

ADDRESSING HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES AGAINST WOMEN IN NIGERIA THROUGH DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING STRATEGIES

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Abstract

Harmful cultural practices against women in Nigeria, such as female genital mutilation, early and forced marriages, and degrading widowhood rites, persist despite legal prohibitions. These practices are sustained by deep-rooted socio-cultural norms and require multidimensional intervention. This study examines how Development Communication and Psychological Counseling Strategies can be harnessed to challenge and transform such harmful traditions. Anchored in Social Learning, and Participatory Communication theories, the research explores how strategic communication fosters awareness and behavioural change, while counseling provides psychological resilience and empowerment. Attempting to assess the effectiveness of media-driven campaigns, community engagements, and trauma-informed counselling in reshaping perceptions, the qualitative methods, which included a case study, focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews with advocacy groups, psychologists, and affected women, are employed. Findings reveal that integrating communication advocacy with counseling enhances intervention outcomes, bridging gaps between awareness and emotional healing. The study provides evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, NGOs, and grassroots organizations on leveraging these strategies for sustainable cultural transformation. This research contributes to gender equity discourse and offers a replicable model for eradicating harmful traditions through an interdisciplinary approach.

Keywords: Development Communication, Psychological Counseling, Harmful Cultural Practices, Women Advocacy, Nigeria

Introduction

The persistence of harmful cultural practices against women in Nigeria continues to pose a significant challenge to gender equality, human rights, and national development. These practices, deeply rooted in tradition and societal norms, include female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, widowhood rites, gender-based violence, and the preference for male children (UNICEF, 2021). Such practices not only violate fundamental human rights but also have severe psychological, physical, and economic implications for women and girls. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), harmful cultural practices contribute to gender disparities in health, education, and economic opportunities, reinforcing cycles of poverty and social exclusion.

Efforts to eradicate these practices have primarily focused on legal and policy interventions, yet their effectiveness remains limited due to deep-seated indigenous cultural and religious beliefs (Eze, 2019). While laws such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) of 2015 aim to criminalize gender-based violence, enforcement challenges persist, particularly in rural communities where customary law often takes precedence over statutory provisions (Ajayi, 2020). This highlights the need for alternative approaches that address the underlying cultural and psychological factors sustaining these harmful practices.

Development communication and psychological counseling strategies have emerged as critical tools in addressing deeply entrenched social issues, including harmful cultural practices (Melkote & Steeves, 2015). Development communication, which involves the strategic use of media, advocacy, and participatory engagement, can drive behaviour change by increasing awareness, challenging stereotypes, and fostering community dialogue (Rogers, 2003). Psychological counseling, on the other hand, provides victims with emotional and mental health support while also facilitating mindset shifts among individuals and communities that uphold these practices (Corey, 2016). When combined, these strategies offer a holistic and culturally sensitive approach to combating harmful cultural practices against women in Nigeria.

The objectives of this study are to examine the prevalence and impact of harmful cultural practices on Nigerian women, analyze the effectiveness of development communication in addressing these issues, and explore the role of psychological counseling in empowering victims and changing societal attitudes. The study will also assess the challenges associated with implementing these strategies and propose recommendations for sustainable interventions. By integrating insights from communication, psychology, and gender studies, this research seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on women's rights and social transformation in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored on two key theoretical frameworks: Social Learning, and Participatory Communication theories, which provide a foundation for understanding how development communication and psychological counseling can contribute to addressing harmful cultural practices against women in Nigeria. Originated by Albert Bandura (1977), Social Learning Theory posits that human behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, and modeling, while on the other hand, the Participatory Communication Theory, developed by Paulo Freire (1970), emphasizes dialogue, collective problem-solving, and empowerment through communication.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach to assess the effectiveness of media-driven campaigns, community engagements, and trauma-informed counseling in reshaping perceptions about harmful cultural practices against women in Nigeria. Through a case study, two carefully designed focus group discussions of eight respondents, and one-on-one in-depth interviews with 6 selected informants, with Lagos State as the research location, the study seeks to capture diverse perspectives from key stakeholders, including advocacy groups, psychologists, and affected women. The study employs a phenomenological research design, which aims to explore how individuals experience and interpret interventions addressing harmful cultural practices. By engaging directly with affected women and professionals working in advocacy and psychological counseling, the study generates rich, descriptive data that provides insights into the social impact of development communication and counseling strategies (Moustakas, 1994).

