

Breaking the Silence: The VAPP Law as a Game Changer for Women's Rights in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive violation of human rights in Nigeria, reinforced by patriarchal norms, weak institutions, and inadequate legal protection. This study examines the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) of 2015 as a transformative legal framework for addressing GBV and advancing women's rights in Nigeria. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis across four states, Lagos, Bauchi, Kaduna, and Ebonyi, selected to represent diverse sociocultural and institutional contexts. Findings reveal that while the VAPP Act has expanded the legal definitions of violence and improved access to justice in states like Lagos and Bauchi, its overall effectiveness is constrained by inconsistent domestication, low awareness, inadequate institutional capacity, and cultural resistance. States with stronger political commitment and inter-agency coordination demonstrate better outcomes for survivors. The study concludes that the VAPP Act's potential as a catalyst for women's rights can only be realised through context-sensitive implementation, enhanced public education, sustained funding, and survivor-led advocacy to ensure equal protection under the law.

Keywords: Gender-based Violence (GBV), VAPP Act, Women's Rights, Cultural Resistance, Survival-Centred Justice, Policy Domestication

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the most widespread and damaging human rights violations worldwide, and in Nigeria, it has become endemic. With a population of over 200 million, the country presents a complex society characterised by deep-rooted cultural norms, religious beliefs, and patriarchal ideologies that continue to underpin systemic violence against women and girls. From domestic violence and sexual harassment to harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriage, widowhood rites, and spousal rape, Nigerian women face a range of abuses that are often accepted or minimised within society.

Historically, Nigeria's legal system provided inadequate protection against GBV. The Criminal and Penal Codes, which formed the basis of the criminal justice system in the northern and southern regions, respectively, were largely silent or ambiguous on domestic and sexual violence (Akpoghome, 2016). The exemption of marital rape from prosecution, coupled with the absence of provisions for psychological and economic abuse, entrenched patriarchal control and denied women legal recourse (Ifemeje, 2011).

Civil society organisations, women's rights advocates, and international partners long pressed for reform, culminating in the passage of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) in 2015. The Act introduced a broader legal definition of violence, criminalised spousal rape and harmful traditional practices, and adopted a survivor-centred approach through protective mechanisms such as shelters, restraining orders, and compensation. Although the Act was designed as a model law for state domestication, implementation across Nigeria has been inconsistent and uneven, largely due to weak institutional capacity, limited awareness, and cultural resistance.

Despite the Act's legislative innovation, there remains a significant gap in understanding how its domestication and enforcement vary across regions, and how these variations affect survivors' access to justice and protection. Previous studies have focused primarily on legal provisions or advocacy outcomes but have paid limited attention to comparative state-level analysis and survivor experiences under the VAPP framework.

This study empirically examines the VAPP Act as a transformative tool for women's rights in Nigeria through a comparative qualitative analysis of four states (Lagos, Bauchi, Kaduna, and Ebonyi). It assesses differences in implementation, awareness, and survivor experiences, and explores how socio-cultural and political contexts shape the Act's effectiveness. By bridging the gap between legislative reform and practical enforcement, the study offers new insights into the institutional, cultural, and policy factors determining whether the VAPP Act can truly serve as a game changer for women's rights in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on gender-based violence (GBV) in Nigeria is extensive and exposes a deep-rooted crisis exacerbated by socio-cultural norms, institutional failures, and legislative shortcomings. Scholars, civil society organisations, and development agencies have comprehensively documented the complex nature of GBV and the gaps in Nigeria's legal and institutional responses. Amupitan & Aigbovbioisa (2024), Silva et al. (2023), and Ojemeiri et al. (2022) note that GBV in Nigeria is sustained by patriarchal norms and a culture of silence that often blames the victim. Women are discouraged from reporting abuse due to fear of stigma, retaliation, and societal shame (Chime et al., 2022). This is further aggravated by a justice system that is often inaccessible, costly, and unfriendly to survivors.

The absence of legal definitions for many types of violence further impedes prosecution and protection. Before the enactment of the VAPP Act, Nigeria's Penal and Criminal Codes faced widespread criticism for their limited and outdated scope. Jaiyeola and Isaac linked patriarchal laws to the colonial-era statutes that were silent on domestic violence, did not recognise spousal rape, and lacked provisions for psychological or economic abuse. In many instances, they reinforced gender inequality by prescribing lighter punishments for crimes committed against women. Ajayi (2019) adds that laws such as the Penal Code in Northern Nigeria explicitly permitted marital rape, based on the assumption that consent is implied in marriage, thus denying women bodily autonomy.

