3.5. Support Systems for Online Gender-Based Violence Victims in Nigeria***

#### ***3.5.1. The Rise of Online Women's Communities in Nigeria:***

Social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp have facilitated the transition of traditional women's groups to digital spaces, offering resources, support, and networking opportunities<sup>20</sup>. The emergence of online women's groups in Nigeria, such as Wine and Whine, Female In Nigeria, Abuja Moms, Naija Moms, As Equals Africa, etc. reflect initiatives taken by individuals to create safe spaces where women can discuss issues without fear of judgment or harassment. These groups provide platforms for networking, support, empowerment, and addressing the diverse needs of women. The digital age has also given rise to specialized online communities catering to specific needs, such as Sparkling Sisters in Business for entrepreneurship support and Mamere for single mothers seeking solidarity and advice. Female in Nigeria (FIN), led by Lola Omolola, and Dang! Lifestyle, led by Ifedayo Agoro, is an online and offline community providing avenues for networking, mentorship, resource-sharing, socializing, and addressing Nigerian women's unique challenges.

Overall, online women's groups play a crucial role in providing support, empowerment, and networking opportunities for Nigerian women in a patriarchal society where access to opportunities is unequal. These communities offer hope for bridging structural inequalities and fostering confidence and resilience among women striving for success in digital and offline spheres.

#### ***3.5.2. Individual Support trumps protection from social media platforms***

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.thecontinentalapproach.com/p/how-nigerian-women-are-building-online-853> (accessed on 19 March 2024).

Moving away from the communal-type support that women get online, this research reveals that women facing online harassment in Nigeria often have little to no formal support from platforms or institutions. Instead, they rely heavily on informal networks of activists, feminist groups, friends, and family. Male allies, while important, are often discouraged from standing up due to societal stigma and online backlash.

The interviews indicated that there is limited formal support for women facing online harassment, especially from platforms where these attacks occur. One respondent noted,

*"I never got any support for the online attacks... I recall feeling that platforms like X had protocols for quick responses, but I only relied on my therapist for support" (KII FK3).*

This statement highlights the need for tangible responses from social media platforms and the reliance on personal networks and therapy.

Another interviewee underscores this point:

*"No formal support for OGBV; what is available is mostly informal. Ayra Starr, for example, faced abuse for how she dresses, but what helped was an army of women and girls who stood up for her" (KII NK4).*

This suggests that women in Nigeria often find refuge in informal support networks, where solidarity from other women and feminist groups can offer temporary relief. However, these interventions are usually ad hoc and need more consistent institutional backing to effectively play a significant part in how women are perceived and treated online. Many women are criticized for not conforming to traditional roles. As one focus group participant stated,

*"Society presumes women to be home keepers and should not be seen online as career women. Women engaging online are seen as abnormal" (FGD ABJ R4).*

This underscores the deep-rooted patriarchy in Nigerian society, which reinforces harmful stereotypes and exposes women to further harassment when they deviate from these norms.

While many men are perpetrators of OGBV, there is a growing contingent of male allies who support women online. However, they, too, face challenges.

*"The culture on X discourages men from standing up against OGBV. Men who dare to challenge the perpetrators or call out their abusive behavior are often labeled as "simps," a derogatory term used to belittle men who show empathy or support for women. This term serves to shame and silence those who might otherwise oppose misogynistic behavior, further entrenching the culture of violence and abuse." (KII R.07)*

This derogatory labeling seeks to shame men who show empathy or support women, thereby reinforcing the toxic culture and making it difficult for male allies to intervene.

More so, men who support women are also targeted, further discouraging male allies from standing up, thereby creating a hostile environment for anyone attempting to challenge the status quo, thus silencing both male and female voices.

*"Men who support modern-day women liberating themselves are frowned upon...seen as men who are not 'man enough'" (FGD ABJ R4).*

Male support is crucial for creating a safer online environment, but the harassment they face highlights the pervasive nature of misogyny in digital spaces. Despite this, male allies continue to play a significant role in helping women cope with online abuse, as noted in several accounts.

Victims of OGBV rely heavily on support from activists, civil society organizations (CSOs), and personal networks. One respondent stated,

*"I rely on family and other support systems – I had a lot of understanding people who provided psychological support. The support from those who know what the harassment is like has been key- so having a network of CSOs/activists has been a good way to cope."(KII R.01)*

Similarly, informal support from friends and fellow activists was critical in times of distress. For instance,

*"Informal support such as the community created amongst advocates, responders to SGBV, etc. – when the north became too inhospitable' for me, my friends in the South provided a haven and gave me the support I required." (KII N.K4)*

These networks form a vital safety net, providing emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical protection for women facing severe online abuse.

A respondent shared her experience of being doxed after speaking out against a blasphemy case in Kano State:

*"A crowd showed up at my family's house, but the community stood by my family." (KII N.A. 3)*

This illustrates the importance of community-based support in diffusing potentially dangerous situations offline.

### **3.5.3. Funding Support**

A central theme from the interviews is the scarcity of dedicated funding in this sector. Respondents attributed this to a need for more robust, evidence-based research and data collection on OGBV. This highlights the urgent need for active research programming. Many organizations also noted that while they receive funding to respond to GBV, OGBV has yet to be a significant part of these interventions. They said:

*"There are a few funders that are interested in the areas of OGBV..." (FGD ABJ R3)*

*"...Most funding for OGBV is not fairly accessible..." (KII NG R13)*

*"There are peculiar challenges affecting independent people or freelancers that do not affect organizations. It is almost like an artificial lance because nobody can help*

*us as we are fighting for ourselves and others without funding support. We have more individuals than organizations at the forefront of advocacy for women's issues, but we cannot always access funding or support. And it has not been possible to put them all under an umbrella to access funding." (FGD ABJ R2)*

While the lack of funding has resulted in a paucity of data on OGBV, a few organizations have received funding for OGBV and have done significant work in mitigating OGBV. They said:

*"Organizations such as STER, Mentally Aware, TechHer have received funding and undertake interventions on OGBV." (KII Ng R1)*

*"TechHer has some support for OGBV, other groups include the Baddies in Development." (KII NG R7)*

*"TechHer's work is good on the Kuram platform, also Paradigm H.Q.'s work on digital rights, and Access Now, Gender Mobile, STER, Invictus Africa, BHI and DNF, etc." (KII NG R10)*

Clearly, there is a need to increase the volume of interdisciplinary and intersectional research on how violence manifests in online spaces, online behaviors of constituents, the spread of mis/disinformation and hate speech, and the role of influencers in shaping discourse. Solid data on OGBV will equip institutions to develop effective policies for our evolving digital landscape, ultimately leading to increased funding for OGBV services. Others expounded on the critical need for government and structural support to upscale intervention:

*"I am also thinking of ways to get the government agencies we work with to prioritize OGBV because we collaborate with them. They may have resources that are sometimes available but have no solid plan, or they embark on irrelevant projects without impact. We may need to leverage our engagements with government agencies where there are collaboration opportunities to determine how we make OGBV a strategic priority." (FGD NNR4)*

Furthermore, respondents underscored the need for an emergency fund to support the



immediate safety and survival of women's rights defenders facing online threats.

## **2.7. Frequency of media reporting on OGBV and TFGBV**

According to the African Women in Media report, content analysis of 679 online news stories from Punch, Vanguard, and Sahara Reporters between January and June 2022 indicates that reporting on violence against women and girls is deficient in frequency and depth. The survey report, which examined the frequency, framing, and extent of VAWG reporting, indicated funding as a significant driver of media outlets' sustainability challenges.

In Nigeria, some media outlets like Women Radio FM 91.7 have received funding to support dedicated gender-equality programming. However, many outlets need help with sustainability. The report cited how a radio program, "Women, Girls & Good Governance," previously aired on UNILAG Radio, struggled with funding shortfalls. Though rebranded as Mothers of Nation and moved to YouTube, it grapples with financial constraints. The survey showed that even pioneering stations like the first women-centered radio network, Women Radio FM 91.7, rely on grants to fund operations and gender-focused content. When funding fluctuates or disappears, maintaining consistent coverage of women's issues becomes more accessible across the Nigerian media.

