
HONORS, SHAME AND SILENCE: STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES, CULTURAL NORMS, AND THE NORMALISATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN LEADING TO FEMICIDE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Femicide in Nigeria persists as a grave crisis despite the enactment of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) in 2015, widely regarded as the most comprehensive gender-based violence legislation in sub-Saharan Africa. This paper argues that femicide cannot be adequately understood through individualised frameworks that pathologise perpetrators; rather, it constitutes the cumulative outcome of intersecting structural violence, patriarchal honour systems that regulate female behaviour through shame, and the systematic silencing of women's voices across legal, cultural, and institutional domains. Drawing on Galtung's (1969) structural violence theory, Kandiyoti's (1988) patriarchal bargain framework, May et al.'s (2009) normalisation process theory, and Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality, the paper synthesises empirical evidence from 2000 to 2026 to demonstrate how Nigerian social structures actively produce women's vulnerability to lethal violence. The analysis reveals a multifaceted crisis: legal pluralism between the Penal Code and Criminal Code creates a geographic lottery of protection; the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons has received zero government funding since 2015; and institutional failures—court delays, police corruption, absent witness protection—have become so routine that they are no longer perceived as aberrations but as normal features of the justice system. Cultural norms framing domestic violence as a private "family matter," reinforced by religious authorities and the honour-shame complex, coerce survivors into silence while insulating perpetrators from accountability. The paper concludes that addressing femicide demands simultaneous structural, cultural, and institutional interventions—full VAPP domestication, dedicated budgetary allocations, specialised courts, community engagement with traditional and religious leaders, and national data infrastructure—recognising that isolated reforms in any single domain will be neutralised by resistance in others.

Keywords: Femicide, Structural violence, Patriarchal honour systems, Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act and Normalisation of impunity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The killing of women by intimate partners and family members—femicide—represents the most extreme and irreversible manifestation of gender-based violence in contemporary societies. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and UN Women (2025), approximately 50,000 women and girls worldwide were killed by intimate partners or family members in 2024, a figure that translates to one femicide every ten minutes globally. Africa bears the highest regional femicide rate at three per 100,000 female population, nearly double that of the Americas and significantly exceeding the global average (UNODC & UN Women, 2025). Within this continental crisis, Nigeria presents a particularly vexing paradox: the country enacted the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) in 2015, legislation hailed by domestic and international observers as the most comprehensive legal framework addressing gender-based violence in sub-Saharan Africa, yet structural inequalities, deeply entrenched cultural norms centred on honour and shame, and pervasive institutional silence continue to normalise violence against women, creating conditions where femicide thrives with near-total impunity.

This disjuncture between progressive legal reform and persistent lethal violence demands critical scholarly attention. The VAPP Act criminalises spousal battery, rape, female genital mutilation, and forced financial dependence, among other practices, and establishes mechanisms for protection orders, victim compensation, and specialised prosecution (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015). However, by 2022, only twenty-five of Nigeria's thirty-six states and the Federal Capital Territory had domesticated the Act, leaving critical gaps in geographic coverage (Ipas Nigeria Health Foundation, 2024). Moreover, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), the agency statutorily mandated to coordinate national VAPP implementation, has reportedly received no government funding since the Act's passage, rendering it entirely dependent on donor support (Ipas Nigeria Health Foundation, 2024). These structural failures are compounded by cultural norms that frame domestic violence as a private "family matter," impose severe social sanctions on women who speak out, and valorise male authority as synonymous with family honour. The result is a culture of silence that obscures the true prevalence of femicide, impedes reporting, and insulates perpetrators from accountability.

This paper argues that femicide in Nigeria cannot be adequately understood through

individualised frameworks that pathologise perpetrators as deviant actors. Rather, femicide must be analysed as the cumulative outcome of intersecting structural violence, patriarchal honour systems that regulate female behaviour through shame, and the systematic silencing of women's voices within legal, cultural, and institutional frameworks. Drawing on Galtung's (1969) structural violence theory, Kandiyoti's (1988) patriarchal bargain framework, and May et al.'s (2009) normalisation process theory, the paper synthesises empirical evidence from 2000 to 2026 to demonstrate how Nigerian social structures actively produce women's vulnerability to lethal violence rather than merely failing to prevent it. The analysis proceeds through six sections: an empirical review of authoritative scholarship; a theoretical framework; an examination of structural, cultural, and institutional challenges; critical issues of discussion; proposed solutions; and a conclusion that situates femicide within broader struggles for gender justice in postcolonial Nigeria.

II. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

The scholarly literature on femicide and gender-based violence in Nigeria has expanded considerably since 2000, yet significant gaps remain in theorising the specific mechanisms through which cultural norms of honour and shame translate into lethal outcomes. This section synthesises key empirical works thematically, tracing the evolution of scholarship from early feminist critiques of African patriarchy to contemporary analyses of legal reform and its limitations.

Early foundational work by Mama (2005) and Nnaemeka (2005) established the theoretical terrain for understanding gender violence in postcolonial African contexts. Mama's (2005) analysis of militarism and masculinity in Nigeria demonstrated how state violence and domestic violence are mutually constitutive, arguing that the normalisation of authoritarian power in the public sphere legitimises male domination in private spaces. Nnaemeka (2005), examining the politics of female genital mutilation, introduced the concept of "nego-feminism" to capture the strategic negotiations African women undertake within patriarchal systems—a framework that anticipates Kandiyoti's (1988) patriarchal bargain and remains essential for understanding why women themselves may enforce norms that endanger their daughters and sisters. These early works, while not focused exclusively on femicide, established that gender violence in Nigeria is neither pre-modern nor culturally static but is dynamically reproduced through postcolonial political and economic structures.

More recent scholarship has turned explicitly to legal and policy analysis. Onyemelukwe (2021) provided a comprehensive doctrinal analysis of the VAPP Act, arguing that while the legislation represents a paradigm shift from the previous framework that treated domestic violence as a private matter, its effectiveness is undermined by Nigeria's dual legal system. The coexistence of the Penal Code in northern states and the Criminal Code in southern states creates a patchwork of protections in which Section 55(1)(d) of the Penal Code explicitly permits the "correction" of wives by husbands, directly contradicting the VAPP Act's prohibition of spousal battery (Onyemelukwe, 2021). This legal pluralism, Onyemelukwe contends, is not merely a technical obstacle but a structural feature of Nigerian governance that reflects deeper political compromises with conservative religious authorities.

Empirical evaluations of VAPP implementation have yielded similarly sobering findings. The Ipas Nigeria Health Foundation (2024) conducted the most comprehensive assessment to date, evaluating implementation across fourteen states and finding that despite legislative domestication, operational capacity remains critically deficient. The study documented that only nine Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) were operational across the evaluated states, many lacked trained medical personnel capable of conducting forensic examinations, and free services were unavailable in the majority of facilities (Ipas Nigeria Health Foundation, 2024). Perhaps most strikingly, the evaluation revealed that 80% of stakeholders believed reporting of gender-based violence had increased since VAPP enactment, yet only 35% perceived any improvement in actual deterrence or perpetrator accountability (Ipas Nigeria Health Foundation, 2024). This disconnect between reporting and deterrence suggests that the Act has succeeded in raising awareness without fundamentally altering the structural conditions that enable violence.

Adebowale et al. (2021) applied Normalisation Process Theory to stakeholder engagement with VAPP implementation in Southwest Nigeria, finding that prolonged court delays, insufficient human resources, and bureaucratic obstacles have become so routine that they are no longer perceived as implementation failures but as normal features of the justice system. This normalisation of dysfunction, the authors argue, constitutes a form of institutional violence that compounds the original harm by systematically denying survivors access to remedy. Their findings are corroborated by qualitative research from the Johns Hopkins Center for Global Women's Health (2025), which identified police compromise of cases through informal "settlement," corruption, and the absence of witness protection as primary barriers to

prosecution.

Internationally, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA, 2025) has documented how religious and cultural norms in northern Nigeria—particularly interpretations of Sharia law that permit wife-beating provided no "grievous harm" results—create divergent vulnerabilities across regions. The EUAA report emphasises that these norms are not static traditions but are actively mobilised by political and religious elites to resist gender equality reforms perceived as Western imposition. This politicisation of culture, the report argues, represents a formidable challenge to both domestic activism and international human rights pressure.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper deploys an integrated theoretical framework that combines structural, cultural, and institutional analyses to explain the normalisation of femicide in Nigeria. Three interlocking theories provide the analytical architecture: Galtung's (1969) structural violence theory, Kandiyoti's (1988) patriarchal bargain framework, and May et al.'s (2009) normalisation process theory, supplemented by Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality to capture the compounded vulnerabilities of women at the intersections of gender, ethnicity, religion, and class.