The need for effective legal reform grew increasingly urgent as public awareness and advocacy from civil society increased. Organisations such as Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA), ActionAid Nigeria, and the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) played crucial roles in calling for a national law that tackles all forms of violence. Their efforts gained traction through collaborations with international partners like UN Women, the British Council, and USAID. The VAPP Act was developed in this context as a landmark piece of legislation. Okafor and Ibe (2020) describe it as a turning point in Nigeria's legal history. Unlike earlier laws, the VAPP Act defines violence broadly, encompassing sexual, physical, psychological, and economic abuse. It criminalises spousal rape, incest, stalking, harmful widowhood practices, and FGM. It also introduces protective measures such as restraining orders, shelter services, and mandatory compensation for victims.

The VAPP Act aligns with international human rights instruments that Nigeria has signed, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Maputo Protocol, and the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. As UN Women

(2021) notes, the Act provides a legal basis for incorporating these global commitments into domestic law. Despite its potential, the literature highlights several challenges to implementing the VAPP Act. Domestication at the state level has been slow and uneven. As of 2023, fewer than 20 of Nigeria's 36 states have fully adopted the Act. Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2021) and Oshaba (2025) attribute this to political resistance, religious conservatism, and bureaucratic inertia, especially in Northern Nigeria. These sources emphasise that without domestication, the Act holds no legal power outside the FCT, leaving millions of Nigerian women unprotected.

Furthermore, awareness and education about the VAPP Act remain limited. A 2023 survey by ActionAid Nigeria indicates that fewer than 30% of women in rural areas are aware of the Act. Media campaigns and civil society sensitisation programmes have had limited reach, especially in conflict-affected and underserved communities. The British Council Nigeria (2012) emphasises that legal reforms alone are insufficient; cultural change and institutional transformation are necessary to foster an environment conducive to enforcement. Implementation is further hampered by inadequate funding and poor institutional coordination. NAPTIP (2022) notes that most states lack the infrastructure and trained personnel needed to support victims. Many police officers, magistrates, and social workers are unfamiliar with the provisions of the VAPP Act, leading to misinterpretation or outright dismissal of cases. Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs), which provide medical, legal, and psychological support to survivors, are limited in number and capacity.

Nigeria's adoption of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) in 2015 aligns with a broader regional trend towards legal reforms addressing gender-based violence (GBV). Many African countries have passed similar laws influenced by the Maputo Protocol and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), reflecting shared commitments to eliminate violence and discrimination against women (African Union, 2003; UN Women, 2021). A regional comparison demonstrates both progress and ongoing challenges in implementation.

In South Africa, the Domestic Violence Act of 1998 remains a benchmark for legislative comprehensiveness, mandating police responsiveness and providing clear protection mechanisms for survivors. However, enforcement challenges persist, including resource shortages and delays in prosecution (Artz & Smythe, 2008). Similarly, Kenya's Protection Against Domestic Violence Act (2015) expanded the legal scope of protection to cover psychological and economic abuse, but traditional attitudes and limited institutional funding continue to hinder its effectiveness (Karugu, 2019). Ghana's Domestic Violence Act of 2007 established a Victims Support Fund and oversight board, yet implementation has been hampered by inadequate financial commitment and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Yakubu & Chaudhuri, 2022; Cantalupo et al., 2006).

Compared to these contexts, Nigeria's VAPP Act is relatively strong in criminalising spousal rape, harmful traditional practices, and emotional abuse, while including survivor-centred measures such as compensation and restraining orders (National Assembly of Nigeria, 2015). However, the country's federal structure and the requirement for state-level domestication led to enforcement disparities. States such as Lagos, Bauchi, and Ebonyi have made notable progress, whereas others lag due to weak political commitment and institutional inertia (Iyare, 2024; WFD, 2021).

This regional perspective highlights that Nigeria's implementation challenges are not unique, but rather reflect a continental pattern in which strong legislative frameworks coexist with limited institutional capacity and entrenched patriarchal norms. Lessons from regional counterparts, particularly South Africa's coordinated response model and Ghana's victim support mechanisms, could inform more effective and inclusive enforcement of the VAPP Act across Nigeria.