Therefore, more systemic and sustainable solutions are needed to ensure the viability of reporting on gender rights across outlets. Technological innovations are expanding how media covers violence against women and girls. The survey found outlets increasingly utilizing digital platforms to amplify their reporting, though approaches remain inconsistent.<sup>21</sup>

## **2.3. Personal experiences of OGBV**

## **2.8. Recounting lived experiences**

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted delved into the experiences of women social justice crusaders who encounter online violence and abuse. These individuals, including

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<sup>21</sup> <https://africanwomeninmedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/RVAWG-Status-of-Media-Coverage.pdf> accessed on 18 March 2024

women's rights activists and human rights defenders, leverage online platforms to advance their causes. The types of OGBV faced by these women include doxing, harassment, stalking, slut-shaming, hateful comments, name-calling, trolling, unsolicited sexual content, threats, etc.

Female social justice advocates face extensive and multifaceted forms of OGBV. These experiences highlight the systemic issues of misogyny, harassment, cultural resistance, and societal backlash, significantly hampering women's ability to express themselves and advocate for their rights freely.

Several respondents highlighted several hate comments and online harassment experienced while working. OGBV also takes diverse forms, such as incessant unsolicited messages and sexually inappropriate conversations.

*"I have faced online harassment, anonymous emails and explicit messages, verbal abuse (trolling), sexual harassment, and weird comments about sex life. It is very worrisome that the first thing men do when they look at a woman is sexualizing their bodies. The anonymity of social media empowers and emboldens sexual predators to do and say things at will in an unbridled way without the threat of being held accountable". (KII NG R10)*

The perpetuation of online violence and abuse is a deliberate strategy aimed at undermining the credibility of women social justice crusaders, gradually diminishing their presence in online spaces. Perpetrators attack the self-confidence of women's rights advocates to diminish their zeal to advocate.

While online harassment can target anyone, women face a distinct type of attack. Comments aimed at belittling women often reinforce traditional gender roles, such as telling women to cook for their husbands instead of participating in advocacy. This form of harassment not only

undermines women's contributions but also excludes them from recognition in significant movements like the #EndSARS protests, despite their pivotal roles.

*"As an advocate online, there are attacks on you irrespective of your gender, but then when you are a woman, there is a special kind of attack that you face. These attacks, often from women, belittle your contributions to a cause with comments like, "You are supposed to be cooking for your husband; what are you doing here? Go and look after your children." During the #EndSARS protests, many women spearheaded parts of the campaign, and #EndSARS would not have succeeded without the contribution of feminists. Yet, women are excluded and not mentioned when these stories are written." (FGD ABJ R12)*

The research corroborates existing studies that document the chilling effect of online abuse on women's engagement in social justice movements. The reputational damage caused by online rumors and defamation campaigns intended to discredit women's advocacy, with some deliberately sabotaging the work they do.

*"An unidentified hacker hijacked a virtual GBV meeting aimed to share live experiences for survivors of GBV; the deliberate disruption made the conveners discontinue the meeting to protect the privacy and safety of GBV survivors." (IDI NN R2)*

Perceptions are that there are coordinated efforts to silence the voices of women advocates. Many come in the form of smear campaigns, defamation of character, and misinformation on their personalities and work. Respondents stated that:

*"I have experienced extreme forms that go to threats, doxing (especially during the protest against police brutality), my image has been altered, there have been smear campaigns against me such as allegations of having affairs. These smear campaigns are potent towards women because of the type of society Nigeria is – people don't take lightly a woman being vocal. People resent that. People taunt,*

*'Where are your parents,' 'where is your husband,' 'should you not be married?'" (KII NG R9)*

*"I have experienced other people being harassed online. It's very similar and almost looks like a pattern. The culture of insults, doxing, and violence against women online is calculated not just in Nigeria but everywhere in the world. There is a targeted movement to push back on the gains of women's rights advocacy." (KII NG R6).*

Sexual harassment and the over-sexualization of women, particularly women advocates, are designed to demoralize women and remind them of 'their place' of subservience to the sexual desires of men. This partly results from the foundational social belief of women's place as second-class citizens, wives, and mothers rather than leaders.

*"Most times, men tend to sexualize everything and anything I do. These include men who follow me and who do not follow me. Also, I can't air my opinion about women's rights or gender equality in peace. Someone somewhere would choose to misunderstand or insult me. From men telling me I would die single to body shaming ..." (KII NG R5)*

*"...Some tell me that they masturbate to my pictures and videos..." (FGD LS R5)*

Many women have experienced doxing as a consequence of speaking up for women's rights, and this has turned community members and beneficiaries against their cause:

*"I have experienced doxing, death threats, rape, and sexual violence threats, caricature and photoshopping of my head on a naked body, racism, etc.... the most popular were as a result of my work on the BBC Sex for Grades documentary and my radical feminist activism." (KII NG R1)*

Ultimately, these forms of online gender-based violence not only harm individual activists but also discourage other women from participating in social justice movements and public

discourse on women's issues. This creates a climate of fear and self-silencing, hindering progress towards gender equality.

## **CHAPTER THREE – DEEP DIVE ANALYSIS – MAKING MEANING OF THE DATA**

### **3.1. Spotlighting categories of women who are constantly at risk of OGBV**

Everyone can be a victim of online gender-based violence, ranging from cyberbullying to the distressing phenomenon of leaked sexual images in Nigeria. Unfortunately, there continues to

be significant gaps in data and global reports suggest that the prevalence of OGBV ranges from 16 to 58 percent.<sup>22</sup> However, some categories of women are more at risk depending on their context. For instance, according to TechHer's DDP report<sup>23</sup>, it is believed that one in ten women has experienced a form of TFGBV since the age of 15. The 2020 Plan International's *Free to Be Online* report is based on research conducted across 22 countries, including Brazil, India, Nigeria, Spain, Thailand, and the United States, with over 14,000 girls and young women ages 15 to 25. It uncovered girls' and young women's online experiences across social media platforms.<sup>24</sup> From the 22 survey countries in the research, 58 percent of girls reported that they have personally experienced some form of online harassment on social media platforms. The report showed some regional differences, with 63 percent of respondents in Europe reporting online abuse, followed by 60 percent of girls in Latin America, 58 percent in the Asia-Pacific region, 54 percent in Africa, and 52 percent in North America. Similarly, a 2020 global survey of young people's experience of online abuse and harassment was conducted by The World Wide Web Foundation and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts. The survey found that 52 percent of young women and girls have experienced online abuse, including threatening messages, sexual harassment, and the sharing of private images without consent.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, from above, younger women's use of social media is high and so, their risk of experiencing OGBV is equally high.

This study observes female students as consistent victims of leverage porn or the non-consensual sharing of intimate or sexually explicit images or videos of these student victims, often with the intent to humiliate, harm, or demand a favor from them. Most recently, the Akin Fadeyi Foundation, through FlagIT, was able to unmask the students of Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti (ABUAD), who were blackmailing young girls to share their nudes with them on social media. The accused students were charged to court. Their

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<sup>22</sup> Jacqueline Hicks (October 2021) Institute of Development Studies. Global evidence on the prevalence and impact of online gender-based violence (OGBV).

<sup>23</sup><https://kuramng.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/UNDERSTANDING-TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED-GENDER-BASED-VIOLENCE.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> <https://plan-international.org/uploads/2023/06/SOTWGR2020-CommsReport-edition2023-EN.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> The World Wide Web Foundation, 12 March 2020. The online crisis facing women and girls threatens global progress on gender equality accessed at <https://webfoundation.org/2020/03/the-online-crisis-facing-women-and-girls-threatens-global-progress-on-gender-equality/> on 12 March 2024

modus operandi, before the management of the institution rounded them up in conjunction with FlagIT, was creating a WhatsApp group tagged 'Anonymous' to lure unsuspecting female students to send their nude pictures for a beauty pageant.<sup>26</sup>

Our study also shows that women who organize for social justice on social media are at risk of experiencing various forms of OGBV because their campaigns often challenge societal norms and expose societal ills. At the same time, female professionals in journalism, politics, sports, also experiences high incidences of OGBV.

