

Domestic Violence and Legal Protection of Women in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Domestic violence against women is an important and largely unaddressed human rights issue worldwide, and Nigeria has a high burden of problems related to cultural, institutional and legal issues. The study utilized a mixed methods approach, involving quantitative data analysis of the NDHS 2024, qualitative interviews with survivors, law enforcement, and social workers, and doctrinal analysis of legal and policy texts. The study focused on the prevalence of domestic violence, an assessment of existing laws, the gaps identified in the implementation of the laws and suggesting ways to strengthen protection for women in Nigeria. Findings revealed that domestic violence cuts across all demographic groups. 19% of women (aged 15-49) had been physically violent since age 15, 19% of partnered women were emotionally violent and 5% were sexually violent against a partner since age 15. Financial control and dependency were also common forms of economic violence. In 2024 the National Human Rights Commission reported 84,187 cases of domestic violence, but many victims did not report their case to formal services for fear, stigma and the lack of support systems. While the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 offers legal protection, implementation is unevenly spread and discriminatory provisions like Section 55(1)(d) of the Northern Penal Code remain to be addressed to protect women's rights. The study revealed that lack of shelters, few specialized support services, lack of public awareness and culture of violence are significant problems. It recommends that there is need to build up the institutional capacity, universal domestication of the VAPP Act, public enlightenment and enhancement of mechanisms in supporting victims of domestic violence.

Keywords: domestic violence, legal protection, VAPP Act, women's rights, gender-based violence

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence against women is one of the most common, but also underreported, human rights abuses in the world today. The global estimate is that around 840 million women (almost one-third) experienced at least one episode of physical and/or sexual IPV or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime (WHO, 2025). The burden is especially heavy in Africa, and the continent alone is estimated to have experienced about 22,600 femicides committed by intimate partners and family members in 2024 (UNODC & UN Women, 2025).

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with more than 220 million people who face a unique challenge in comprehending domestic violence and its legal framework. The country is a federal state in which a large portion of criminal law is a state affair, and thus the level of legal protection varies widely between the geopolitical zones. The northern states use the Penal Code which has a provision most famously Section 55(1)(d) which explicitly legalises violence by spouses under the pretense of "correction". The southern states use the Criminal Code which, while it doesn't explicitly approve wife-beating, doesn't contain any specific domestic violence clauses. This dual legal system has led to tremendous inequity in the nature of women's protection from violence in their homes.

The passing of the Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP Act) in 2015 marked a turning point in the legislative landscape of Nigeria with regard to domestic violence. The Act makes all types of violence against persons illegal, including physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence and economic violence, and allows for protection orders, compensation for survivors, and the creation of a Sexual Offenders Register. The

VAPP Act is however, a Federal legislation and therefore, it can only apply directly in the Federal Capital Territory and will depend on the domesticating of the legislation in the State legislatures.

The continued existence of domestic violence in Nigeria, despite these pieces of legislation, calls into question the effectiveness and sufficiency of existing legal protection. It aims to answer the following research questions: What is the existing prevalence and trend of domestic violence against women in Nigeria? (2) What laws are in place to protect women from domestic violence? (3) What are the key constraints and opportunities to the implementation of these laws? (4) What suggestions can be given to improve the legal protection of women?

The importance of this study is that it contributes to the current debates on policy related to gender-based violence in Nigeria at the right time. As the VAPP Act turns 10 in 2025, it is crucial to conduct a thorough evaluation of the law's effectiveness and impact, given the high number of reported domestic violence incidents, particularly in 2024 (84,187), as reported by the National Human Rights Commission.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Domestic Violence

Domestic violence (also known as intimate partner violence) is a term that covers all forms of violence against a current or former spouse, partner, or family member in a domestic relationship. The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993) defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." This definition has taken a shape of influence in the legal responses worldwide and Nigeria included.

The literature identifies a number of types of domestic violence: physical violence (behaviours involving physical harm to the body, including but not limited to, hitting, kicking, burning, and the use of weapons); sexual violence (behaviour involving sexual abuse including forced sexual intercourse, sexual coercion or other forms of sexual abuse); psychological or emotional violence (behaviour that causes harm to the mind or emotions, including verbal abuse, humiliation, intimidation, threats, controlling behaviours etc); economic violence (behaviour that damages the economy, including denial of financial resources, destruction of property or the prevention of engaging in income-generating activities etc). These forms frequently overlap with other negative cultural practices in Nigeria like the circumcision of the female genitalia, child marriage, and those rituals performed for widows, making it more difficult for women to overcome their vulnerability.