Johan Galtung's (1969) seminal conceptualisation of structural violence offers a necessary corrective to individualised explanations of femicide. Galtung distinguished between direct violence, which is visible and personal, and structural violence, which is embedded in social arrangements that systematically prevent individuals from achieving their basic needs. Structural violence is characterised by its invisibility; it requires no specific perpetrator because harm is built into the normal functioning of institutions. In the Nigerian context, structural violence operates through multiple channels: economic structures that render the majority of rural women financially dependent on male partners; educational structures that limit girls' school enrolment in northern states; healthcare structures that lack forensic capacity to document abuse; and legal structures that create jurisdictional confusion between federal VAPP provisions and state-level Penal Code provisions. These structures do not merely fail to protect women; they actively produce vulnerability by distributing power, resources, and recognition asymmetrically along gendered lines. Femicide, from this perspective, is not an aberration but the predictable endpoint of structures that devalue women's lives.

Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the patriarchal bargain extends this analysis by explaining how women themselves become complicit in systems that ultimately endanger them. Kandiyoti argued that women in patriarchal societies strategically accommodate to male dominance in exchange for security, status, and limited autonomy within defined spheres. This bargain is not freely chosen but represents a rational adaptation to constrained options. In Nigeria, the patriarchal bargain manifests in mothers-in-law who enforce virginity testing and child marriage, female elders who ostracise survivors of sexual violence, and women who discourage daughters from reporting domestic abuse to preserve family reputation. The concept of "honour" functions as the currency of this bargain: women's compliance with patriarchal norms secures their social standing, while transgression triggers shame that extends across kinship networks. Femicide thus emerges not only from male aggression but from a collective investment in honour that renders women's bodies expendable.

May et al.'s (2009) Normalisation Process Theory provides the crucial link between structural and cultural factors by explaining how harmful practices become routine and self-sustaining. The theory posits that practices normalise through four mechanisms: coherence (making sense of the practice), cognitive participation (engaging relevant actors), collective action (mobilising resources), and reflexive monitoring (appraising outcomes). Adebowale et al. (2021) applied this framework to VAPP implementation in Nigeria, demonstrating that implementation failures—court delays, absent judges, lost case files—have become so routine that stakeholders no longer perceive them as problems requiring intervention. This normalisation of dysfunction transforms structural failure into cultural common sense: when justice is consistently unavailable, communities cease to expect it, and violence becomes an accepted feature of marital and family life.

Finally, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality ensures that analysis does not treat "Nigerian women" as a homogeneous category. The vulnerabilities of a Hausa-Fulani Muslim woman in rural Kano differ substantially from those of an Igbo Christian woman in urban Enugu or an Ogoni woman in the oil-producing Niger Delta. Religious legal pluralism, ethnic customary practices, and class-based access to legal representation create divergent pathways to violence and divergent capacities for resistance. An intersectional approach thus refuses the temptation to identify a single "Nigerian" culture of honour, instead revealing how multiple honour codes operate through distinct institutional channels to produce femicide.

IV. CHALLENGES

The challenges confronting efforts to address femicide in Nigeria are multifaceted, encompassing structural deficits in governance, deeply entrenched cultural norms, and systemic institutional failures that collectively sustain a regime of impunity.

At the structural level, Nigeria's legal architecture presents perhaps the most formidable obstacle. The coexistence of the Penal Code in northern states and the Criminal Code in southern states, a colonial legacy retained at independence, creates a fundamental incompatibility with the VAPP Act's uniform protections. Section 55(1)(d) of the Penal Code explicitly permits a husband to "correct" his wife, provided the correction does not amount to "grievous harm"—a provision that directly contradicts the VAPP Act's criminalisation of spousal battery (Onyemelukwe, 2021). This legal pluralism is not merely a technical anomaly but a political settlement that reflects the Nigerian state's accommodation of conservative religious authorities. The consequences for women are severe: a victim of domestic violence in Kano State, where the VAPP Act has not been domesticated, possesses no statutory protection against spousal assault, while her counterpart in Lagos enjoys substantially greater legal recourse. This geographic lottery of protection violates the constitutional guarantee of equal treatment and renders national-level policy coordination virtually impossible.