There is also the issue of backlash and legislative threats. IPAS (2022) reports attempt by some Sharia lawmakers to repeal or dilute certain provisions of the Act, especially those involving spousal rape and children's rights. Such efforts reflect broader societal resistance to gender equality and highlight the fragility of legal gains without ongoing vigilance and advocacy. Nonetheless, there are notable success stories. Bauchi State's adoption of the VAPP Act in 2021, supported by UN Women, is often cited as a model for other states. The development of a Costed Model Action Plan (CMAP) has facilitated structured implementation, budget

allocation, and inter-agency collaboration. Evaluations indicate that this has resulted in better reporting, quicker prosecution, and improved survivor services (UN Women, 2021).

Recent academic contributions also examine the intersectionality of violence and marginalisation. Scholars have begun to explore how class, ethnicity, disability, and displacement intersect with gender to shape experiences of violence. For instance, Ume and Ekong (2022) explore how internally displaced women in the North-East face compounded vulnerabilities due to both conflict and institutional neglect. This suggests that future reforms and policies must be responsive to the diversity of women's experiences and not adopt a one-size-fits-all approach.

To interpret these patterns, this study draws on feminist legal theory and gendered institutionalism to explain the relationship between gender inequality, human rights law, and institutional performance in addressing gender-based violence. Feminist legal theory argues that law is not gender-neutral but often reflects the patriarchal values of the societies that create and enforce it (Charlesworth, 1994; MacKinnon, 1989). Consequently, even progressive statutes such as the VAPP Act may function within gendered power structures that constrain their transformative potential. Gendered institutionalism complements this by emphasising how formal institutions, such as courts, police, and ministries, are shaped by informal gender norms and hierarchies that influence their responsiveness to women's rights (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Acker, 1990). Integrating these perspectives allows the study to move beyond textual analysis of the law to explore how socio-political power, institutional culture, and accountability mechanisms affect the realisation of justice for survivors. This theoretical linkage between gender theory, human rights law, and institutional analysis strengthens the analytical foundation of the study.

The literature affirms that while the VAPP Act marks a significant advancement in Nigeria's legal system for addressing GBV, it is not a panacea. Full realisation of its potential requires political will, sustained funding, widespread awareness, and systemic reforms. The VAPP Act must be part of a broader societal shift that dismantles the patriarchal structures enabling violence and empowers survivors to seek justice.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the impact, implementation, and limitations of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) as a tool for promoting women's rights in Nigeria. Qualitative methods have become essential for gaining in-depth insights and exploring complex phenomena (Bazen et al. 2021; Creswell et al. 2011). Given the legal and socio-cultural complexities surrounding gender-based violence (GBV), a qualitative design was deemed appropriate to allow for in-depth exploration of stakeholders' perspectives, state-level variations, and the underlying systemic barriers to effective enforcement.

The research design was structured around a multi-case comparative approach focusing on four Nigerian states that illustrate diverse levels of domestication and implementation of the VAPP Act. These states were Lagos, Bauchi, Kaduna, and Ebonyi. These states were purposively selected based on their geographical distribution, legal status of the VAPP Act, and differences in socio-cultural and political settings. Lagos represents a highly urbanised and domesticated context. In contrast, Bauchi offers insights from a northern, Muslim-majority state that has adopted the Act. Kaduna, on the other hand, presents a mixed religious demographic and has implemented the Act only partially. Ebonyi was selected due to its high reported incidence of GBV.

Data Sources

The study combines both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews and key informant consultations with legal practitioners, civil society organisations (CSOs), police officers, gender desk officers, social workers, health professionals, and survivors of violence. A total of 32 interviews were conducted across the selected states. Table 1.0 presents the details of interviews with the key informants. The interview questions were focused on awareness, enforcement, survivor access to justice, institutional readiness, and community reception of the VAPP Act.

Table 1.0: Distribution of key informant interviews by state

State	Number of interviews conducted	Percentage of total interviews (%)
Lagos	10	31.25
Bauchi	8	25.00
Kaduna	7	21.88
Ebonyi	7	21.88
Total	32	100

Furthermore, focus group discussions (FGDs) were held in each state with groups of women’s rights advocates, youth leaders, and traditional/religious leaders to understand the broader sociocultural narratives surrounding the Act. Table 2.0 presents the details of the FGD.