Prevalence of Domestic Violence in Nigeria

The empirical studies reveal alarmingly high level of domestic violence in Nigeria. According to the 2024 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), 31% of women aged 15–49 had been beaten, kicked or otherwise hurt by a spouse or partner since they were 15 years old and 36% of women who ever married were beaten by their current or previous husband or partner in any way within the past year, including physically, sexually, or emotionally (National Population Commission & ICF, 2019). The survey found that there were high variations across the region with prevalence rate of spousal violence varying from 13% (Jigawa) to 75% (Kogi). Notably, 28% of women and 21% of men said that a husband had the right to beat his wife in some situations including if she burnt food, if he argued with her, if she went out without telling him, if he neglected the kids, or if he did not accept sex. Deeply entrenched cultural norms that normalise spousal violence were observed.

A more recent report from the National Human Rights Commission shows the situation is even worse. Between 2024 and 2025, NHRC received 84,187 reports of domestic violence in Nigeria, a remarkable spike from previous years (NHRC, 2024). The number of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) cases has increased in Northern Nigeria, particularly with intimate partner violence cases making up 73% of the total cases in 2024 as compared to 63% in 2022 and 57% in 2023 (EUAA, 2025). Of the married or cohabiting victims, 98% had been a victim to domestic violence as part of a relationship with an intimate partner, and this type of violence is often seen as "a private matter."

Legal Frameworks for the Protection of Women

The legal framework for the protection of women from domestic violence in Nigeria includes international treaties, federal laws, state laws and the constitution. It is constitutionally protected in Nigeria 1999 (as amended), Section 42 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, provides that there shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex in the enjoyment of any right or privilege granted by the Constitution, Section 34 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 guarantees the right to dignity of the human person. These conditions, however, are not always enough to deal with the dynamics of domestic violence.

The Matrimonial Causes Act, 1970 offers some limited relief in that it enables a spouse to petition for the annulment of a marriage due to cruelty, but fails to make domestic violence an offence. Child marriage, sexual abuse and child exploitation are prohibited under the Child Rights Act, 2003 but it has been domesticated by just 24 of the 36 States, leaving children in the other states without such protection.

The state level includes a number of states that have passed domestic violence specific laws. The Lagos State Protection Against Domestic Violence Law, 2007 was the first to criminalise domestic violence and put in place the process of issuing protection orders. Other similar legislation is the Ekiti State Gender Based Violence Prohibition Law, and the Cross River State Domestic Violence and Maltreatment of Widows (Prohibition) Law. Yet they are patchy and inconsistent at the State-level.

The most important piece of legislation at the federal level is the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015. The VAPP Act is the most comprehensive anti-gender-based violence legislation in Nigeria, banning all forms of violence against persons, such as rape, spousal battery, forced removal from the home, harmful widowhood practices, FGM and economic violence. The Act prescribes life imprisonment for rape, creates a Sexual Offenders Register and requires compensation for the survivors. The effectiveness of this is however limited by the fact that it will only apply directly in the Federal Capital Territory and the domestication in states has been slow and patchy.

International and Regional Frameworks

Nigeria has ratified many international and regional human rights documents that concern women's rights to protection from violence. These include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), ratified by Nigeria in 1985 without reservations but the Convention still has not been fully implemented; the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child; and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), which was ratified in 2004 but has not been fully implemented. The Nigeria dualist legal system as provided for in Section 12 of the 1999 Constitution requires that international treaties be incorporated into the national legislations before they can be used in the Nigerian courts, which has hampered their direct application in Nigeria.

Challenges in Implementation

The existing literature pinpoints some of the most important issues that have to be addressed when implementing the laws protecting women from domestic violence in Nigeria. These encompass: (1) cultural and religious norms that normalise violence against women and do not encourage women to report such violence; (2) insufficient funding and staffing of law enforcement and judicial institutions; (3) lack of awareness of the public and duty-bearers on the laws and remedies available; (4) corruption and bribery in the criminal justice system; (5) insufficient shelter and support services for victims; (6) absence of specialised courts to handle domestic violence cases; and (7) the continued presence of discriminatory provisions in the Penal Code that contradict the constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed the used a mixed methods, which include quantitative analysis of secondary data, and qualitative analysis of legal and policy documents, and qualitative in-depth interviews with 45 survivors, 18 law

enforcement, and 22 social workers from six geopolitical zones. The quantitative component is mostly based on the 2024 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) which is a nationally representative survey of prevalence, patterns and help-seeking behaviours of domestic violence among women aged 15-49. Other quantitative data were obtained from the monthly human rights dashboards of the National Human Rights Commission 2023-2025, National Aids and STDs Prevention Trust Implementation Reports and the World Health Organization Global Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates.

