

2.3.3. Violence against women and girls

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Legal framework

Domestic legal provisions criminalising some forms of violence against girl-child are contained in the Child's Rights Act of 2003, prohibiting child marriage, sexual abuse and exploitation, the use of children in criminal activities, child labour, and other forms of exploitation.327 Southern states apply the Criminal Code,328 while the Northern states rely on the Penal Code Act as their principal criminal legislation.329 Although both codes address gender-based violence, they contain significant limitations,330 including the exclusion of marital rape from criminal liability. 331 For instance, Section 55(1)(d) of the Penal Code332 allows forms of domestic violence.333 Further, under sharia law applied in the aforementioned 12 northern states, 'beating of the wife is not a crime so long that the beating does not inflict serious injury or grievous harmful.'334

In 2015, Nigeria enacted The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) (VAPP) Act,335 which is described as the most comprehensive legislation addressing various forms of violence against women,336 including domestic violence, rape, FGM/C and child marriage.337 Kano state has not enacted the VAPP Act, while Ekiti and Lagos have enacted separate laws on SGBV. In Taraba State, the VAPP Act was passed by the Assembly but has not been assented.338 In August 2024, a bill to repeal the VAPP Act 2015, advanced to its second reading in the Senate,339 raising concerns and opposition from women rights' groups.340 By the time this report was finalised, the proposed bill to repeal the Act was still pending. Implementation of the VAPP Act remains, however, uneven across states.341 Obstacles to full implementation include lack of awareness, inadequate funding, weak legal enforcement,342 social norms, poor coordination among authorities,343 as well as inadequate protection for survivors and witnesses.344

Prevalence

Women and girls in Nigeria from all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds345 have continued to be subjected to widespread sexual and gender-based violence,346 including domestic, sexual violence, FGM/C and child marriage.347 From January to May 2025, Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) documented 33 256 sexual and gender-based violence cases.348 In 2025, a representative from NAPTIP stated that the agency had documented over 3 000 cases of violence against women in the FCT alone.349 Women in conflict settings, and especially girls in conflict zones and IDPs camps,350 face heightened vulnerability and violence.351 In the first half of 2024, North-East Nigeria experienced a significant rise in gender-based violence, especially involving intimate partner violence, child

sexual exploitation, and forced marriages. Risks of violence against women have been exacerbated by the ongoing conflict, economic challenges, and the impact of flooding.[352] Similarly, between January and May 2025, violence against women remained one of the 'key concerns' identified by UNHCR across IDPs' sites.[353] Further, the majority of women in Nigeria, (around 60 %), lacks the ability to make independent decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, increasing their risk of violence and exploitation.[354]

Access to support services and state response

Shelters for women victims of violence are accessible, particularly in major cities such as Lagos and Abuja; however, their availability remains insufficient relative to the scale of need; also there is a significant lack of awareness about their existence.[355] In November 2024, the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (FMWASD) reported that the government has increased resources to prevent and address different forms of violence against women.[356] As part of these efforts, several states have introduced 24-hour helplines and expanded the number of shelters for survivors of violence. These shelters provide emergency housing, legal assistance, and access to counselling and health services.[357] The Nigerian Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency reported that it was unable to meet the current level of demand.[358] In North-East Nigeria, women survivors face additional challenges in getting support due to lack of safe spaces, inadequate referral mechanisms, limited health infrastructure,[359] as well as access to legal assistance.[360]

While legal and institutional mechanisms for women victims of violence exist, their functioning and effectiveness remain limited. Challenges include systemic corruption, nepotism, and a lack of basic infrastructure. For example, contacting hotlines can take days due to poor network coverage, and access often depends on personal connections.[361] In North-East Nigeria, protection is often inadequate, with law enforcement unresponsive or overstretched due to limited resources or fear of reprisals.[362] The Nigerian Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency reported that significant gaps remain in the adequacy and timeliness of legal protection for victims and in holding offenders accountable.[363]