Table 2.0: Focus group discussion (FGD) participants by position and state

State	Women’s rights advocates	Youth leaders	Traditional/religious leaders	Total participants (range)
Lagos	3	2	2	7
Bauchi	2	2	4	8
Kaduna	2	3	2	7
Ebonyi	2	2	2	6
Total	9	9	10	28-30

The GD comprised 6 to 8 participants and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The secondary data included legislative documents, state-level VAPP domestication reports, institutional policy papers, and published materials such as scholarly articles, media reports, civil society advocacy briefs, and government statistics. Data triangulation from these diverse sources enhanced the validity of the findings.

Samplings

A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants with direct experience or knowledge relevant to the implementation of the VAPP Act. The sample frame included stakeholders involved in advocacy, legislation, enforcement, support service delivery, and survivors. Inclusion criteria required that participants had a minimum of one year of professional engagement or lived experience related to gender-based violence or the VAPP Act. Snowball sampling was used to identify additional respondents, particularly survivors and frontline service providers.

Research instrument

The study utilises semi-structured interviews, FGDs and document analysis as its research instruments. The interviews were conducted in English and local languages where necessary and were audio-recorded with consent. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. The FGDs were conducted using open-ended guides developed by the researcher, drawing on both theoretical frameworks and empirical insights from previous studies on gender-based violence (GBV) and legal reform in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa. Specifically, the questions were adapted from established qualitative instruments used in

studies by UN Women (2021), ActionAid Nigeria (2023), and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2021), ensuring alignment with local realities and global best practices.

The FGD guide focused on participants' perceptions of violence, awareness of the VAPP Act, community responses to GBV, and the socio-cultural and institutional factors influencing the law's implementation. Similarly, the semi-structured interviews focused on legal awareness, enforcement mechanisms, institutional readiness, funding availability, and inter-agency coordination. The guides were pilot-tested and refined to ensure contextual relevance, clarity, and sensitivity, particularly for survivor-centred discussions.

It was reviewed by a panel of gender experts for cultural sensitivity and effectiveness. To ensure consistency, interviews in each state were conducted by trained local researchers who were based in the various states under the supervision of the lead researcher. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the lead institution. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Data Analysis

The data from both interviews and FGD were analysed thematically using NVivo software. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where applicable. Transcripts were coded inductively to identify emerging themes and sub-themes. Thematic categories included: (1) legal awareness, (2) community reception, (3) institutional enforcement capacity, (4) survivor experience, (5) political and religious resistance, and (6) funding and support infrastructure.

In addition, comparative analysis on the legislative documents, institutional policy papers, published materials and government statistics was conducted to highlight regional disparities and implementation gaps. This approach allowed the researcher to identify patterns, contradictions, and best practices that could inform policy recommendations.

Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, the qualitative nature of the research means that findings are not statistically generalizable. Second, access to survivors was limited in some states due to safety concerns, stigma, and lack of shelter support services. Third, some interviews were affected by social desirability bias, particularly among government officials and law enforcement agents. Fourth, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted fieldwork timelines and necessitated the use of virtual interviews in some instances, which may have limited rapport and depth. Nonetheless, the study's triangulation of multiple data sources, inclusion of diverse stakeholders, and cross-regional comparative analysis provide a robust foundation for understanding the impact of the VAPP Act in practice.

Ethical Considerations

All research protocols adhered to global ethical standards for social research. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and measures to protect their identity. Interviews with survivors were conducted in safe and confidential environments, and referrals were provided for psychosocial and legal support where necessary. All data were stored securely and used solely for academic and policy purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical findings presented in this section are derived from the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analyses conducted across the four case study states: Lagos, Bauchi, Kaduna, and Ebonyi. The findings are organised into thematic categories that emerged during data analysis and are discussed based on the broader literature and policy environment.

Legal Awareness and Public Knowledge

Across the states studied, awareness of the VAPP Act varied significantly. In Lagos, 9 out of 10 key informants and 6 out of 7 FGD participants demonstrated familiarity with the Act (Excerpt 1 & Excerpt 2)

Excerpt 1: Lagos State, SARC legal advisor

“The VAPP Act is a regular reference point in our work with survivors. From police officers to magistrates, we’ve trained multiple stakeholders on how to apply the provisions, especially around emotional abuse and economic violence, which were never addressed in our previous laws. In Lagos, there’s no excuse for not knowing the law exists.” (Key informant interview,

Excerpt 2: FGD participant, women’s rights advocate, Lagos state

“We’ve held several community sensitisations on the VAPP Act, especially for market women and school girls. Many of us now understand that even denying a woman economic support is considered violence. The law has empowered us to speak out and educate others.”