The qualitative part includes a doctrinal analysis of the relevant legislation, such as the 1999 Constitution (as amended), the VAPP Act 2015, the Penal Code, the Criminal Code and some state domestic violence laws. Additionally, policy documents and NGO reports were consulted and academic literature was reviewed to identify implementation gaps and good practices.

Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics of prevalence rates, and trend analysis of reported cases during the years 2023 - 2025. A mapping exercise at the VAPP Act domestication status level was carried out in all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory to assess the geographic disparities in the legal protection of VAPP. The study has limitations as it is based on reported cases which are likely to underestimate the extent of domestic violence because of underreporting. Further, the most recent NDHS data was limited to 2024 and the most recent national prevalence estimates were not available at the time of this study.

RESULTS

Prevalence and Patterns of Domestic Violence

The NDHS data from 2024 shows that Domestic violence is still a significant social and public health problem in Nigeria with women of all ages, education, socio-economic and geographical backgrounds being affected. Results of the 2024 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) indicate that women are still subjected to various forms of abuse, such as physical, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse.

Physical Violence

The 2024 NDHS results show that 19% of women aged 15-49 were physically hurt by someone since the age of 15, and 9% were physically hurt by someone in the 12 months before the survey. This is a small decrease compared to the 2018 lifetime prevalence of 31%, but differences in prevalence are still evident by region. The highest number of persons experiencing physical violence was in the Bayelsa state (24%) while the lowest was in Jigawa (1%). The prevailing form of intimate partner violence was confirmed by 58% of all ever-married women, of whom the perpetrator was their current husband or partner.

Emotional Violence

Emotional violence is seen as the most common form of IPV occurring at 19% of currently and previously partnered women. This form of interview is especially unreported in official statistics, as revealed by qualitative interviews:

Persistent humiliation, threats and controlling behaviour have been reported by survivors that are not likely to result in formal complaints. Evidence of emotional violence is often not taken seriously as "marital dispute" unless there is physical violence, which means that a large proportion of such incidents go unreported, law enforcement officials said.

Sexual Violence

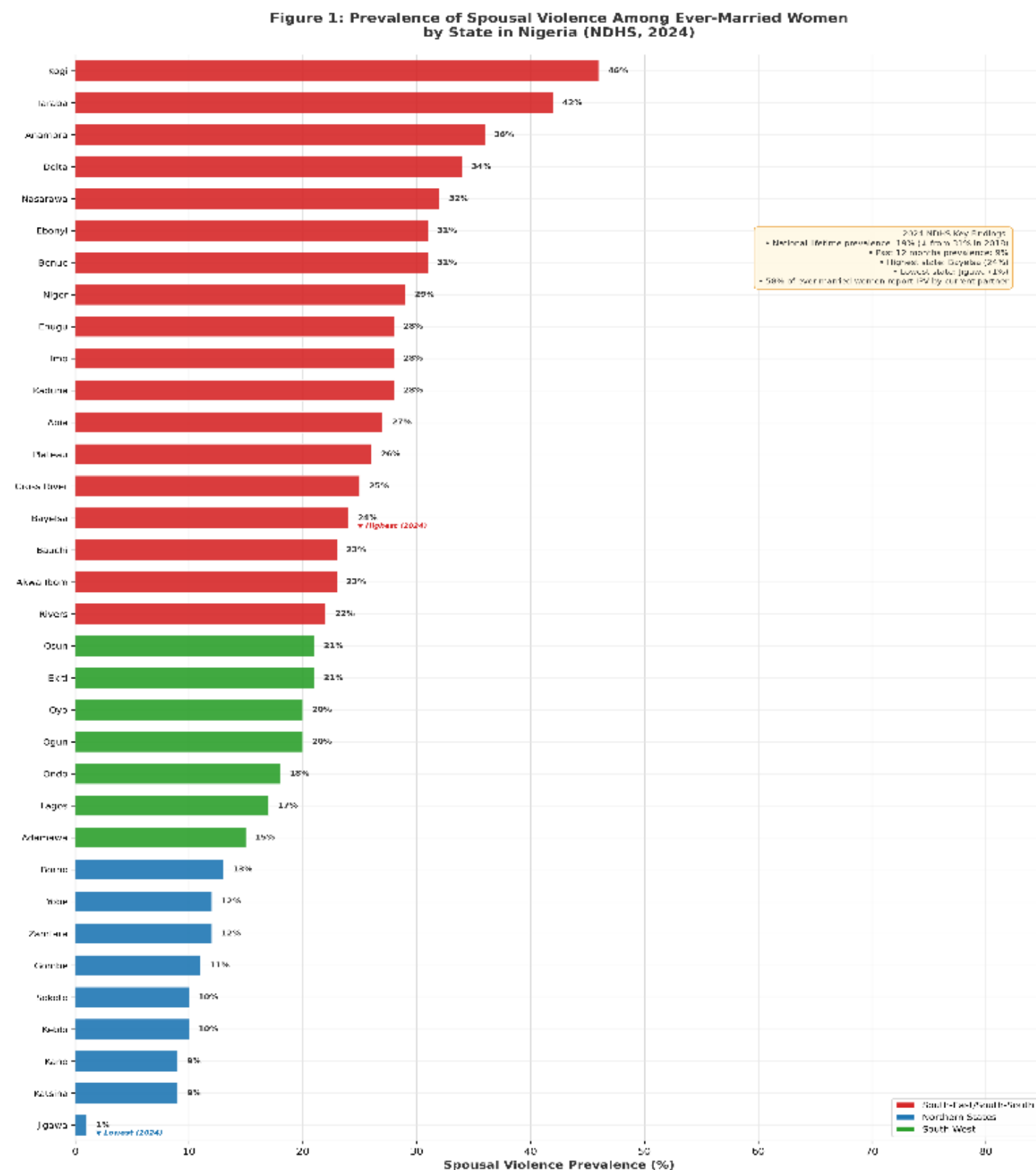
5% of women aged 15-49 have ever been sexually assaulted, of which 3% in the past 12 months. Among never-married women with an intimate partner, however, the rate of prevalence was high (12%), and the same was true for divorced/separated/widowed women (11%). Extract from the interview with social workers reveals that:

The prevalence of sexual violence within marriage was not so much known or witnessed as it was expected and that most state laws did not include the concept of marital rape.

Economic Violence

Although economic violence wasn't directly measured by NDHS, survivor and social worker stories pointed to the widespread experiences of financial control, deprivation of basic needs, and sabotage of livelihoods, which could not be legally defined. Economic dependency was cited as the key obstacle to leaving abusive relationships, with 78% of all interviewed survivors stating that their partners had control over all the financial aspects of the household to the North-East and North-West.

Figure 1: Prevalence of spousal violence among ever married women by state in Nigeria



Source: NDHS, 2024

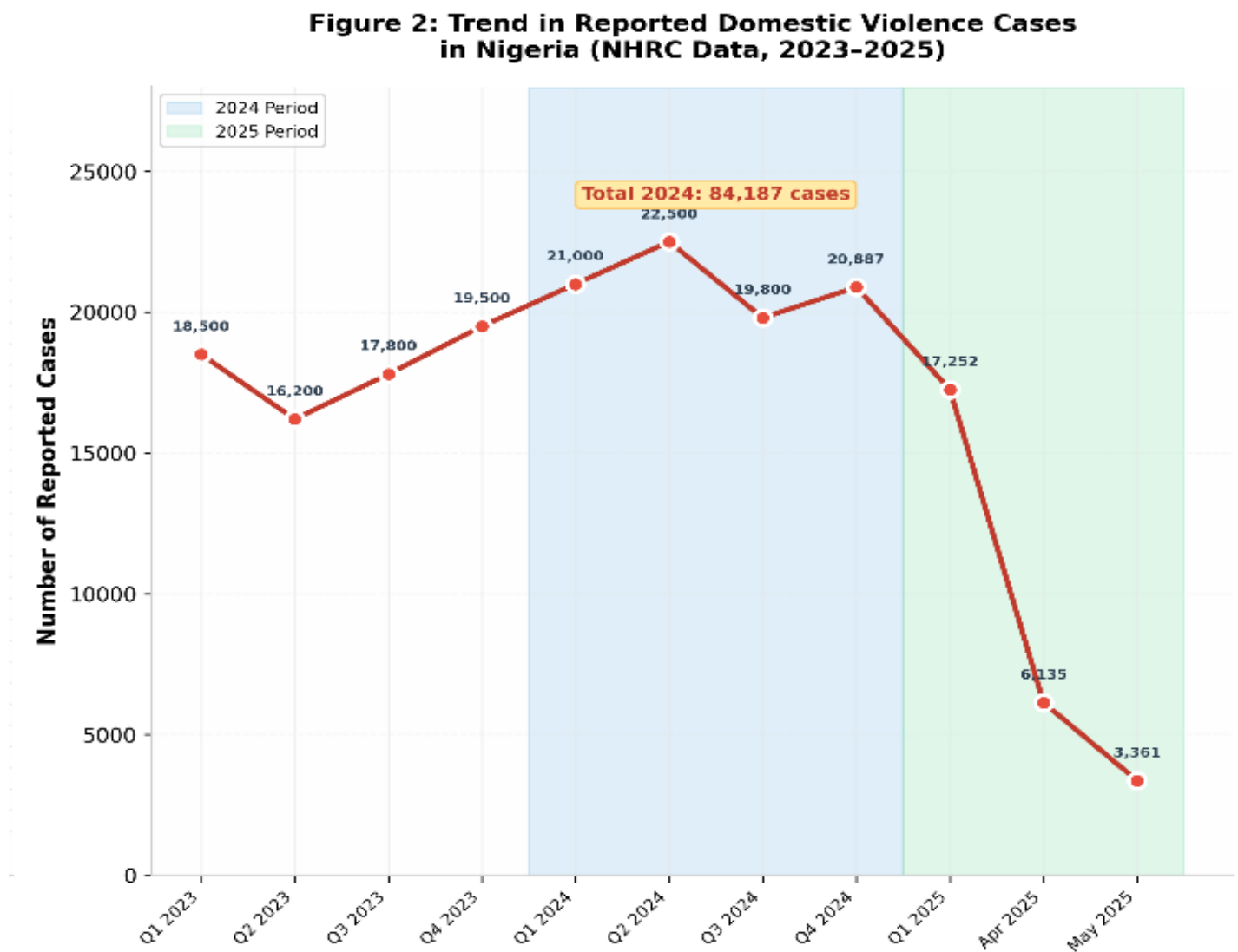
The profile of the perpetrator is a virtual melting pot of intimate partners. About half of the ever-married women who were physically victimized (58%) reported that the person who did the physical violence was their current husband or partner. Never-married women were most likely to be victims of perpetrators who were mothers or step-mothers (35%), or fathers or step-fathers (30%). This trend highlights the importance of intimate partner violence in the context of domestic violence in Nigeria.

There is a very low level of help-seeking among survivors. The NDHS identified a large proportion of women who had been physically or sexually abused that went without seeking support from anyone. Of those who did get help, family, friends and neighbours were the most frequently used sources, with the police, health services and legal institutions being the least used. In another more recent study, conducted in 2025 by EUAA with 31,802 women from all over Nigeria, it was observed that after experiencing intimate partner violence, 67.1% of women did not seek help whilst only 1.9% sought formal support services.

Trend in Reported Cases