Compounding these legal deficiencies is a profound resource crisis. The Ipas Nigeria Health Foundation (2024) evaluation found that NAPTIP, the agency mandated to coordinate VAPP implementation nationally, has received zero government funding since 2015, surviving entirely on donor contributions that are unpredictable and often earmarked for specific activities. This funding vacuum has left critical infrastructure moribund: across fourteen evaluated states, only nine Sexual Assault Referral Centres were operational, and many of these lacked trained medical personnel, forensic examination capacity, or free services for indigent survivors (Ipas Nigeria Health Foundation, 2024). The absence of dedicated budget lines for VAPP implementation at state and federal levels signals that gender-based violence remains a policy priority in rhetoric only.

Cultural challenges are equally entrenched. In many Nigerian communities, domestic violence is conceptualised not as a violation of rights but as a private "family matter" in which external intervention constitutes unwarranted intrusion. The honour-shame complex operates powerfully to silence survivors: women who report abuse risk ostracism from kinship

networks, economic retaliation through withdrawal of bride price or inheritance rights, and community stigmatisation that extends to their children. Religious authorities frequently reinforce these norms; interpretations of Sharia law in northern Nigeria and certain Pentecostal teachings in the south frame wifely submission as a divine obligation and male headship as natural order. The 2024 Senate bill proposing to repeal the VAPP Act, though ultimately unsuccessful, demonstrated that cultural resistance to gender equality has institutional expression in the legislative process itself (EUAA, 2025).

Institutional failures complete the architecture of impunity. Police stations routinely refuse to document domestic violence complaints, directing complainants to "settle" matters within the family. Where cases are documented, investigation is often perfunctory, evidence is mishandled, and witnesses lack protection. Court delays are endemic; survivors abandon prosecutions after years of adjournments, and perpetrators secure bail and intimidate complainants with impunity. The absence of a national sex offenders register means that perpetrators move between communities undetected, while poor data collection systems prevent accurate measurement of prevalence or evaluation of interventions. These institutional failures have become so routine that, as Adebowale et al. (2021) demonstrate, they are no longer perceived as aberrations but as normal features of the justice system—a normalisation that itself constitutes a form of violence.

V. ISSUES OF DISCUSSION

Several critical issues emerge from the intersection of structural, cultural, and institutional factors that demand sustained analytical attention.

First, the concept of "honour" itself requires critical interrogation. In Nigerian patriarchal discourse, honour is overwhelmingly coded as male property that resides in the sexual conduct, domestic obedience, and public modesty of female kin. This proprietary construction renders women's bodies the terrain upon which male and familial honour is contested, defended, and avenged. Femicide, in this framework, represents not an irrational outburst but a calculated restoration of honour—a final assertion of patriarchal authority when other mechanisms of control have failed. The 2024 Senate bill to repeal the VAPP Act must be understood within this logic: the legislation was perceived by its opponents not as a protection for women but as a threat to male authority and, by extension, to the cultural order itself (EUAA, 2025). This politicisation of honour renders legal reform perpetually vulnerable to cultural backlash.

Second, silence operates as a multifaceted technology of power that sustains femicide. At the individual level, survivors' silence is coerced through threats of economic retaliation, social ostracism, and physical reprisal. At the community level, silence is maintained through collective agreement that certain matters "should not be spoken outside"—a cultural imperative that protects perpetrators and isolates victims. At the state level, silence manifests in the failure to collect data, the refusal to prosecute cases, and the systematic underfunding of protective services. These silences are not merely absences of speech but active productions of ignorance: by rendering femicide uncountable, unprosecutable, and unmentionable, they create the conditions for its continuation. The Ipas Nigeria Health Foundation (2024) finding that 80% of stakeholders perceived increased reporting while only 35% perceived improved deterrence suggests that breaking individual silence has not been accompanied by breaking institutional silence; women are speaking, but the state is not listening.

Third, the normalisation of violence through impunity creates intergenerational effects that extend femicide's reach beyond immediate fatalities. Children who witness domestic violence internalise its logic, learning that male authority is established through force and that female submission is the price of safety. Girls who observe their mothers' silence absorb the lesson that survival depends on accommodation. The 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey found that 30.3% of women aged 20-49 were married before age 18 (National Population Commission & ICF, 2019)—a structural practice that itself constitutes violence and that creates the conditions for subsequent lethal violence by establishing early patterns of power asymmetry. Femicide must thus be understood not as isolated endpoint events but as embedded within life-course trajectories of violence that begin in childhood and are normalised through repetition.