Table 3.0 below depicts a summary of the VAPP Act awareness

Table 3.0: VAPP Act awareness summary table

State	Key informant awareness	FGD participant awareness
Lagos	9/10 (90%)	6/7 (86%)
Bauchi	6/8 (75%)	5/8 (63%)
Kaduna	3/7 (43%)	3/7 (43%)
Ebonyi	2/7 (29%)	2/6 (33%)

In contrast, respondents from Bauchi and Kaduna, particularly in rural areas, reported limited or no knowledge of the VAPP Act.

Excerpt 3: FGD participant, community youth leader, Bauchi State

“Before now, most people didn’t know the government had passed a law like this. But after the awareness sessions by NGOs and the Ministry of Women Affairs, we began to understand that emotional and sexual violence are punishable, even in marriage. People are slowly beginning to take it seriously.”

Excerpt 4: FGD participant, women’s group member, Ebonyi State

“We’ve heard of laws that protect women, but we’re not sure what they are called or what they cover. In our villages, people don’t talk about these things openly. If something happens, families usually settle it quietly, even if the woman suffers”

Traditional leaders in Bauchi expressed confusion about the content of the law and its implications for customary practices. In Ebonyi, where GBV rates are among the highest nationally, many women had heard of the VAPP Act but lacked practical knowledge of how to access its protections.

The findings indicate that awareness of the VAPP Act is highest in Lagos, moderately improving in Bauchi, and considerably lower in Kaduna and Ebonyi. This supports earlier research (e.g., UN Women, 2021), which emphasises that legal awareness is essential for access to justice. When civil society and state actors actively promote the law (as seen in Lagos), awareness levels rise. Conversely, limited outreach in Kaduna and Ebonyi perpetuates the structural silence surrounding GBV.

Implementation, Infrastructure and Capacity

The presence of Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs), trained law enforcement units, and legal aid services was a key differentiator between states. Lagos and Bauchi had relatively functional SARCs, with multi-sectoral support from the government, NGOs, and development partners. Excerpts 5 and 6 illustrate the case in point.

Excerpt 5: Key informant interview, GBV programme officer, Lagos State

“In Lagos, the SARC works closely with the Ministry of Justice, and there’s a fast-track desk for GBV cases. Survivors are referred immediately to legal aid or psychological support. We also have trained police units that understand how to handle these cases sensitively.”

Excerpt 6: Key informant interview, government official, Bauchi State

“Bauchi has benefited a lot from the CMAP and donor funding. We now have a dedicated VAPP Unit in the Ministry of Women Affairs, and we conduct joint case reviews with health and police teams monthly. We are improving, but we need more state funding to sustain it.”

These facilities provided survivors with access to medical care, psychosocial support, legal counselling, and shelter. Kaduna and Ebonyi, by contrast, lacked adequately resourced SARCs. Police officers in these states admitted that GBV cases were often dismissed or poorly handled due to a lack of training and resource constraints.

Excerpt 7: FGD participant, legal aid volunteer, Kaduna State

“We have some structures in place, but they don’t always talk to each other. The Ministry of Justice, police, and health workers often work in silos. Survivors still get bounced around from one place to another, which discourages them.”

Excerpt 8: Key informant interview, civil society advocate, Ebonyi State

“There’s no functioning SARC here. If a woman is raped, the police may not even know how to file it properly. We have to rely on NGOs to step in, but they are also overstretched. Without real funding or political will, implementation will remain just on paper.”

In Lagos, several police divisions have established gender desks with trained officers, leading to more survivor-centred approaches. However, in Bauchi and Ebonyi, respondents highlighted that police stations often discouraged survivors from pursuing formal complaints, with some officers urging women to “settle at home” or return to abusive partners.

Lagos and Bauchi benefit from dedicated SARCs, gender desks, and trained personnel, enabling relatively smooth case management. This demonstrates that infrastructure and inter-agency collaboration are crucial for effective GBV response. The fragmented coordination in Kaduna and the near-absence of structure in Ebonyi reveal the gap between policy and implementation, particularly in resource-constrained or politically indifferent states.