The reported domestic violence cases are on the rise and data from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has shown a worrying upward trend. The NHRC registered 84,187 cases for domestic violence in 2024, the highest number of cases in a year since the NHRC's records began. Figure 2 presents the quarterly trend 2023 – 2025, with the numbers increasing for 2024 and decreasing in early 2025, which may be due to reporting delays as opposed to a real decrease in incidence.

Figure 2: Trend in Reported Domestic Violence Cases (NHRC 2023–2025)



Source: NHRC 2023–2025

The 2024 data also sheds light on the proportions of the various types of gender-based violence and sexual violence. Table 2 indicates that domestic violence was the highest reported form of SGBV (54.2%), with sexual violence coming in at 29.6%. Rape made up 4.5% of the cases, with proportionately less cases of child abuse, defilement and sexual harassment. It is relevant to note that the exposure of 2,980 children to domestic violence was documented as an emotional type of abuse, thus demonstrating the intergenerational transmission of violence.

Moreover, according to the findings of the 2024 NDHS, 24% of women who experienced physical or sexual violence sought help to stop the violence and 58% did not seek help nor tell others. Qualitative interviews provide insight into why formal systems are not working: All 45 survivors interviewed first sought out assistance from family, friends or religious leaders, which aligns with the NDHS finding that informal systems are the first place to go for assistance. Only three of the survivors (6.7%) eventually went to the police, who reported of victim blaming, demands for bribes and pressure to reconcile. One of the people who survived in Anambra said,

"The police asked me what I did to provoke him, they said I should go home and pray.

Likewise, of the 18 officers interviewed, 14 recognized that they do not have specific training in gender-based violence case management. Northern officers said they were pressed for resources (no dedicated DV units, no forensic kits) and community pressure (from community leaders) to drop charges. One of the senior officers in Kogi said

"We don't have a SARC in this state". Should survivors be taken for medical evidence, where do we put them?