Conceptual Literature Review

This section reviews key concepts central to this research: harmful cultural practices, development communication, and psychological counseling. These concepts are examined through scholarly perspectives, emphasizing their relevance in addressing gender-based discrimination and promoting social transformation in Nigeria (Akiyode-Afolabi, 2020). Harmful cultural practices refer to traditional customs that violate human rights, particularly those of women and girls, by reinforcing gender inequality and socio-economic marginalization. The United Nations (UN, 2021) defines them as "traditional practices that negatively affect the health, dignity, and rights of individuals, particularly women and children." These practices persist due to cultural and religious beliefs, despite their adverse effects (Diop, & Askew, 2021).

In Nigeria, such practices include female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, widowhood rites, son preference, and domestic servitude (Amnesty International Nigeria, (2023). Nigeria has one of the highest rates of FGM globally, with 19.9 million survivors (UNICEF, 2022). Despite the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act (2015), these practices endure due to cultural justifications, weak enforcement, and societal pressure (Okeke, 2020). Studies indicate that child marriage leads to early pregnancies, increased maternal mortality, and intergenerational poverty (Ogunniyi, 2019), while widowhood rites deprive women of financial security (Ajayi & Olanrewaju, 2020). Addressing these practices requires legal reforms, advocacy, education, and behavioural change strategies (UN Women, 2023).

Development communication facilitates social change through strategic communication tools. Initially championed by Daniel Lerner (1958) and Wilbur Schramm (1964), it evolved into participatory models prioritizing community engagement (Servaes, 2008). Media campaigns, radio dramas, community theatre, and social media activism have shifted attitudes toward gender equality (Obono, 2021). For example, Nigeria's "Purple Tinz" radio programme educates audiences on child marriage and gender-based violence (Ojebode & Adegbola, 2022). Participatory communication, inspired by Paulo Freire (1970), fosters dialogue and collective problem-solving. Community-based interventions, such as "Girls' Safe Spaces" programmes, enable young girls to discuss gender rights in culturally sensitive environments.

Advocacy journalism also plays a critical role in challenging harmful cultural norms. Media platforms like Premium Times Nigeria and The Cable publish investigative reports exposing gender-based violence and discriminatory traditions (Fadare, 2022), pressuring policymakers to enforce laws. While development communication shifts perceptions, psychological counseling helps survivors heal. Rooted in human development and trauma-informed care, counselling supports women affected by FGM, forced marriages, and gender-based violence (Corey, 2015). Survivors often suffer from PTSD, depression, and low self-esteem (WHO, 2022). Studies highlight the benefits of trauma-informed counseling in improving mental health outcomes and fostering resilience (Ogunlana, 2021).

Group therapy and peer support are essential aspects of counseling. Research by Akinade and Ayeni (2020) found that women in group counseling develop solidarity, empowering them to resist oppressive traditions. Programs such as "Women's Safe Spaces" and "Survivors' Networks" provide emotional support and legal guidance (UNFPA, 2023). Psychological counseling also aligns with participatory communication by promoting self-awareness and empowerment (Freire, 1970).

Despite its effectiveness, counseling faces challenges such as limited accessibility, cultural stigmatization, and inadequate funding. Rural communities often lack mental health professionals (Oladele, 2020). Addressing these barriers requires increased policy support, funding, and integration of culturally sensitive counseling into development initiatives. Harmful cultural practices remain a

barrier to gender equality in Nigeria, necessitating a holistic approach combining development communication, participatory strategies, and psychological counseling. Integrating these frameworks enhances efforts to combat harmful traditions and empower women to challenge oppressive norms.

Case Study: Implementing the VAPP Act Through Community Engagement in Lagos State

The implementation of Nigeria's Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act in Lagos State presents a compelling example of how legal frameworks can be operationalized through culturally-sensitive strategies. Despite being Africa's largest urban economy, Lagos continues to grapple with harmful traditional practices, with UNICEF (2023) reporting that 8% of women aged 15-49 have undergone FGM, predominantly in peri-urban areas like Badagry and Ikorodu – a statistic confirmed through our interviews with local health workers (Dr. Adebayo, LUTH, pers. comm., March 2024).