Women journalists are generally exposed to specific forms of gender-based violence offline. These include rape and sexual harassment, and other forms of intimidation, including threats. However, female journalist that use social media to promote their work also experience OGBV. According to the International Women's Media Foundation, nearly 2 out of 3 women journalists and media workers said they were threatened or harassed online at least once. Of those, 40 percent said they avoided reporting specific stories due to online harassment.<sup>27</sup> A 2020 published survey report fielded by the International Center for Journalists (ICJ) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) suggests nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of female reporters<sup>28</sup> have experienced online abuse, and 20 percent of the women surveyed reported being targeted with offline abuse and attacks that they believed were connected with online violence they had experienced. These attacks include threats of physical and sexual violence, as well as digital security breaches.<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that online violence is the new frontline in journalism safety, and it is hazardous for women. The insidious problem of online violence against women journalists is increasingly spilling offline with potentially deadly consequences. A key observation noted in the study is that journalists become susceptible to OGBV in Nigeria when they start to promote social

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[https://dnllegalandstyle.com/2023/online-violence-against-women-a-reflection-of-the-offline-peculiarity-of-our-society-and-the-adverse-effect-on-digital-equality/#\\_ftn6](https://dnllegalandstyle.com/2023/online-violence-against-women-a-reflection-of-the-offline-peculiarity-of-our-society-and-the-adverse-effect-on-digital-equality/#_ftn6)

<sup>28</sup><https://theconversation.com/online-attacks-on-female-journalists-are-increasingly-spilling-into-the-real-world-new-research-150791>

<sup>29</sup> UNESCO, "Online violence against women journalists: a global snapshot of incidence and impacts," 2020,

justice. Celebrated journalist Kadaria Ahmed is constantly abused, issued death threats, and tagged unprintable names for her decision to fight for the poor masses in her home state, Zamfara. Yet, without the efforts of Ahmed, the brutal massacre of helpless citizens in her hometown would have arguably not attracted the attention of the Federal Government and Zamfara State Government.

**Amb Abdulrahman Yahaya**  
@cardinalabdul

Replying to @KadariaAhmed

Kadaria, you converted to Christianity in London. I was appalled when I heard her describing herself as a passionate citizen of Zamfara. By Islamic tenets, Kadaria is a walking corpse. She's supposed to have been killed as an apostate. She's a condemned soul.

8:43 · 11 Apr 19 · Twitter for Android

**Aji Bussu Onye Mpiawa azu** @AfamDeluxo · Jun 24, 2023

Today is a good day to remind y'all how in 2015, Agbado peasants, BMC, & some of these criminals masquerading as intellectuals wrote a petition to the Uni of Yale to withdraw the honorary doctorate conferred to Madame Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. Today, they want validation from her. 😡

**ochi abu uto** @MadukaKOB

@kadariaAhmed have always been a bitter woman, a super hypocrite. Went about every TV and radio screaming 25% Abuja votes before the election, now she has hibernated.

9:07 AM · Jun 24, 2023 · 909 Views

**Vanguard Newspapers** @vanguardnews · Feb 27

A mild drama played out during Nigeria's Super Falcons Olympics qualifiers clash against Cameroon on Monday.

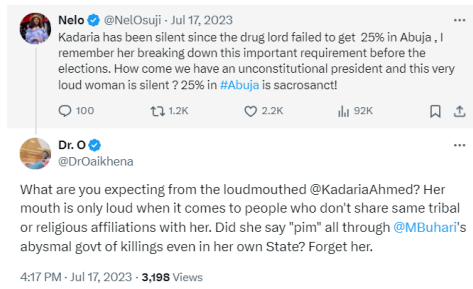
Suspecting foul play, Cameroon defender Claudine Faonne Mefommetou attempted to make contact with the net in Nigeria's goal in a bid to destroy the potency of whatever

**Editor22** @SURUKAL22

Where is #kadariaahmed, another ethnic bigot of a woman, she only surfaces during elections

3:14 PM · Feb 27, 2024 · 1,267 Views





Narrowing into sports, the Football's world governing body, FIFA, said in a statement that 152 players received targeted "discriminatory, abusive or threatening messaging."<sup>30</sup> And nearly 50 percent of the verified online abuse was homophobic, sexual, or sexist. The analysis also found players at the Women's World Cup were 29 percent more likely to receive abuse compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, one in five players at the 2023 Women's World Cup were targeted by online abuse, according to a study released by FIFA and the FIFPRO global players' body. The findings emerged from an analysis of 5.1 million posts and comments about 697 players and coaches participating in the tournament in Australia and New Zealand.

Furthermore, in a 2021 study conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union on women in African parliaments, it was found that 46 percent of women parliamentarians had been targeted by sexist attacks online.<sup>31</sup> Women who engage in political activities online face insults, hate speech, reputational harm, physical threats, and sexualized misrepresentation.<sup>32</sup> Violence against Women in Politics (VAW-P) is not just an offline phenomenon but also extends to online spaces. Research has found that women in public-facing positions like journalists and politicians experience a disproportionate amount of OGBV<sup>33</sup>. OGBV against women politicians is referred to as Online Violence against Women in Politics (OVAW-P).<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/12/one-in-five-players-at-womens-world-cup-suffer-online-abuse-study/>

<sup>31</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Africa," 2021, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> National Democratic Institute, "Tweets That Chill: Analyzing Online Violence Against Women in Politics", 2019, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Web Foundation, 2020

<sup>34</sup> <https://archive.policyp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Amplified-Abuse-Report.pdf> accessed at 17th March 2024

Above research finding aligns with the findings and our conclusions that women who are public facing are at risk of experiencing OGBV. In Nigeria, former Minister of Education Oby Ezekwesili and presidential candidate for Allied Congress Party of Nigeria in the 2019 elections is often attacked by bots and unidentifiable handles; she is also attacked by supporters of the government in power, party members, etc. One of the study respondent cited the example of Serah Ibrahim - a prominent female Nigerian who supports a presidential candidate.

*"Serah Ibrahim is someone who is constantly harassed for living her life – she is a young girl in politics – who engages in politics but is constantly abused and harassed. This pushback will also affect some women/girls to side with the misogynists to 'get along' and spare themselves the abuse." (KII NK R3)*

A closer look at the Nigerian context shows that women with public voices, especially journalists, communicators, and human rights defenders, are the target of systematic OGBV. Women with public opinions experience persistent attacks that negatively affect freedom of expression, participation in public debate, and, consequently, the quality of democracy.

Aisha Yesufu, famous social justice campaigner and co-convener of the viral and global **"#BringBackOurGirls"** campaign and the **#EndSARS** protests, has been constantly abused online for her online and offline campaign for social, political, and economic reforms. Someone once tweeted a picture of her side-by-side with an open-mouthed baboon accusing her of having a "big mouth." She has been called "mentally challenged" due to a cause, while others accuse her of being an 'immodest woman,' especially for leading protests wearing the Hijab. Lies are often spread online about Yesufu, for instance, that foreign or partisan groups sponsor her advocacy or that her husband, a retired public servant, has been convicted of corruption.<sup>35</sup>

Northern feminists Fakhriyyah Hashim and Maryam Awaisu are harshly bullied for promoting **the #ArewaMeToo** Movement and **#NorthNormal** campaigns designed to raise awareness

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<sup>35</sup> <https://webfoundation.org/2022/12/online-gender-based-violence-story-aisha-nigeria/>

about sexual abuse and harassment in Northern Nigeria and advocate for safeguarding women's rights, promoting girl-child education, speaking against gender violence, and fighting the rise of pedophilia. In Awaisu's case, online abuse and trolling eventually resulted in her being abducted from Kaduna, where she lived at the time, and taken to Abuja by Nigerian security officers for questioning about the allegations she had made online about sexual abuse and rape. Hashim has been the victim of constant online abuse and bullying and has even received death threats, particularly from northerners.



Women activists often become victims of various forms of abuse aimed to silence them, exemplified by coordinated waves of online abuse known as "pile-on."<sup>36</sup> Evidence indicates that women and girls, particularly those in public life, are disproportionately affected by higher rates and more severe forms of online violence, particularly when advocating for gender justice.<sup>37</sup> Regrettably, the insights garnered from these studies fail to provide specific data about women with disabilities within this framework.

A critical observation from our research is that no amount of preparation or care can shield female users from the threat of OGBV. All female users, regardless of their online presence or activities, are potential victims. The multifaceted nature of OGBV ensures that it does not

<sup>36</sup> World Wide Web Foundation (Tech Policy Design Lab), "Online Gender-Based Violence and Abuse: Consultation Briefing," 2021. p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Plan International, "Free to Be Online?," p. 18; Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), "In Search of Safe Spaces Online: Research Summary," March 2020, p. 3.

discriminate; it affects a wide range of women, from feminists and social advocates to children, online vendors, and professionals merely conducting their business.

The ubiquity of OGBV can be attributed to the diversity of its manifestations. There are numerous forms of OGBV, each targeting different aspects of a woman's identity or activities. This wide array of violence includes but is not limited to slut-shaming, body-shaming, harassment, doxxing, and non-consensual sharing of intimate images. Such a variety ensures that no female user is immune to attack, as perpetrators exploit their targets' vulnerabilities in different ways.