22 social workers agreed that there was a lack of shelter space. Only 22 states have Sexual Assault Referral Centers (SARCs) with 15 states (including Kano, Katsina and Zamfara states which have not domesticated the VAPP Act) not having a standardized support mechanism. In Lagos, 4 out of 5 people seeking admission to Eko Haven's shelter are referred to other facilities because the shelter is overcrowded.

Table 1: Status of VAPP Act Domestication across Nigerian States (2024)

S/N	State	VAPP Status
1.	Abia	Domesticated
2.	Adamawa	Domesticated
3.	Akwa Ibom	Domesticated
4.	Anambra	Domesticated
5.	Bauchi	Domesticated
6.	Bayelsa	Domesticated
7.	Benue	Domesticated
8.	Borno	Domesticated
9.	Cross River	Domesticated
10.	Delta	Domesticated
11.	Ebonyi	Domesticated
12.	Edo	Domesticated
13.	Ekiti	Domesticated
14.	Enugu	Domesticated
15.	Gombe	Domesticated
16.	Imo	Domesticated
17.	Jigawa	Domesticated
18.	Kaduna	Domesticated
19.	Kano	Not Domesticated
20.	Katsina	Not Domesticated
21.	Kebbi	Domesticated

22.	Kogi	Domesticated
23.	Kwara	Domesticated
24.	Lagos	Not Domesticated
25.	Nasarawa	Domesticated
26.	Niger	Domesticated
27.	Ogun	Domesticated
28.	Ondo	Domesticated
29.	Osun	Domesticated
30.	Oyo	Domesticated
31.	Plateau	Domesticated
32.	Rivers	Domesticated
33.	Sokoto	Domesticated
34.	Taraba	Passed, Awaiting Assent
35.	Yobe	Domesticated
36.	Zamfara	Not Domesticated
37.	FCT	Federal Law Applies

Source: Compiled from WFD (2022), NAPTIP (2024), and EUAA (2025)

Legal Framework Assessment

Table 3 gives a detailed summary of the main legal instruments that have relevance to the protection of women from domestic violence in Nigeria. The analysis shows a complex and at times contradictory legal landscape.

Table 2: Reported Cases of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria (NHRC, 2024)

Type of Violence	Cases Reported (2024)	Percentage of Total
Domestic Violence	84187	54.2
Sexual Violence	45986	29.6
Rape	6943	4.5
Child Abuse/Physical Assault	436	0.3
Defilement	271	0.2
Sexual Harassment/Molestation	148	0.1
Child Labour/Abduction/Neglect	454	0.3
Emotional Abuse (Children exposed to DV)	2980	1.9

Source: NHRC (2024)

Table 3: Summary of Key Legal Frameworks for the Protection of Women Against Violence in Nigeria

S/N	Legal Instrument	Scope of Application	Key Provisions
1.	1999 Constitution of Nigeria (as amended)	Federal	Fundamental rights; non-discrimination (S.42)
2.	Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015	Federal Territory	Comprehensive prohibition of all forms of violence; compensation to survivors; protection orders
3.	Lagos State Protection Against Domestic Violence Law, 2007	Lagos State	Protection orders; prohibition of domestic violence; eviction orders; counselling
4.	Ekiti State Gender-Based Violence Prohibition Law	Ekiti State	Prohibition of GBV; establishment of response mechanisms; special courts

5.	Cross River State Domestic Violence and Maltreatment of Widows Law	Cross River State	Prohibition of domestic violence; protection of widows from harmful practices
6.	Child Rights Act, 2003	Federal (domesticated by 24 states)	Prohibition of child marriage, sexual abuse, exploitation, child labour
7.	Matrimonial Causes Act, 1970	Federal	Grounds for dissolution of marriage on basis of cruelty
8.	Penal Code Act (Northern Nigeria)	Northern States	Section 55(1)(d) permits husband to "correct" wife; marital rape exemption (S.282)
9.	Criminal Code Act (Southern Nigeria)	Southern States	General provisions on assault; no specific domestic violence provisions

Source: Compiled from various legal texts and policy documents

As seen in Table 1, the VAPP Act status of domestication for states as of 2024 shows that there are 31 states out of 36 where the Act has been domesticated with Taraba State having passed the bill but awaiting the Governor's assent. The Act has not been domesticated in 4 States namely Kano, Katsina, Lagos and Zamfara. In the case of Lagos state, it has its own Protection Against Domestic Violence Law, 2007, which is under review to include significant provisions of VAPP Act.