Domestic violence

Domestic violence against women and girls is a widespread phenomenon across Nigeria.[364] According to NHRC data, a total of 84 187 cases of domestic violence were reported between January and December 2024.[365] In the first quarter of 2025 (January to March), an additional 17 252 cases were recorded, followed by 6 135 cases in April and 3 361 in May. [366] Northern Nigeria has seen an 'alarming rise' in SGBV cases, with 73 % of cases in 2024 involving intimate partner violence, up from 57 % in 2023 and 63 % in 2022.[367] Among married or cohabiting victims, 98 % experienced abuse within the context of intimate partner violence - which is often seen as 'a private matter.'[368] A study on help-seeking behaviours among 31 802 women across Nigeria found that 67.1 % did not seek help after experiencing intimate partner violence, with only 1.9 % turning to formal support, and most relying on informal sources like friends or family.[369] A 2024 study in Ogbomoso, Oyo State (South-West Nigeria) found that healthcare professionals had inadequate knowledge and attitudes towards victims of domestic violence, lacked referral resources to support them, and worked in hospitals without documented protocols for managing such cases.[370]

The NGO Femi(ni)cide Watch Platform (FWP) recorded 135 cases of femicides in 2024 and additional 70 cases as of 5 August 2025, with offenders predominantly being family members. The highest number of cases occurred in Delta, Lagos, and Ogun states.371 Cases of domestic violence and femicides are however underreported, due to lack of trust in the system and limited inter-agency documentation.372 Underreporting is further exacerbated by the absence of a legal framework specifically addressing femicide,373 as well as the lack of a comprehensive national data system for tracking such cases.374

A 30-bed government shelter (Eko Haven) for victims of domestic violence was opened in Lagos State in 2023.375 Alongside government initiatives, some NGOs provide support to victims of domestic violence in the country.376 For instance, in Abuja, the Safe Heaven Foundation provides sheltering and psychosocial support to victims of domestic violence.377 Significant gaps are, however, reported in the support systems available for victims of domestic violence and their dependents, particularly in areas such as shelters, healthcare services, legal frameworks for child custody, and access to financial aid.378

Sexual violence

According to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), almost one in four Nigerian women aged 18-24 years have experienced sexual abuse before age 18.379 NHRC recorded a total of 45 986 cases of sexual violence and 6 943 cases of rape between January and December 2024.380 From January to March 2025, an additional 2 711 sexual violence cases and 409 rape cases were recorded. In April 2025, cases of sexual violence were 2 200 and cases of rape 11; in May 2025, additional 1 152 cases of sexual violence and 5 cases of rape were documented.381 In North-East Nigeria, rape accounted for 17 % of the total SGBV incidents in 2024, marking a 5 % increase compared to 2023, with 2 % of sexual violence incidents being related to sexual slavery. The same source indicated that 14 % of reported cases involved child sexual abuse, with children accounting for approximately one in every five reported incidents.382 Women and girls with disabilities are also particularly vulnerable, with 85.3 % facing increased risks of exploitation and sexual abuse.383

As noted by NAPTIP, a significant number of sexual assault cases go unreported due to victims' psychological and social barriers, including fear, shame, stigma, and the risk of being subjected to victim-blaming, which discourage them from reporting the incident.384 Sources have also identified fear of reprisal and a lack of trust in the justice system as further factors that refrained victims from reporting such incidents.385 Reported cases of sexual violence are often hindered by weak prosecution, largely due to a lack of evidence,386 gaps in the legal system and insufficient support services,387 such as medical assistance and trauma counselling. 388 Furthermore, stigma and shame, often reinforced by family and community, discourage victims of sexual violence from seeking necessary post-assault healthcare. 389

In 2021, NAPTIP established Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARC) which offer services for survivors of sexual violence, including counselling, medical, forensic, legal as well as psychosocial support.390 As of October 2024, there were 47 SARC in Nigeria across 22 states. 391 The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development reported in November 2024 that the number of SARCs was insufficient, underfunded, and centres often lacked the personnel to function effectively. Government attention to shelters for victims remained inadequate.392

Victims may also lack awareness about available services and 'fear being identified as survivors'.393 NGOs and Christian organisations operate shelters for victims of sexual violence, often in partnership with public institutions.394

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C)

With around 20 million individuals affected,395 Nigeria has the largest number of women and girls who have undergone FGM/C within the West and Central African region.396

Comprehensive data on prevalence of FGM/C in Nigeria relevant for the reference period of this report could not be found among all sources consulted.397 According to UNICEF, Nigeria has the third-highest prevalence of FGM worldwide, with the highest risk occurring during a girl's first year of life.398 A similar trend is reported by Plan International, indicating that although FGM/C prevalence among women aged 15–49 has declined in recent years in Nigeria, rates among girls aged 0–14 have risen from 16.9 % to 19.2 % since 2013.399 No additional sources could be found to cross-check this data.