### **3.2. How the Current and Evolving Online Civic Space Affects Women and Girls**

While Nigeria's civic space has contributed tremendously to fostering social justice for women and girls, diverse challenges exist, including emerging forms of violations such as OGBV. Discussants from the FGD who are primarily CSO and CBO leaders and founders, cited varying occurrences of OGBV and how it affects them:

*"When spaces are being created, people use them for different reasons. But, when women try to use the online space to get information, push for information, advocate for certain things, or contribute to conversations on women's issues, etc., we hear, "Must you women always make everything about you?". As an organization, we see the online space as a platform where we can advocate for issues that affect women, but we face constant backlash." (FGD ABJ R2)*

Above quote suggests that despite the transformative potential of civic spaces, just like women are not expected to engage in physical civic space, they are also reprimanded for taking up space virtually. Invariably, when women dare to use virtual spaces, they are castigated and targeted for their online engagement. Clearly, the online space has become "scary" due to diverse forms of harassment against women who campaign for women's rights. She said:

*"The current online civic space is affecting women in two ways. It is scary and inspiring at the same time. [On one hand], many young women are being radicalized as feminists, and others are still being made martyrs through their work and advocacy. [On the otherhand}, young feminists are called men haters, bitter women. Online vendors and women who trade/do business are called sex workers, for example." (KII NG R1)*

Civic space is critical in the development of any nation, especially one that is developing, such as Nigeria. While technology has posed many gains for civil actors and advocates to amplify their voices, regulating the cons accompanying the pros of technological advancement has become critical. OGBV, an increasing phenomenon, must be tackled to ensure that vulnerable women, who constitute over half of the country's population, have safe online spaces to foster the equality they seek.

#### **3.4.1. Institutional & Structural Issues**

In exploring how cultural and religious norms in Nigeria influence societal responses towards women who engage online, we delved deeply into the influence of culture and religion on the perpetuation of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) in Nigeria. The patriarchal structure of Nigeria and the pervasive gender stereotypes typically grant men social superiority and the authority to exert power over women both terrestrially and virtually. These stereotypes are part of the I beliefs about male dominance that fuels the perception that men should determine a woman's use of resources including controlling what she can say or do. Unfortunately, some of the beliefs are justified using misinterpretations of religious beliefs. A respondent recounted her experience of OGBV as a result of speaking out about abuse using X and Facebook.

*"In 2021, there was such a vicious online attack against me that my family tried to get me out of Abuja to keep me safe. I narrated my experience of rape and how it affected my mental health. Muslims online attacked me even though I was raped in*

*my Hijab. I was accused of disgracing Islam with the post. The Muslim Students Society (MSS) launched a campaign against me online and threatened my family and me." (KII NG R11)*

Respondents pointed to entrenched traditional and religious norms within Nigerian society as significant contributors to women's backlash when participating in online civic discourse. Participants agreed that OGBV is merely a modern, different form of VAWG that is deep-rooted and age-long within Nigerian society.

*"Society presumes women to be home keepers and should not be seen online engaging as career women. This means that women engaging online are seen as abnormal and not supportive of the family front." (FGD ABJ R4)*

### **3.3. Impact of OGBV on self-identifying Feminists**

The feedback from key informants and focus group discussions offers a comprehensive view of the multifaceted challenges faced by women who identify as feminists. These challenges encompass a range of issues, from misogyny and religious discrimination to the strategic dilution of feminist messages and the broader societal backlash against feminist ideals.

*"As a feminist in a patriarchal society, there is much misogyny; as such, identifying as a feminist gets one more OGBV perpetuation. This dilutes what you have to say – people focus on feminism and not on the message. You are constantly asked, "Is it because you are a feminist that: 'you can't be respectful to the governor?' 'That you want to destroy someone's life,' etc.". (KII NG R12)*

*"In my organization, we were having an event for feminists, and I posted this thing and said, "Are you a feminist in Abuja and you are interested in joining a feminine convergence"? Send me a message. I got messages from like 3 or 4 people, the first*

*one was from a man, and he said all feminists should be arrested and jailed together." (FGD ABJ R4)*

Many feminists have now resorted to strategic messages that may not fully reflect the full scope of the matter. In a bid to protect themselves from backlash, they modify messages to ensure they are more 'acceptable' to men and even other women who consider feminism a shame or a form of immodesty.

*"It has always been hard to be a self-identifying feminist online because feminists face much backlash, and we also have the society shading people who hold feminist beliefs. It has made me design campaigns or messages to target a particular result or change, but then I am forced to tailor my messages to be acceptable online while maintaining the original intention." (KII NG R8)*

There is societal resistance to feminist identities, where being labeled as a feminist subjects individuals to increased OGBV. The focus shifts from the substantive message to the feminist identity, thereby diluting the impact and undermining the message's credibility, reflecting a broader societal issue where feminist voices are marginalized and their contributions devalued. In addition to this, some respondents believed that there are deliberate digital plays that facilitate the pushback on feminism, stating that critical determinants such as algorithms work against amplifying their voices and instead promote misogynistic content.

*"Algorithms, misogyny, the multiplicity of incels, and the push back against feminism which includes posting and celebrating traditional roles for women, i.e., the pregnant woman kneeling to serve her husband, etc., the abuse of single mothers who speak about governance/politics/insecurity and engaging online generally gets upsetting and annoying." (KII NG R3)*

Observably, the intersection of religious identity and feminism, i.e., identifying as a religious feminist, attracts severe backlash. This indicates a broader cultural and religious intolerance

towards the feminist ideology, which questions women's understanding of their faith and their right to equality. The backlash often stems from patriarchal interpretations of religious doctrines, further complicating the advocacy efforts of feminists within religious communities. Feminists are also attacked based on religious beliefs that go against the teachings of specific religions. This is, however, expected in Nigeria, which is predominantly a cultural and religious country where moral beliefs and specific gender stereotypes are tailored in line with religious orientation. A respondent spoke about her experience recounting:

*"I have been attacked and called an unbeliever. I witnessed an attack on someone for identifying as a Muslim feminist in her bio, questioning her understanding of Islam for claiming to be a Muslim feminist. The feminist description riles men up, particularly those who question women's equality to men." (KII NG R6)*

*"...I resolved to wear the hijab in 1992 when some of the people who troll me for wearing the hijab were not born. They insult me and abuse me, and I get comments like, "With that hijab, you are a disgrace to Islam." (IDI ABJ R4)*

However, despite these obstacles, the emergence of agile and responsive feminist networks offers a glimmer of hope for sustaining and advancing feminist advocacy. Some feminists, amid these challenges, find the zeal to soldier on.

*"It used to be hard to be identified as a feminist online. People would profile me even before they got the chance to know me. They would assume I hate men, and that I am a troublemaker. Right now, I don't care. I have the confidence to carry my advocacy on my shoulders. I am proud of the work I do." (KII NG R2)*

*"More women will leave the online spaces for advocacy and learning to the bravest. The abuse of women/feminists gets tiring, and talk of a generational struggle for women's rights and the sense of self-shrinking add to the exhaustion." (KII NG R3)*



The space for everyone to engage in gender equality and social justice needs to be safe, and it cannot be left to the brave alone.

### **3.4. Trends, Observations, and Lessons**

In the course of gathering data for this research, the following challenges were encountered:

#### ***3.4.1. Social Media Anonymity***

The anonymity afforded by social media platforms is a significant factor contributing to the prevalence of OGBV in Nigeria. This anonymity allows perpetrators to hide behind pseudonyms and fake profiles, creating a sense of impunity. They believe their harmful comments will either be lost among other comments, especially on posts by celebrities or those with a broad reach, or their true identities will remain concealed.

This sense of anonymity emboldens perpetrators, leading them to post abusive, derogatory, and violent comments without fear of immediate consequences. The belief that they cannot be identified and held accountable fosters a culture of impunity, where harmful behaviors are repeated and normalized. For instance, many perpetrators delete their comments, issue insincere apologies, or even delete their accounts when confronted by survivors. This transient nature of their online presence makes it challenging to hold them accountable.

The anonymity provided by social media also complicates the process of documenting and reporting OGBV incidents. Determining the actual identity or gender of the perpetrator becomes a daunting task, as many use anonymous or "burner" accounts specifically created to harass and abuse others. This anonymity barrier hinders the ability to trace and prosecute offenders and understand the full scope of the issue, as the same individual may be responsible for multiple incidents under different aliases.

Thus, the anonymity feature of social media platforms not only enables the perpetration of OGBV but also obstructs effective reporting, accountability, and remediation efforts. This creates a vicious cycle where survivors are continually exposed to harm without adequate recourse, perpetuating a hostile and unsafe digital environment.