Section 55(1)(d) of the Nigerian Penal Code in the northern states is a basic paradox in the country's laws. This provision provides that: "Nothing is a crime which does not involve the infliction of grievous hurt to any person, by a husband, for the purpose of correcting his wife, both subject to what may be called a native rule, or custom, for the same. Under Section 241 "grievous hurt" is not limited to the most serious of injuries but allows for a much broader classification of violent acts committed against wives. This is in violation of section 42 of the Constitution which bars discrimination on the basis of sex and Nigeria's commitment to international human rights law.

Institutional and Support Infrastructure

Support services for survivors of domestic violence are still lacking in Nigeria. There were 47 Sexual Assault Referral Centers (SARCs) in 22 states as of October 2024, providing services such as counselling, medical support, forensic evaluation, legal and psychosocial support services (NAPTIP, 2024). The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, however, has admitted that the number of SARCs is low in comparison to the magnitude of the problems and that SARCs are under-funded and under staffed.

The availability of shelters for survivors is especially limited. In 2023, Lagos State established a 30 bed government shelter (Eko Haven), while other NGOs like the Safe Haven Foundation in Abuja offer shelter and psychosocial assistance, there is a significant gap in the country. The Nigerian Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency has complained that it cannot currently provide the necessary level of services to meet demand and that there are significant gaps in the extent and timeliness of legal protection for victims.

A study conducted by the International Press Centre (2024) revealed that 50.7% of Nigerians had no knowledge of the VAPP Act, showing a huge lack of awareness of the law which could impact on its effectiveness. Some of the other critical gaps found in the infrastructure evaluation were the lack of sex offender registers and the lack of adequate shelters, and the lack of adequate Sexual Assault Referral Centres.

DISCUSSION

The Paradox of Legislative Progress and Persistent Violence

The results of this study indicate a disturbing paradox that despite the achievements of legislative powers, especially the passage of the VAPP Act in 2015, domestic violence against women is widespread and at times increasing in Nigeria. The NHRC received a total of 84,187 reports of domestic violence in 2024, which is a

significant increase from the previous years, but could be due to better reporting methods. However, the level of reported cases coupled with a circumstantial evidence of underreporting indicates that domestic violence is still being experienced by millions of women in Nigeria.

This paradox can be attributed to the disjuncture between law on the books and law in practice. The VAPP Act is an extensive measure for criminalising violence and for the protection of survivors, but there are gaps in its implementation which it does not solve, due to structural, institutional and cultural obstacles. As Nwazuke (2016) noted in his critical evaluation of the VAPP Act, its effectiveness can only be achieved by the political will and institutional capacity to enable its practical implementation, as well as the cultural shifts required.

Regional Disparities and the Federalism Challenge

There is a state to state variation in the prevalence of domestic violence and in the legislation that is available to protect victims, which presents a problem in a federal country like Nigeria. Millions of women are not protected by the VAPP Act as four states have thus far not enacted it and one state (Taraba) has enacted the bill but failed to secure assent. Even in states which have accepted the Act, there has been great variation in its implementation, some setting up functional SARCs and special courts, others little more than enacting the legislation.

The region to region prevalence figures from 13% in Jigawa to 75% in Kogi reflect that factors behind domestic violence are multidimensional and complex, including economic factors, access to education, cultural norms, and the quality of legal institutions. This high prevalence in certain states like Kogi, Taraba and Anambra is not only attributable to legal issues but can be attributed to other socio-economic and cultural issues.

The Cultural Normalisation of Violence

One of the major challenges in providing effective legal protection is the high level of normalisation of domestic violence in Nigeria. Perhaps most troubling is the NDHS's conclusion that 28% of women believe that it is "ok" for a husband to beat his wife under some circumstances, suggesting that a significant portion of potential victims normalise violence. Religious beliefs, traditional practices and community norms contribute to this cultural normalisation by giving greater weight to male authority in the household and normalising domestic violence as a private affair which is not the business of the state.

Similarly, 67.1% of women who experienced intimate partner violence did not seek any help is another example of the power of cultural barriers. Those who do seek assistance mostly go to informal sources like family and friends, and they are likely to offer mediation instead of legal proceedings. Stigma, social isolation, and economic hardship (especially for women who depend on their perpetrator for economic support) are all reasons to keep crimes unreported to the formal justice system.