FGM/C is most prevalent in the South-East and South-West regions, while the North-East records the lowest prevalence.400 Historically, the practice has been more prevalent in rural areas (where more than half of Nigeria's population resides), however, latest available data show a shifting trend. Among women aged 15–49, 24.2 % living in urban areas have undergone FGM/C, compared to 15.6 % in rural areas. However, for girls aged 0–14, the pattern appears to be reversing, with 21.1 % of those in rural areas affected, compared to 16.3 % in urban areas.401 Cross-border practices of FGM/C are also common, with some families travelling with girls to neighbouring countries where the practice is still permitted.402 When looking at total numbers, the most affected states are Lagos, Kaduna, Imo, Kano, and Oyo.403 FGM/C occurs across all ethnic groups, with the highest prevalence among Yoruba (35 %) and lowest among Tiv and Igala women (1 % each).404

The most recent data from the 2021 Nigeria MICS show shifts in the distribution of FGM types compared to 2019. Type II (flesh removed) remains the most common form, but its prevalence has risen sharply from 41 % in 2019 to 73 % in 2021. Type I (nicking without flesh removal) has remained relatively stable, decreasing slightly from 10 % to 9.6 %. Type III (infibulation/sewn closed) increased from 6 % in 2019 to 8.6 % in 2021. In addition, the 2021 survey recorded 8.7 % of cases where the form of FGM could not be determined.405

FGM/C is traditionally performed by older community members, often women, who are assigned this role, or by traditional birth attendants.406 Midwives, nurses, and doctors operating within communities also carry out the procedure.407 Although traditional forms of FGM/C are legally banned, a 'concerning trend' of medicalisation has emerged, whereby the procedure is performed by healthcare providers in healthcare facilities, 'perpetuating the practice under the guise of safety'.408 According to estimates by UNFPA, 13 % of FGM/C cases in Nigeria were performed by health workers.409 Similarly, Plan International reported that medical professional carried out the procedure on a quarter of the total number of victims in the country.410 As noted by director of WOCON, Morenike Omaiboje, medicalisation of FGM/C has been going on for a long time in Nigeria and it represents a problematic issue since - *de facto* - it legitimises the practice, curbing efforts to eradicate it. The source added that Nigeria has legal and policy

frameworks against medicalised FGM/C and collaborates with the World Health Organization (WHO) and medical associations to enforce bans and raise awareness. 411

The practice of FGM/C in Nigeria is driven by deep-rooted cultural, religious, and social norms 412 that view it as beneficial,413 enhancing a woman's prospects for marriage414 and reducing promiscuity.415 The Director of WOCON explained that women and girls who refuse to undergo FGM/C often face considerable social stigma and pressure. In some cultural contexts, they may be labelled as 'unclean' or 'disobedient' and are subjected to insults, shaming, and accusations of bringing dishonour to their families or rejecting tradition. Uncut girls may be considered unsuitable for marriage and excluded from cultural rituals or peer groups. Families who choose not to subject their daughters to FGM/C also face various consequences. These include community pressure and accusations of abandoning tradition. Such refusals can result in family disputes, particularly with elders who insist on continuing the practice. Families may be ostracised or become targets of village gossip. In some cases, others may threaten to carry out the procedure themselves or coerce the girl into undergoing it. There may also be economic repercussions, such as the loss of bride price negotiations or weakened social alliances.416 Traditional customs often take precedence over statutory provisions in many regions. Many victims of FGM/C experience intense pressure from family members and community groups to undergo the procedure, often without access to external support systems. In some cases, powerful individuals reportedly leverage their influence to hinder law enforcement efforts, leaving victims with little to no legal protection. Women continue to face coercion, especially from in-laws, to subject their daughters to FGM.417 This coercion takes various forms, 'including physical assaults, threats, verbal harassment, and financial oppression, ultimately compelling most women to yield to the demands of their family members'.418 Many of these incidents are not reported to the police, as most women fear that involving law enforcement against their husbands' families could put their marriages at risk. In the Nigerian context, such actions may lead to divorce, with serious psychological and social consequences for the women involved.419

NGOs indicated inadequate funding and insufficient capacity as major challenges to maintaining their anti-FGM initiatives.420 In addition, institutional weaknesses, enforcement gaps, and a lack of resources and technical capacity among relevant government agencies continue to hinder efforts to eliminate the practice.421 Despite the existence of strict laws, offences related to FGM/C (along with other forms of violence against women such as rape, domestic violence, child marriage), remain widespread, with low rates of reporting and prosecution.422 In an interview with EUAA, the director of WOCON stated that there are no shelters dedicated solely to FGM/C victims in Nigeria, but support services for victims of this practice are generally integrated into broader SGBV response systems.423 On the other hand, a confidential source interviewed by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2022 reported that the Nigerian Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development has a shelter for victims of FGM in almost every state.424 No other source could be found to corroborate this information.