### ***3.4.2. Deletion of Content***

The ease with which social media content can be deleted from platforms significantly contributes to the prevalence of OGBV and poses a substantial challenge to effective reporting and accountability. Perpetrators of OGBV often use the delete feature to remove their offensive posts and comments or deactivate the entire account after committing the act. This not only erases the evidence of their harmful behavior but also creates a significant obstacle in tracing the patterns of abuse and holding offenders responsible.

Furthermore, many survivors of OGBV are often pressured to delete their original posts, change their handles, or restrict access to their accounts due to continuous harassment and bullying. This forced digital retreat not only silences the survivors but also complicates the data collection process, as critical evidence and context for the abuse are lost. The inability to retrieve and preserve this data impedes efforts to understand the full scope and nature of OGBV.

### ***3.4.3. Fast-Paced Nature of Social Media***

The fast-paced nature of social media significantly contributes to the prevalence and persistence of OGBV by creating an environment where issues rapidly come and go, making sustained attention challenging to achieve. Social media platforms are characterized by the constant flow of new content, with trends, issues, and hashtags changing as fast as they come. This rapid turnover means that once an OGBV incident is no longer trending, it quickly fades from public attention and concern.

This transient focus impedes efforts to curb OGBV as the collective memory of social media users is short-lived. Once the spotlight moves away from a particular instance of violence, the momentum for addressing it often dissipates. This makes it challenging to maintain consistent advocacy and support for survivors, as new issues continuously take precedence, pushing previous incidents into obscurity.

This situation fosters an environment where OGBV can thrive, as the lack of sustained attention and difficulty retrieving past incidents hinder the development of effective

long-term strategies to combat the issue. As a result, the fast-paced nature of social media perpetuates a cycle of neglect and inaction, exacerbating the challenges faced by survivors and advocates working to address OGBV.

#### ***3.4.4. Clout Chasing***

Clout chasing, driven by the desire for attention and engagement, is another major factor contributing to the surge of OGBV in Nigeria. The phenomenon of clout chasing is further compounded by the recent monetization of social media platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter), where our data indicates a high prevalence of OGBV incidents. With the introduction of monetization features that reward premium subscribers based on the impressions their posts and comments generate, many users are incentivized to make vile and hateful comments or post controversial content to attract engagement, regardless of the harm caused.

This quest for clout and monetization leads individuals, both men and women, to engage in behavior that constitutes or encourages OGBV as they seek to maximize their visibility and earnings. The focus on generating impressions rather than fostering positive and respectful discourse creates a toxic digital environment that normalizes and perpetuates OGBV.

On the other hand, the prevalence of clout chasing complicates the identification and support of genuine OGBV victims. With numerous women deliberately posting controversial content to attract attention, it becomes challenging to discern between those who are genuinely targeted and those seeking engagement. This blurs the lines of accountability and can undermine the seriousness of OGBV, as genuine cases may be overshadowed by those seeking to exploit the issue for personal gain.

However, it is crucial to recognize that OGBV is inherently wrong, regardless of whether or not the victim's actions might have attracted offensive remarks or whether the victim considered the comment as being harmful or not. The intent behind clout chasing does not diminish the impact of OGBV on survivors. The detrimental effects of OGBV are real and significant, affecting the mental and emotional wellbeing of victims. Therefore, it is imperative to address

clout chasing as a contributing factor to OGBV while ensuring that all instances of abuse are taken seriously and addressed appropriately, regardless of the context in which they occur.

### **3.4.5. Moral Policing**

Moral policing is observed to be a significant factor contributing to the prevalence of OGBV in Nigeria. This phenomenon arises when content posted by survivors is deemed morally wrong by specific individuals or groups, leading to abusive and harmful reactions. The subjective nature of moral judgment begs the question of "who determines what is right" and "what constitutes a moral wrong," highlighting the double standards often applied in such evaluations.

The reactions to similar content vary greatly depending on the gender of the person sharing it. When men post content that might be considered controversial or morally questionable, the responses are often less severe and more tolerant than when women post similar content. This gender bias reinforces the unequal treatment and heightened scrutiny women face online, contributing to the perpetuation of OGBV. A good example of this is when a survivor with the X handle @TheRealCEOAmber posted, "I have decided to quit my job at the office to concentrate fully on a bet," and got slut-shamed for it. @TalentedFBG, her male counterpart, posted the same content, and the follow-up reactions differed.

A respondent spoke about the OGBV experienced by women who are non-conventional either in terms of their economic, social, and political activity and how these women are viewed as immoral for not toeing the line of acceptable behavior from women. She said:

*"A former Miss Nigeria from Kano State faced digital backlash and was shamed on social media for participating in the pageantry competition..." (IDI NN R1).*

Even if some consider content morally wrong, it should be regarded as the interlocutor's harmless opinion and should not warrant cyberbullying or abusive reactions. The right to freedom of expression guarantees that subject to certain exceptions, everyone should be able to air their opinions without being exposed to hate speech or bullying. This principle should

be upheld consistently, irrespective of the interlocutor's gender. Respect for differing viewpoints is essential to maintaining a healthy and inclusive digital environment.

Moral policing manifests as a form of OGBV when individuals or groups impose their subjective moral standards on others, particularly women, and use those standards to justify abusive behavior. This not only infringes on the victims' rights to free expression but also perpetuates a culture of intimidation and control. By targeting women more harshly, moral policing reinforces societal power imbalances and perpetuates gender inequalities.

#### ***3.4.6. Ignorance***

One notable observation from our research is the pervasive ignorance among perpetrators of OGBV. Many individuals veil their vile comments and remarks with laughing emojis or phrases like "LOL" to downplay the seriousness of their actions. When survivors take follow-up actions against them, these perpetrators often plead that their comments were harmless jokes with no malicious intent. However, ignorance is no defense in law, and no woman or girl should be exposed to emotional distress due to another person's "ignorance."

This pattern of behavior highlights a fundamental lack of awareness and understanding regarding the impact of their words and actions. The casual dismissal of harmful comments as jokes not only minimizes the victims' experience but also perpetuates a culture where such behavior is normalized and excused. It reflects a broader societal issue where the boundaries of acceptable behavior online are not well understood or respected.

Furthermore, the trivialization of harmful remarks under the guise of humor can have severe psychological effects on the victims. Repeated exposure to such comments can lead to significant emotional distress, undermining the victim's sense of safety and wellbeing in digital spaces. This highlights the need for increased education and awareness about the consequences of online behavior and the importance of respectful communication.

Addressing ignorance as a factor in OGBV requires a multifaceted approach. This includes promoting digital literacy and educating individuals about the impact of their online

interactions. Social media platforms also have a role to play in implementing stricter policies and providing more explicit guidelines on what constitutes unacceptable behavior.

### ***3.4.7. Misogyny and Normalization of OGBV***

Another observation from our research is the rampant and normalized presence of misogyny on X (formerly known as Twitter). Certain personalities on this platform have cultivated a brand closely associated with misogynistic views and behaviors. These individuals, often influential and highly revered online, perpetuate misogyny as a part of their online identity, which requires them to seek out victims to bully consistently. This sustains their brand but also fosters a culture of misogyny that encourages other men to join in the abuse. These groups often rally around to defend and support perpetrators and shield them from facing any consequences.

The influence of these personalities is profound, as their behavior sets a precedent for others. Their actions and comments often serve as a rallying point for like-minded individuals, creating an environment where violent and abusive behavior towards women is normalized and even celebrated. This normalization makes it increasingly difficult to challenge and dismantle misogynistic attitudes, as the perpetrators receive validation and support from their followers.

The pervasive misogyny on X and other platforms manifests in various ways, from direct harassment and threats to subtler forms of abuse like gaslighting and slut-shaming. This hostile environment not only affects the immediate victims but also has a broader impact on the digital space, making it an unsafe space for women to express themselves freely.

Addressing the issue of misogyny on X requires a concerted effort from both the platform and its users. X must enforce stricter policies against misogynistic behavior and take decisive action against influential personalities who perpetuate such attitudes. Additionally, there is a need for a cultural shift that challenges the normalization of misogyny and promotes respect and equality. Encouraging men to stand up against abuse and providing them with support and resources to do so can also help to dismantle the toxic culture that currently prevails.

#### **3.4.8. Inherent Offline Violence Transmitted Online**

One of the fundamental observations from our research is that OGBV is prevalent primarily because violence against women is deeply rooted and inherent in society. Many women in Nigeria have faced gender-based violence at some point in their lives, and this preexisting offline violence extends into the digital realm. This transmission of violence from offline to online platforms is a direct consequence of the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society. This may also happen as online violence is transmitted offline in some cases.