Survivor Experiences with Justice Access

Survivors interviewed in Lagos and Bauchi reported mixed experiences with the justice system. Some noted that restraining orders and legal redress were effective, but others cited delays, re-traumatisation during police interviews, and a lack of follow-through by prosecutors.

Excerpt 9: Survivor (anonymous), FGD participant, Lagos State

“When I reported my husband for economic abuse, they didn’t laugh it off. The officer at the gender desk explained my rights and referred me to a lawyer at the SARC. I didn’t expect justice would start with just one report.”

Excerpt 10: Survivor (anonymous), interviewee, Bauchi State

“Before, reporting sexual violence was like bringing shame to your family. Now, at least I know there’s a place to go. They took my statement, sent me to the hospital, and I met with a female officer who made me feel safe. But the court process is still slow.”

In Kaduna, survivors expressed fear of stigma and reprisal, especially in communities where cultural and religious norms discouraged public disclosure of abuse. In Ebonyi, survivors faced severe social ostracism, and many chose silence over legal action.

Excerpt 11: Survivor (anonymous), FGD participant, Kaduna State

“I went to the police, but they told me to go home and settle it with my husband’s people. They said involving the law would only disgrace us. I felt worse than before I came. There was no one to explain what the VAPP law even meant.”

Excerpt 12: Survivor (anonymous), FGD participant, Ebonyi State

“When I was beaten by my partner, my mother told me not to report. She said the police would not help, and I would bring shame to our family. There is no place I know where a woman like me can report such things and be protected.”

Civil society organisations played a crucial role in bridging the gap between survivors and the justice system. In all states, NGOs provided referrals, counselling, and legal support. However, their reach was limited by funding and geographic coverage. Participants called for greater investment in survivor-centred services and broader public education on legal rights.

Survivors in Lagos and Bauchi reported relatively positive experiences with institutional processes, while those in Kaduna and Ebonyi encountered indifference, stigma, or outright rejection. These findings reflect Amnesty International (2019) and Okafor & Ibe (2020), who noted that survivor access depends on frontline worker training, justice sector coordination, and culturally sensitive procedures. A functional legal structure alone is not sufficient; its accessibility and credibility are what matter most to those it is intended to serve.

Resistance and Legislative Pushback

Resistance to the VAPP Act was most evident in Kaduna and Bauchi, where religious leaders and conservative legislators voiced objections to provisions such as the criminalisation of spousal rape and expanded definitions of sexual violence.

Excerpt 13: Key informant interview, legal reforms advocate, Kaduna State

“Some members of the House are openly opposed to the VAPP law. They say it empowers women too much and undermines family structures. Even within ministries, some quiet saboteurs don’t want the law enforced.”

Excerpt 14: FDG participant, CSO leader, Bauchi State

“At first, many lawmakers here thought the VAPP Act was foreign and against our religion. But after several advocacy sessions, some started seeing that protecting women and children aligns with our values too.”

FGDs with community leaders in Kaduna revealed that many viewed the Act as a Western imposition that undermined local values and family structures. In Bauchi, some legislators proposed amendments to remove “controversial” provisions. These findings echo the concerns documented in the literature about legislative

fragility and cultural resistance. The perceived clash between universal human rights and religious/cultural norms continues to pose a challenge to the full implementation of the Act.

The contrast between Kaduna's deep-rooted resistance and Bauchi's growing acceptance shows how local political and cultural gatekeepers influence the success of progressive laws. As previous research (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2022) has noted, legislative success depends not only on content but also on framing and relational advocacy. In Bauchi, faith-based framing helped ease opposition, demonstrating that context-sensitive strategies are vital in conservative regions.

Funding and Multisector Coordination

Respondents across all four states identified inadequate and inconsistent funding as a major barrier to the success of the VAPP Act. SARCs, legal aid services, and gender units within ministries are often under-resourced and rely on donor support. Multisectoral coordination mechanisms, such as the Gender-Based Violence Response Teams, were operational in Lagos and Bauchi but largely inactive or non-existent in Kaduna and Ebonyi.

Excerpt 15: Key informant interview, state GBV coordinator, Lagos State

"We have some budget allocation for GBV response, but it's not enough. The strength of Lagos is in its multisectoral approach; we have MOUs between police, SARCs, social welfare, and health sectors, and we meet quarterly to review cases."