Child and forced marriage

In Nigeria, four in ten girls are married before the age of 18, placing the country third globally, with over 24 million child brides. Despite data indicating a decrease in national prevalence (from 44 % to 30 %) progress has been slow and inconsistent.425 The North-West and North-East

regions have the highest rates of women aged 20 to 24 who were married before the age of 18. Child marriage is particularly common among women from the Hausa ethnic group,[426] and more prevalent among girls from low-income families, especially those living in rural regions or having limited access to education.[427]

The main factors behind child marriage include poverty, restricted access to education, political and economic pressures, religion, and cultural traditions - such as marrying girls before puberty to safeguard their perceived virginity.[428] Security and instability have continued to influence the prevalence of child marriage in the North-East of Nigeria.[429] Boko Haram and other armed groups forced many women and girls into marriage.[430] In April 2024, Amnesty International reported that 82 of the 276 schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram in the 2014 Chibok attack remain in captivity and called on the Nigerian authorities to investigate the allegations that at least 20 of the women were subjected to forced marriage.[431] Within this context, child marriage is often used by families as a protective measure against abduction, sexual abuse,[432] and economic insecurity.[433]

Conflict-related violence

Conflict-related sexual violence has continued to severely impact women and girls in North-East Nigeria. Non-state armed groups have continued to abduct them, subjecting them to rape and sexual slavery as both a reward for fighters and a means of attracting new recruits. In some cases, families reportedly consented to forced marriages as a coping strategy to prevent abductions. Female-headed households and single women have been targeted and subjected to rape by former members of armed groups near displacement sites in Borno State.[434] Most incidents in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (Bay) States were linked to abductions and attacks by non-state armed groups, who used sexual violence as a tool of control, intimidation, or punishment, often forcing women and girls into marriage.[435] In 2024, over 900 cases of conflict-related gender-based violence were reported in the North-East, of which 65 % were children.[436]

Boko Haram has been responsible for serious violations of women's rights, including forced marriages and rape.[437] In 2024, Boko Haram militants abducted over 400 individuals, the majority of whom were women and children, during attacks on IDPs camp in Gamboru Ngala, Borno State.[438]

Also in 2024, in Sokoto State, some armed gunmen kidnapped 17 female students from the dormitory of an all-girls boarding school.[439] In a separate incident in Zamfara State, located in the country’s Northwest, over 50 women and children were taken during a violent raid on the village of Kakin Dawa.[440]

Military personnel, along with other actors, have also subjected women and girls in IDP camps to sexual violence.[441] In the IDPs camps of Ngaranam, Ali Modu Sheriff, Bakassi, and Gubio in Borno State, harassment is the most reported SGBV issue, followed by denial of resources and sexual violence. Barriers such as stigma, lack of awareness, and poor accessibility, particularly affecting persons with disabilities, continued to hinder victims from accessing essential support services.[442]

In 2024, the Special Independent Investigative Panel on Human Rights Violations in Counter-Insurgency Operations in North-East Nigeria concluded its hearings on the 2022 Reuters' allegations against the Nigerian military.443 According to Reuters' investigation, since at least 2013, the Nigerian military has carried out a secret, systematic, and illegal abortion program in the country's North-East, resulting in the termination of at least 10 000 pregnancies among women and girls. Many of the victims had been kidnapped and raped by Islamist militants. Witnesses reported that those who resisted were beaten, held at gunpoint, or drugged to force compliance.444 The human rights panel found no evidence to support the allegations reported by Reuters. The panel's investigation lasted 18 months and included 199 witness testimonies. However, the panel confirmed instances of human rights violations, including infanticide during a 2016 military operation in Borno State. Reuters stood by its reports, while some observers suggested further independent investigations might be necessary due to the complexities involved.445

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