Institutional Weaknesses in the Justice System

There are numerous challenges in the Nigerian criminal justice system for survivors to seek justice. Domestic violence is frequently considered a "family affair" and is therefore often not the responsibility of police officers. In most instances, cases are not reported, and investigation is impaired by poor training, insufficient forensic resources and corrupt practices. Domestic violence prosecutions are virtually unheard of and rarely leads to conviction. No specialized domestic violence courts, therefore generalist magistrates and judges might not be sensitive to the dynamics of gender-based violence.

In the states where VAPP Act is implemented, 926 cases had been reported as of December 2022 while 252 of the cases were under investigation, 560 cases were being prosecuted, and only 169 cases were convicted (IPAS Nigeria, 2024). This translates to about a 30% prosecution-to-conviction rate, although this is not a small number, it is still a very small proportion of all domestic violence incidents in those states.

The Role of International and Regional Obligations

It is worthy to note that Nigeria has not domesticated CEDAW, so far as 1985 is concerned, there is a gap in the Nigerian legal structure. The VAPP Act includes some of the principles of CEDAW, but full domestication

would offer a more salient ground for challenging discriminatory laws and practices. Likewise, the Maputo Protocol that was ratified in 2004 by Nigeria is still not implemented in the country, and this means Nigerian women continue to lose out on the strong protection it provides. The Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill, aimed at bringing the CEDAW into the country, has been rejected several times in the National Assembly, due to political opposition of the gender equality reforms.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the situation of domestic violence and legal protection of women in Nigeria, and has found that while there have been some steps forward in the law, implementation is a problem and there are significant cultural challenges. The key findings can be summarized as follows: First, domestic violence is extremely common in Nigeria with at least 36% of every-married women according to the latest nationally representative survey, and there is great variation across the region. Second, although Nigeria has a fairly detailed legislative framework, as exemplified by the VAPP Act, 2015, implementation remains inconsistent; only four states have domesticated the Act and many states are lacking the institutional capacity to implement it effectively. Third, the Penal Code provisions which continue to condone spousal violence in the north, such as in Section 55(1)(d) are fundamentally inconsistent with the constitution and international human rights conventions. Last, support services for survivors, such as legal aid, SARCs, shelters, and others are also woefully insufficient in comparison to the magnitude of the need. Fifth, cultural norms which normalize domestic violence are perhaps the largest obstacle to effective legal protection, and lack of reporting and preclusion of the legitimacy of legal actions stem from these norms.

The study concludes that there is no problem with legal protection to solve domestic violence in Nigeria. Strengthening the legal framework is still critical, including through the universal domestication of the VAPP Act, repeal of discriminatory provisions in the Penal Code and domestication of CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol, but equal focus must be placed on the development of institutional capacity, changing cultural norms, and increasing survivor support services. Otherwise, the laws passed over the last ten years may not be much more than window dressing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. The Federal Government in collaboration with the state Governors and state legislatures should help accelerate the domestication of the VAPP Act by all the 36 states. For States which have not yet done so, Kano, Katsina, Lagos and Zamfara should be targeted, thus provision of technical and financial support should be made to ease the legislative process. Taraba State should speed up the approval of its already passed bill by the Governor.
2. As an urgent priority, section 55(1)(d) of the Penal Code which allows for a husband's 'correction' of his wife should be repealed. This is unconstitutional and contravenes Section 42 of the Constitution as well as Nigeria's international human rights commitments. The federal government should urge cooperation from northern state governments to achieve this repeal and replace it with a definition of domestic violence which specifies all offence types as criminal.
3. There should be specialised courts or court divisions in all states for domestic violence and gender-based violence cases. The judges and magistrates in these courts should be specially trained in the dynamics of domestic violence, trauma informed approaches and the implementation of the VAPP Act. There should be haste-tracks mechanism for the speedy disposal of cases.
4. There should be greater budgetary allocations by the federal and state governments to provide survivor support services, such as establishing SARCs in all 36 states, providing government funded shelters in each state and free legal support for survivors. This ratio of 47 SARCs, for a population of more than 220 million, is very low.
5. The Nigeria Police Force should set up Gender Desks in all police stations, with officers with a special training in domestic violence case management. Standard Operating Procedures should be established and followed in responding to reports of domestic violence and officers should be held accountable for their failure to respond.

6. Public awareness campaigns with adequate funding and resources, for extended periods, should be rolled out to raise awareness about the VAPP Act and to question culturally entrenched beliefs and attitudes around domestic violence, and to promote help-seeking among victims. Campaigns should involve multiple outlets, such as mass media, community leaders, schools and religious institutions and should be customized for local languages and local cultural context.

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