Excerpt 16: FGD participant, legal aid volunteer, Kaduna State

"There's no clear budget line for GBV under the VAPP framework. Different ministries work in isolation, and the referral pathway is broken. Survivors have to tell their stories over and over again because there's no unified system."

Stakeholders emphasised the need for a clear budget line for GBV prevention and response in state budgets. They also advocated for the institutionalisation of response mechanisms through a formal government policy structure.

Funding remains a crucial bottleneck across all states, particularly in Kaduna and Ebonyi, where political will is weak. Lagos shows that moderate state investment combined with structured multisector coordination can enhance service delivery. These findings align with international best practices outlined by UNFPA and UNDP, which advocate for dedicated GBV budget lines, referral pathways, and inter-agency accountability to effectively implement gender laws.

Institutional Weaknesses

Beyond funding and coordination challenges, the enforcement of the VAPP Act is further weakened by corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and political instability. As one participant in Lagos noted:

Excerpts 17: Female Survivor, Lagos State

"You can't expect justice when officers are asking for transport money before taking a statement. That's why many victims give up."

Similarly, a respondent from Bauchi observed:

Excerpts 18: Social worker, Bauchi State

"Sometimes it's not that the law is bad; it's that files don't move unless someone 'pushes' them. Everything is delay and connection."

Corruption diverts funds intended for shelters, legal aid, and survivor support, while some law enforcement officers reportedly demand bribes before pursuing GBV cases. Bureaucratic delays in releasing budget allocations or approving case files also hinder justice delivery and erode public trust in state institutions. Additionally, frequent changes in political leadership and inconsistent policy priorities disrupt ongoing advocacy and institutional training programmes. These governance-related weaknesses create a cycle where the law exists mostly on paper but fails to realise its transformative purpose. Tackling these structural barriers requires transparent budgeting, enhanced institutional accountability, and political commitment that goes beyond regime changes.

In response to these systemic barriers, civil society organisations and digital advocacy networks have increasingly taken on complementary roles in raising awareness, mobilising support, and holding institutions accountable for implementing the VAPP Act.

Digital Advocacy and Civil Society Mobilisation

Digital communication has transformed how gender-based violence (GBV) is addressed in Nigeria. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and online movements play a crucial role in raising awareness of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) and advocating for accountability. Campaigns such as #ArewaMeToo, #SayNoToRape, and #MeToo have mobilised youth and policymakers, using social media to shift GBV from being a private matter to a national policy issue (Ebong et al., 2025; Ezeaka & Bartholomew, 2025).

Groups including Stand to End Rape (STER), WARDC, and Mirabel Centre employ digital storytelling and survivor-led advocacy to amplify voices often silenced by stigma. Alongside offline efforts, ActionAid Nigeria, WRAPA, and FIDA Nigeria carry out community outreach, legal aid, and law enforcement training to enhance VAPP enforcement (Stand to End Rape Initiative, 2023; ActionAid Nigeria, 2022; WRAPA, 2021). Through WhatsApp helplines and webinars, these organisations connect victims to justice mechanisms and raise awareness in underserved areas.

Digital activism functions as a hybrid platform that connects civic participation with institutional reform. However, persistent online misogyny and cyber-harassment expose that virtual spaces still reflect gender inequalities. Collaboration among digital advocates, traditional media, and government institutions remains crucial for realising the transformative goals of the VAPP Act.

Best Practices and Innovations

Bauchi's implementation model emerged as a promising example of strategic domestication. The adoption of a Costed Model Action Plan (CMAP) with support from UN Women allowed for stakeholder alignment, training of service providers, and targeted community engagement. This model was cited by both civil society and government actors as a blueprint for other states.

Excerpt 19: FGD participant, women's rights advocate, Bauchi State

"We trained imams and pastors on the VAPP Act using scripture. Once they started preaching against GBV, community acceptance improved. Now, religious leaders are our biggest allies in pushing for justice."

Excerpt 20: Key informant interview, State Ministry of Women Affairs, Lagos State

"We recently launched a toll-free GBV helpline, and survivors can now report anonymously via SMS or WhatsApp. It's helping bridge the fear gap. We also have gender desks in nearly every major police station."

In Lagos, innovations such as mobile legal clinics, community surveillance structures, and survivor follow-up systems have significantly improved reporting and case resolution. These practices accentuate the importance of context-specific, well-funded, and survivor-focused strategies.