*“...these attacks affect me and everybody that is linked to me. These attacks have so many times graduated from online into physical attacks.” (KII NG R1)*

The patriarchal structure in Nigeria is characterized by deeply entrenched gender roles and norms that often subordinate women and perpetuate male dominance. This societal framework not only tolerates but sometimes even justifies violence against women. As a result, the same attitudes and behaviors that manifest as physical or emotional abuse in the offline world are carried over to online spaces, where they manifest as OGBV.

The digital environment, mainly social media platforms, provides a new arena for the continuation and amplification of gender-based violence. Perpetrators who might have engaged in violent behavior offline find an additional, often more anonymous, outlet for their aggression and hostility online. This shift is facilitated by the same patriarchal attitudes that normalize and excuse violence against women in real life.

The normalization of violence in offline settings also means that women are frequently subjected to OGBV without significant societal backlash. This lack of accountability emboldens perpetrators, who feel they can act online and offline with impunity. The anonymity and reach provided by social media further exacerbate the issue, allowing abusers to target women on a much larger scale than would be possible offline.

To address this issue, it is crucial to recognize the interconnectedness of offline and online violence against women. Efforts to combat OGBV must also tackle the underlying patriarchal structures that enable and sustain gender-based violence in all its forms. This involves enforcing stricter regulations and protections on social media platforms and promoting societal change that challenges and dismantles patriarchal norms. By addressing the root causes of violence against women, we can create a safer and more equitable environment both online and offline.

#### ***3.4.9. Follow-Up Actions***

It is not uncommon for survivors to take follow-up actions against perpetrators of OGBV. Such actions may range from direct response to blocking perpetrators on social media to legal action. Survivors of OGBV who take further action often encounter a mixed bag of reactions. On the one hand, perpetrators might apologize, delete their comments, or even face public backlash from others who condemn their behavior. This can be seen as a positive outcome, as it holds the perpetrators accountable and discourages similar behavior in the future.

However, on the other hand, survivors can also become further victimized and subjected to additional violence. A pertinent example is the ongoing **#FreeAyo** campaign. The actress Toyin Abraham had petitioned the Police under the Cybercrime Act about the harassment she was facing online, resulting in the arrest of someone called Ayo. Instead of condemning Ayo's actions, online misogynists rallied around him, trending the hashtag **#FreeAyo** and further perpetrating OGBV against Toyin Abraham. This phenomenon highlights a dangerous trend where perpetrators are defended and even celebrated while survivors are vilified and "canceled."



**Dr Abiola Akiyode...** @abiolaak

I have been leading a case Demanding Justice for a Fallen Sister, Mrs. Olufunmilayo Mary-Anne Oluwawemimo suspected to have been Violently Murdered by Her Absconding Husband on the 18th of May 2024.

My colleague and another activist sister, Ene obi were at the state command with the Minister for women affairs to demand Justice . But was shocked that the police has released Damilola oluwawemimo the alleged murderer without prosecution . Enough is enough ! We call for the immediate intervention by the Attorney General of the Federation. Mr. Daniel Oluwadamilola Oluwawemimo must be rearrested and prosecuted. @BigBadReni

**Enoch** @Royal\_Citizens

Replying to @abiolaak

Why spread lies about a grieving husband? This is an evil thing to do.

You have been told repeatedly to put down that post knowing fully well that you're lying, may your children suffer same fate madam.

11:43 PM · 03 Jul 24 · 42K Views

17 Reposts 333 Likes

You can reply  
Accounts @abiolaak mentioned can reply.

**AMADI NOEL C** @KingnoelC · 04 Jul  
Replying to @Royal\_Citizens and @abiolaak  
If is me I am suing her!

**MR FOWOSERE** @espeezeal

Replying to @abiolaak

I don't think misandrists like this should be allowed to hold any position of power.

7:42 PM · 03 Jul 24 · 39.5K Views

11 Reposts 4 Quotes 223 Likes

2 Bookmarks

You can reply  
Accounts @abiolaak mentioned can reply.

**big man** @atthetop4real · 03 Jul  
Replying to @espeezeal and @abiolaak  
This story is very misleading.

**MR FOWOSERE** @espeezeal · 03 Jul  
Very very

**Àánúolúwàpò** @VanAanog

Replying to @abiolaak

This husband should sue you after exonerating himself. You are vile, terrible human desperately trying to tarnish the man's image and whip up the sentiments of the public against him with half-truths.

9:33 PM · 03 Jul 24 · 5,108 Views

These adverse reactions often stem from deeply ingrained misogynistic attitudes and a societal reluctance to confront issues of gender-based violence. Advocates like Dr. Abiola Akiyode-Afolabi are frequently accused of harboring personal vendettas or being overly

emotional, undermining their credibility and the seriousness of the issues they highlight. This not only silences advocates but also perpetuates a culture where OGBV and other forms of violence against women are downplayed or ignored.

#### **3.4.10. Vulnerability to OGBV**

Specific categories of people are easy targets of OGBV in the Nigerian media space, particularly celebrity actresses, singers, models, feminists, social justice advocates, members of the LGBTIQ community, politicians, and other public figures. According to a respondent:

*"The online civic space is not safe for women in Nigeria, especially women who use social media frequently targeted at female celebrities and models, particularly those in the movie industry. Some Nollywood actresses get bullied a lot, including their colleagues online, and there is nobody to regulate." (FGD NN R1)*

*"Our society does not reflect that women's rights should be protected or that their opinions count. Women leaders are overly careful as we are in that box of patriarchy where women should not have opinions about themselves." (FGD ABJ R5)*

Some individuals are singled out for constant attacks on specific subject matters. For instance, Ayra Starr faces criticism for not dressing conservatively, while Aisha Yesufu, who is always clothed in full hijab by Islam, is still criticized for being immodest. This indicates that it is not about the way women are dressed – which we know from centuries of men raping children and the elderly. The way the women and girls are clothed is an excuse to attack them, not the reason they are attacked. Similarly, women who share their political affiliations publicly, such as Eniola Badmus and Toyin Abraham, who endorsed President Tinubu, are vilified as women, the same as female supporters of other presidential candidates. No woman, no matter how revered, is spared, as Ajoke Silva, a renowned Nigerian Nollywood actress, was recently attacked online for attending the APC Convention in Lagos before the 2023 general elections

after sharing a video of herself at the Convention. How women look is always on the table for misogynists – as women get body shamed for not being whatever standard society has set; even losing weight, as the entertainer Teni did, earned her abuse online as she was accused of relying on surgery. The vulnerability to OGBV cuts across how women and girls look, what they say, what they do not say, and who they choose to associate with.

### **3.5. Implications of OGBV**

#### ***3.5.1. The Nigerian Government's Posture on OGBV and Freedom of Expression***

The Nigerian government's approach to online platforms, freedom of expression, and social media regulation has increasingly come under scrutiny, especially with its handling of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV).

When Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) bring the issue of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) into greater prominence, there is an inherent risk that the government may respond by imposing stricter regulations on social media. This concern is particularly valid when considering the approach of both the Buhari administration and the current Tinubu government, where there is a precedent of restricting online platforms under the guise of national security or public order. The danger lies in the possibility of further limitations on free expression, which may ultimately silence voices advocating against OGBV.

Analyzing the government's posture toward OGBV and free expression was demonstrated in light of a 2022 significant ruling by the Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) concerning the suspension of Twitter in Nigeria. The decision underscores broader concerns about the Nigerian government's tendency to restrict digital spaces, raising concerns about its commitment to protecting freedom of expression and addressing online violence, including OGBV.

On June 4, 2021, the Nigerian government suspended Twitter operations, citing national security concerns. The suspension followed Twitter's removal of a tweet by Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, which was flagged for violating platform rules. The government justified

the ban by claiming that a separatist leader was using Twitter to incite unrest, thus threatening the country's sovereignty.

However, various applicants, including civil society organizations and human rights activists, challenged the suspension, arguing that it was a retaliatory action aimed at curbing free speech and punishing the platform for flagging the president's tweet. The case was brought before the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice, which held that the suspension violated the right to freedom of expression, access to information, and the media.

The court's ruling emphasized that access to social media platforms like Twitter is an essential right for the enjoyment of freedom of expression. The court concluded that the suspension was unlawful under Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The Nigerian government was, therefore, ordered to lift the suspension and ensure non-repetition of the unlawful ban.