VI. SOLUTIONS

Addressing femicide in Nigeria requires interventions that operate simultaneously at structural, cultural, and institutional levels, recognising that isolated reforms in any single domain will be captured or neutralised by resistance in others.

At the structural level, full domestication of the VAPP Act across all thirty-six states and the Federal Capital Territory is an indispensable prerequisite. This requires not merely legislative passage but gazettelement, allocation of dedicated budget lines, and establishment of implementation committees with clear mandates and resources. The Anambra State model,

which established a functional implementation committee with state funding, provides a template for replication (Ipas Nigeria Health Foundation, 2024). Federal coordination must address the Penal Code-Criminal Code incompatibility, either through constitutional amendment removing the "correction" provision or through explicit federal supremacy clauses that render VAPP protections applicable nationwide regardless of state domestication status. Economic empowerment programmes targeting rural women—microcredit, agricultural extension services, vocational training—are essential to reduce financial dependence that traps women in violent relationships.

Cultural interventions must engage rather than bypass traditional and religious authorities. The Ipas Nigeria Health Foundation (2024) evaluation found that community advocacy using local languages and gender-neutral messaging achieved greater traction than rights-based framing perceived as Western imposition. Religious leaders must be engaged as "custodians of the law" rather than adversaries, with theological resources marshalled to support gender equality within Islamic and Christian frameworks. Survivor-centred approaches require safe shelters in every state, witness protection programmes, and economic reintegration support that addresses the material consequences of breaking silence.

Institutional reforms must prioritise capacity building and accountability. The establishment of specialised gender-based violence courts with trained judges, expedited procedures, and victim-support facilities would address the court delay crisis that drives survivor attrition. Police reform must include mandatory domestic violence response training, disciplinary consequences for officers who refuse to document complaints or compromise cases, and dedicated gender desks in every division. A national sex offenders register, interoperable across states, would prevent perpetrator mobility. Most fundamentally, NAPTIP must receive statutory budgetary allocation rather than donor dependence, ensuring sustainable national coordination.

Data infrastructure represents a cross-cutting imperative. Standardised reporting protocols, a national GBV database, and regular prevalence surveys would transform femicide from an invisible crisis into a measurable policy problem. Without data, advocacy lacks evidence, funding lacks justification, and accountability lacks benchmarks. The 2025 UNODC-UN Women femicide brief provides a methodological template for such data collection; Nigeria must adapt and institutionalise these approaches domestically.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that femicide in Nigeria is not an aberration produced by deviant individuals but the predictable outcome of intersecting structural violence, patriarchal honour systems, and institutionalised silence. The VAPP Act of 2015 represented a significant legislative advance, yet its implementation has been systematically undermined by legal pluralism, resource starvation, cultural resistance, and the normalisation of institutional dysfunction. These failures are not accidental or incidental; they reflect deep political choices about whose lives matter and whose suffering can be rendered invisible.

The theoretical framework deployed here—integrating Galtung's (1969) structural violence, Kandiyoti's (1988) patriarchal bargain, May et al.'s (2009) normalisation process theory, and Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality—demonstrates that femicide cannot be addressed through isolated interventions. Legal reform without cultural transformation produces paper protections; cultural transformation without economic redistribution leaves women dependent on violent relationships; economic empowerment without institutional accountability exposes survivors to retaliation. Effective response requires simultaneous action across all domains, sustained by political will that has thus far been conspicuously absent.

The 2024 Senate bill to repeal the VAPP Act, though defeated, sounded an alarm that gender equality remains politically contested in Nigeria. This contestation is not merely a legislative battle but a struggle over the fundamental terms of social organisation—whether women's lives will be valued as ends in themselves or instrumentalised as means for male honour and familial reputation. The silence that surrounds femicide is not passive absence but active production, maintained by institutions that fail to count, courts that fail to prosecute, and communities that fail to name. Breaking this silence requires not only that women speak but that the state listen, record, and act.

The path forward demands what Amina Mama (2005) termed "no shortcuts"—sustained, intersectional, structural transformation that refuses the temptation of symbolic reform. Anything less consigns Nigerian women to continue paying with their lives for the preservation of patriarchal honour.

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