Although no single state has a perfect model, examples such as faith-based messaging in Bauchi, mobile legal clinics in Ebonyi, youth-led storytelling in Kaduna, and tech-enabled reporting in Lagos provide valuable insights for scalable innovations. These align with lessons from international literature (e.g., UN Women, 2021) that emphasise community-based and survivor-centred approaches to law enforcement and public engagement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) of 2015 represents a bold legal and policy attempt to confront Nigeria's long-standing and systemic gender-based violence (GBV) crisis. As shown in this study, the Act's strength lies in its effectiveness and its alignment with global human rights guidelines. It addresses not only physical violence but also sexual, psychological, and economic abuse, issues previously neglected by colonial-era criminal statutes.

However, while the legislation is ambitious, its practical impact remains uneven. A key empirical finding is the wide disparity in the Act's awareness and enforcement between states. For instance, Lagos and Bauchi, having invested in implementation structures like SARCs and gender desks, demonstrate higher levels of engagement with the Act. In contrast, states like Ebonyi and Kaduna struggle with low awareness, inadequate service provision, and cultural resistance, leading to continued survivor vulnerability.

One critical insight is that domestication of the Act at the state level is not a guarantee of enforcement. In Bauchi, despite socio-cultural and religious complexities, strategic planning through the Costed Model Action Plan (CMAP) has improved survivor support and institutional coordination. This reinforces the idea that political will, structured implementation, and multisector collaboration are more important than legislative passage alone. To move forward, five core areas must be addressed.

1. Bridging the Awareness Gap through Targeted Public Education. The findings reveal that most rural communities, particularly in the North and South-East, lack basic awareness of the VAPP Act. Survivors and even local law enforcement remain unaware of its provisions. Public education campaigns must be tailored to these demographics. Religious and traditional institutions, which play a dominant role in shaping attitudes, should be involved in reinterpreting the Act within culturally acceptable narratives. Leveraging community radio, religious sermons, and town hall meetings can demystify legal jargon and encourage reporting.

2. Strengthening Institutional Capacity and Infrastructure. The disparity in survivor outcomes across states is strongly linked to differences in institutional preparedness. Lagos, with better-resourced SARCs and trained police units, recorded more survivor-friendly procedures. Conversely, in Ebonyi and Kaduna, survivors were often discouraged from seeking justice due to hostile or dismissive law enforcement. Institutional reforms must focus on equipping frontline responders with gender-sensitive training, increasing the number of SARCs, and standardising survivor protocols. These steps are essential to translating legislation into actual protection.

3. Confronting Cultural and Legislative Resistance. The empirical evidence, particularly from Kaduna and Bauchi, points to strong resistance to provisions such as the criminalisation of spousal rape and expanded definitions of abuse. While some see these clauses as culturally alien, others cite religious grounds for non-compliance. Instead of framing the law as a Western import, state actors and CSOs should adopt a dialogue-based approach that situates the Act within local value systems that already emphasise justice, dignity, and protection for the vulnerable. Religious leaders should be engaged as advocates, not adversaries.

4. Funding and Policy Ownership at the State Level. Another major challenge is the lack of dedicated funding and policy continuity. In states that depend heavily on donor support (e.g., Ebonyi), implementation has been erratic and short-lived. This highlights the importance of integrating VAPP-related initiatives into mainstream government budgets. States must see GBV not as a donor agenda, but as a public health and human rights crisis demanding consistent resource allocation. Institutionalising VAPP implementation units within ministries of justice, women's affairs, and health will foster sustainability.

5. Encouraging Survivor-Led Reform and Monitoring. The study highlights the powerful role survivors and civil society can play in accountability. In Lagos, survivors who became peer educators helped to drive awareness and challenge stigma. There is a need to formalise such survivor-led advocacy networks across the country. Also, state-based monitoring teams comprising survivors, legal professionals, social workers, and CSOs should be empowered to track enforcement metrics, publish findings, and pressure state actors to act. Transparency and civil participation are crucial for sustained change.

The VAPP Act is more than a legal instrument; it is a litmus test of Nigeria's willingness to uphold the dignity and rights of its women and girls. The law has laid the foundation, but its promise can only be realised through deliberate, context-sensitive strategies. This requires synchronising legal reforms with cultural discourse, budgetary commitment with implementation capacity, and survivor protection with community accountability.

Only by weaving these elements together can Nigeria truly "break the silence" and ensure that the VAPP Act lives up to its potential as a game changer for women's rights.

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