This case highlights the Nigerian government's broader tendency to suppress digital platforms, directly impacting addressing OGBV. Social media platforms are critical spaces for discussing gender-based violence, providing support to victims, and raising awareness about the issue. The government's posture, however, often reflects a readiness to curtail online activities, especially when these platforms are used to criticize state actors or expose systemic failures, including in the area of gender rights.

The suspension of Twitter, an essential platform for discourse on OGBV, demonstrates the risk of government overreach in the name of protecting national security. The Nigerian government's action, in this case, mirrors its broader approach to controlling digital spaces where online gender violence is increasingly visible. Civil society organizations (CSOs) advocating against OGBV have noted that as awareness around OGBV grows, the government may respond with heightened restrictions on social media, potentially stifling the very conversations needed to combat online harassment and violence against women.

Women's advocacy groups, feminist platforms, and OGBV survivors rely heavily on social

media to expose instances of online violence and harassment, share resources, and offer peer support. The government's inclination to restrict access to these platforms undermines efforts to address the pervasive issue of OGBV, which disproportionately affects women in the digital space. By limiting freedom of expression online, the government not only suppresses political dissent but also silences voices that seek to challenge gender-based violence.

### **3.5.2. Under-reporting**

Under-reporting of OGBV is a critical obstacle in tackling this pervasive issue. Fear of retaliation, stigma, and privacy concerns often silence survivors, hindering efforts to gauge the true scope of the problem and develop practical solutions. This under-reporting not only speaks to the lack of redress mechanisms to tackle OGBV but also the lack of legal empowerment of victims to understand OGBV as an infringement on their rights and not mere personal attacks. Some women's rights organizations also recorded the non-reportage of OGBV, as many do not recognize them as matters to be prioritized over other forms of VAWG.

*“For my organization, we took those issues as a learning curve and have not technically reported any online violence.” (FGD ABJ R7)*

This research revealed a stark underutilization of reporting mechanisms, as only 1% of respondents reported OGBV incidents to social media platforms, with none experiencing meaningful consequences.

Stakeholders attributed this trend to a lack of cultural sensitivity within social media platforms, particularly regarding localized language and context.

On the other hand, survivors highlighted individualized coping mechanisms, such as disregarding harassment and implementing safety measures, such as blocking and muting certain words, etc, as strategies to navigate harassment online.

### **3.6. Organizational Barriers to Supporting Survivors of OGBV**

The study's insights indicate existing efforts to expand and improve OGBV response services. However, challenges remain in ensuring accessibility, particularly to remote areas, which hampers programming for marginalized populations.

A critical issue identified was the rising rate of femicide and threat to life for women who advocate online, creating more barriers to supporting survivors of OGBV. Women who often support survivors are seen as instruments driving the destruction of traditional values. One respondent cited:

*"One of the major issues that women are advocating against online is femicide. The rates of femicide in Nigeria are incredibly high; women are consistently begging men online not to kill them. Each week, there's a new case on Instablog X about a man who has stabbed his girlfriend, wife, or daughter to death. This happens daily, and we hardly see any form of accountability from the justice system for those women." (FGD ABJ R4)*

Stigma, victim blaming, and cultural barriers, in addition to the absence of accountability of perpetrators through proper legal proceedings and the inefficiencies of the Police, deter survivors from seeking necessary help.

*"Police ask ridiculous questions like, "Why were you sharing your video with a man? What is a young girl doing online? Why is a small girl like you using a phone?" This creates barriers for young girls from reporting OGBV cases to the Police." (FGD NN R3)*

*"When some OGBV cases come up in Court, the authorities cannot fully follow through. Most times, the services to follow up with OGBV cases are difficult, but it is easier for survivors who belong to prominent families to access and pay for these services, for example, the Police." (FGD NN R3)*

Also, limited funding and resources, including poverty, were highlighted as factors restricting the ability of organizations to provide comprehensive services to survivors, including access to shelters, counseling, and legal aid, especially with the cost of these services. One respondent said:

*"My organization receives many cases, and in trying to seek justice, we are constantly faced with roadblocks. When reporting these cases to the Police, we are always asked to pay a 120,000-naira facilitation fee. That's just on one hand. On the other hand, there is the appearance fee for the lawyer, the filing fee for the Court, etc. The challenges are all around implementation, enforcement, and funding." (FGD ABJ R3)*

Furthermore, lack of coordination and collaboration among different organizations and government agencies involved in supporting survivors were underlined as factors resulting in fragmented services and gaps in assistance. Additional challenges highlighted include Inadequate legal and policy frameworks that impede efforts to hold perpetrators of OGBV accountable and provide adequate protection and support for survivors. Other challenges emphasized the need for more safety planning by women crusaders and organizations who utilize the online civic space to advocate for women's issues.

## CHAPTER FOUR- RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

### 4.1. Recommendations

Ideas for mitigating OGBV or reducing the incidences reveals a multifaceted approach to addressing OGBV, emphasizing the need for organizations to implement robust safety protocols to prevent negative offline impacts.

There's a strong call for mechanisms to curb online indecencies that extend into real-world harm. Effective strategies include having dedicated resources and personnel to handle public interactions, ensuring team wellness through health insurance and mental health support, and fostering strategic partnerships with governmental agencies to leverage statistical data and enhance regulatory engagement.

Awareness campaigns are crucial, particularly in rural areas, to educate the public on the consequences of online actions.

There is a pressing need for feminist capacity building, including wellness clinics to address trauma, and for more vigorous law enforcement to protect gender advocates.

Collaboration and networking among organizations are essential to disseminating advocacy messages and implementing holistic approaches to OGBV. Funding and community support are critical, especially for frontline defenders, to sustain their work and address the psychological toll of their efforts. Also recommended were emergency funds for feminists and flexible grant-making, which are necessary to support those in danger due to their activism.

Legal empowerment is also vital, ensuring women are aware of redress systems and can report OGBV incidents, thereby holding perpetrators accountable. Organizations are encouraged to

*"... think about ways to engage cyberspace companies' leaders strategically. Consider how they tailor advocacy messages to these companies, tailoring and defining what cyberspace means for women. Our advocacy can leverage the*



*government's involvement in enforcing ethical business considerations. This can include highlighting that OGBV is a prevalent issue and companies should put in place measures to make the online spaces safe for women as users and as customers." (FGD ABJ R4)*

Respondents, elucidating the paucity of data, spoke to the need for more research to gather comprehensive data on OGBV to design sustainable interventions. Also, to ensure data availability, organizations need to work with government partners to generate national data on OGBV.

Emphasis was placed on the need for law enforcement agencies to facilitate the implementation of existing laws to tackle OGBV. Also emphasized was the critical role of the media in amplifying targeted efforts to end OGBV.

- ❖ The establishment of an online register for perpetrators of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV). This register will serve as the foundation for a comprehensive dashboard, providing a real-time, data-driven tool to monitor the digital safety of female civic defenders and women in general. The platform would facilitate collecting, analyzing, and reporting critical data on OGBV incidents, enabling timely intervention and support for affected individuals. This system will be instrumental in tracking patterns of online abuse, enhancing accountability, and ensuring a safer online environment for women in public and civic spaces.
- ❖ Increasing public awareness and education on OGBV is crucial to curbing this issue. Our research findings indicate that a significant number of people, both men and women, are unaware of what constitutes OGBV. This ignorance leads many men to make harmful "jokes" and comments, often without realizing the impact of their words. Similarly, some women do not speak up against these violations because they do not recognize themselves as victims. To address this, comprehensive educational campaigns are needed to inform the public about the various forms of OGBV, its

consequences, and the importance of respectful online behavior. Schools, workplaces, and community organizations should incorporate OGBV awareness into their programs, while social media platforms can play a role by promoting educational content and resources. Civil Society Organizations should strengthen collaboration with the National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the Ministry of Information to enhance awareness-raising efforts on online gender-based violence.

- ❖ Strengthening reporting and support mechanisms for OGBV survivors is essential in addressing the issue effectively. Currently, many survivors face significant barriers when attempting to report incidents of online gender-based violence, including fear of not being taken seriously, lack of anonymity, and inadequate support systems. To combat this, dedicated support services, such as helplines and online counseling, should be made widely available to provide immediate assistance to survivors. Collaborative efforts between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and tech companies are necessary to create a comprehensive support network.
- ❖ Legal reforms are crucial in the fight against OGBV. Current domestic legislation in Nigeria is insufficient, often addressing violence against persons in general or cybercrime without adequately considering the unique challenges posed by online violence. This gap leaves many OGBV cases unaddressed or inadequately handled. To bridge this gap, existing laws must be revised to include specific provisions that recognize and penalize OGBV. Furthermore, Nigeria should domesticate and enforce various international conventions and treaties that offer robust protections for women's rights, including their rights online. Instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the Council of Europe's Convention on Cybercrime should be integrated into national law. By doing so, the legal framework would offer better protection for victims and serve as a deterrent for potential offenders, ensuring that cyberspace becomes a safer environment for women and girls.

- ❖ It is imperative to emphasize the collective responsibility of significant technology companies, in collaboration with legal systems, to address and mitigate online gender-based violence (OGBV). This shared obligation should include developing robust preventive measures, transparent reporting mechanisms, and partnerships with law enforcement to ensure a comprehensive response. Additionally, victims of OGBV must be entitled to appropriate compensation through civil remedies. This should be coupled with the establishment of well-defined punitive measures aimed at deterring perpetrators and holding both individuals and platforms accountable for enabling such violence.
- ❖ Accountability is essential in the fight against online gender-based violence. Criminalizing it is a crucial first step, but it is equally necessary to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions regardless of their social status. There must be clear consequences for those who engage in OGBV to serve as a strong deterrent. The justice system should actively pursue and prosecute offenders, ensuring they face appropriate legal consequences. High-profile cases should be treated with the same rigor as those involving ordinary individuals to communicate that no one is above the law. Consistent enforcement of penalties will not only provide justice for survivors but also create a culture of accountability, thereby reducing the incidence of OGBV by demonstrating that such behavior will not be tolerated and will inevitably lead to significant repercussions.
- ❖ Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) should establish a dedicated OGBV monitoring and reporting series featuring a periodic review of online gender-based violence incidents. This initiative could involve collecting, analyzing, and publishing OGBV data monthly, quarterly, and annually, providing critical insights into trends, patterns, and emerging threats. Such an approach would raise public awareness, inform policy advocacy, enhance accountability, and guide targeted interventions.
- ❖ Increasing the presence of feminist women in governance is critical for advancing the movement against OGBV. Women, being the primary targets of OGBV, have the lived

experience and insight necessary to advocate for a safer cyberspace for all women effectively. Empowering women to occupy pivotal decision-making positions ensures that their voices and perspectives are included in the legislative process. In Nigeria, for instance, the Senate is the highest law-making body, yet only 3 out of 109 senators are women. This severe underrepresentation hinders the ability to pass robust legislation addressing women's unique online challenges. Given that decision-making in the Senate is democratic and the majority prevails, increasing the number of women, particularly those with feminist ideologies, is essential. This shift would not only help in crafting laws that better protect women from OGBV but also promote gender equality more broadly, ensuring that women's rights and issues are adequately represented and prioritized in governance.

- ❖ Nonetheless, respondents recognized the potential of traditional and faith leaders in mitigating OGBV. These leaders are uniquely positioned to prevent sexual and gender-based violence within their communities due to their intimate familiarity with local customs and their insight into factors and practices that foster such harmful behaviors. One said:

- ❖ *"How people behave online is a product of how they behave offline. Offline behaviors allow them the confidence to exhibit certain behaviors online. So, traditional leaders can influence the behavior of the members of their group based on expected behaviors and practices. That would reflect on the online space as people would rather not engage in posts where they would have ordinarily made unfavorable comments." (FGD ABJ R1).*

- ❖ Hence, managing online safety will require a holistic approach, prioritizing social and behavioral change through strategic reorientation and engagement of cultural and faith gatekeepers. This will lead to a positive mind shift and attitude that transcends physical engagement to influence how individuals behave online and a positive posture towards protecting women and girls, online and offline.

- ❖



## 4.2. Conclusion

### *Ongoing Incidents of OGBV*

Incidences of OGBV appears relenting. For instance, between June and July 2024, we tracked the following trending cases related to OGBV on X:

- *A man named Sir Jairus confessed to physically assaulting his wife on X. The Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency has taken up the case.*
- *Actress Sharon Ooja faced violent attacks on social media after marrying a man alleged to be thrice divorced.*
- *A woman married to Kevin Odanz, a popular personality on X, revealed the inhuman treatment she faces from her husband, opening the floodgate of OGBV cases.*
- *Dr Abiola Akiyode-Afolabi (@abiolaak on X), a women's rights activist, made a post demanding Justice for Mrs. Olufunmilayo Mary-Anne Oluwawemimo, a suspected victim of domestic violence allegedly perpetrated by her husband, Mr. Daniel Oluwadamilola Oluwawemimo. Dr Abiola further called for the arrest and prosecution of the accused man. This post received many backlashes, especially from men who claimed she was a 'bitter feminist pushing a personal agenda.'*

While these cases received significant attention on social media and evince the spread and diversity of GBV and OGBV, the majority of OGBV cases do not trend but are repetitive and constant.

*"I have faced several forms of online harassment. I have been stalked online. I have a special stalker; he reaches out every three months with an anonymous account. I have been trolled as well." (KII NG R2)*

Some spoke about how their online views translate to physical harm.

*"A couple of years ago, there was an issue around an attack of a student in Sokoto, at the college of education in Sokoto, so I just aired my view on my WhatsApp status, and I got trolled and attacked by a work partner who saw it. She told me*

*that if I had said this thing in Sokoto State, they were going to attack me and make sure I didn't come back alive. These are some of the attacks women face for airing their opinions publicly on human rights concerns." (IDI ABJ R2)*

OGBV can be insidious in its impact, affecting the mental and psycho-social well-being of women online and affecting their economic and social well-being, with public online blackmail and threats resulting in damage to the targets' reputation. This negatively impacts survivors' employability and social capital and limits access to economic resources.

*"I once took out a soft loan for a supply contract, and towards the end of the day, when I had not yet repaid the loan, my attention was drawn to a social media post with my picture and vile accusations made against me. It was the agent for the company I took the loan from. I was astonished. I did not know how they had access to my picture and only found out later that as part of the terms of the agreement, the company had access to and could use my information as they pleased. It was a terrible experience that affected me mentally long after the incident was resolved." (IDI NN R3)*

Shared intimacy between consenting adults also results in online attacks on women. Some perpetrators have weaponized the use of intimate and personal images shared and taken in relationships to damage the reputation of women. This is often an attempt to tarnish the woman's image; celebrities are popular targets. In 2021, Tiwa Savage, a globally recognized Nigerian artiste, was blackmailed with a sex tape to extort financial gains until she came out publicly herself. However, this practice is not limited to celebrities.

*"We've had several reports of people calling and reporting that their ex-partners are threatening to send their nudes to the public, and most times what these guys want is, it's either to send them money or ensure that the relationship continues by force." (FGD LS R9)*

Gender inequality is a fundamental driver of online violence against women, as highlighted by the significant gender disparity in internet usage across Africa, where only 34 percent of

women are online compared to 45 percent of men. However, the majority of OGBV cases target women. This digital divide is even more pronounced in the least developed countries, with just 15 percent of rural households connected to the internet compared to 50 percent in urban areas.

The existence of several supportive initiatives has not resulted in stemming the tide of online abuse towards women, particularly those that provide safe spaces for empowerment; women activists remain disproportionately targeted by OGBV. Notably, high-profile figures like Kiki Mordi, Rinu Oduala, Ozzy Etomi, Big Bad Reni, and Ndi Kato continue to face relentless online harassment, highlighting the urgent need for systemic and comprehensive solutions.

Media coverage of violence against women and girls remains inadequate, and technological innovations are underutilized in ensuring consistent reporting. The pervasive underreporting of online violence in Nigeria calls for legislative reforms grounded in robust data-gathering and reporting mechanisms.

To effectively combat online abuse against women, existing laws such as the Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (NDPR), Data Protection Bill, Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Law, Cyber Crimes Act (2015), Penal Code, Criminal Code Act, and Digital Rights and Freedom Bill must be fully implemented and updated to reflect the evolving technological landscape. Perpetrators must be held accountable through appropriate penalties to reinforce a zero-tolerance approach towards OGBV.

Addressing OGBV is essential to safeguarding women's physical and mental wellbeing, upholding their fundamental human rights, and creating a more equitable cyberspace. Through a concerted and holistic approach, we can mitigate the impact of OGBV, advance gender equality, and empower women to participate safely and freely in the digital world. Achieving lasting change requires coordinated efforts among technology companies, civil



society organizations, the media, and governments. The findings of this study are crucial for policymakers, stakeholders, and advocates committed to eradicating OGBV.

Digital rights are inherently human, and digital spaces must be safe and empowering for all.