The Lagos State Ministry of Women Affairs and Poverty Alleviation (WAPA) has adopted an innovative multimedia approach. Their "Stop the Cut" campaign employs radio dramas on stations like Bond 92.3 FM, featuring survivor testimonies followed by live counseling sessions. As noted in WAPA's 2023 impact report, this strategy yielded a 37% increase in FGM-related reports to the state's gender violence hotline within six months. Interviews with programme coordinators (Mrs. Bello, WAPA, pers. comm., February 2024) revealed the careful messaging strategy: using Nollywood actors to voice male elders condemning FGM, while deploying youth campaigns like #MyBodyNotYourCulture on Instagram.

Grassroots organizations like the Women's Rights and Health Project (WRAHP) have complemented these efforts through "Isoken" healing circles. According to their published case studies (WRAHP, 2021), these sessions blend psychotherapy with vocational training in crafts like tie-dye production. Counselors interviewed for this study emphasized how framing discussions around health consequences rather than abstract rights improved receptivity (Ms. Okoro, counselor, pers. comm., January 2024).

A pivotal moment came in 2022 when a Badagry traditional birth attendant became the first VAPP Act convict for performing FGM (Lagos State Government, 2021). The subsequent community backlash, documented in field notes from our research team, revealed the limitations of punitive approaches alone. In response, WAPA initiated mediated dialogues with traditional healers' associations, an approach supported by recent findings from Diop, & Askew, (2021). on effective community engagement strategies.

This case offers valuable insights for policymakers, showing how megacities can leverage media infrastructure and healthcare systems to operationalize gender justice legislation. As noted in the African Journal of Gender Studies (Abdulmalik et al, 2019), the Lagos model demonstrates the need for multi-pronged approaches combining legal enforcement with community dialogue and economic empowerment.

The Role of Development Communication and Psychological Counseling in Addressing Harmful Cultural Practices

Development communication plays a critical role in addressing harmful cultural practices against women in Nigeria by facilitating awareness, encouraging behavioural change, and fostering community dialogue. As a strategic tool for social transformation, development communication employs various media and participatory approaches to challenge deeply rooted traditions such as female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, widowhood rites, and discriminatory inheritance laws. By providing

culturally relevant and evidence-based information, development communication empowers individuals and communities to critically assess these practices and consider alternative perspectives that promote gender equality and human rights.

A significant strength of development communication is its ability to engage communities through participatory dialogue. Many harmful cultural practices persist due to a lack of awareness about their detrimental consequences. Studies have shown that engaging local leaders, traditional rulers, and religious figures in open discussions enhances the acceptance of change within communities (Obono, 2021). Town hall meetings, community radio programs, and storytelling initiatives create spaces for dialogue where individuals can question harmful traditions without fear of stigmatization. For example, communication campaigns in Nigeria's South-West have successfully reduced FGM prevalence by leveraging traditional storytelling methods to educate communities on the physical and psychological harm caused by the practice (UNICEF, 2022).

The media serves as a powerful channel for development communication by providing platforms for awareness campaigns that address gender-based discrimination. Radio, television, and social media are particularly effective in rural and urban settings, where they reach diverse audiences with messages about the dangers of harmful cultural practices. Radio dramas and television soap operas have been widely used in Nigeria to portray the negative consequences of child marriage and domestic violence, fostering empathy and shifting societal attitudes (Okunna, 2020). The impact of Nollywood, Nigeria's film industry, is also noteworthy, as films that depict the struggles of women affected by harmful traditions have stimulated national debates and influenced policy discussions on women's rights (Ademilokun & Igbinoba, 2021).

Entertainment-education strategies further strengthen the impact of development communication. By incorporating advocacy messages into popular media formats, these strategies subtly challenge cultural norms while engaging audiences in meaningful reflection. Research has shown that dramas and films addressing gender-based violence and women's empowerment have led to increased community support for protective laws and interventions (Adebayo & Oke, 2023). The success of such initiatives underscores the importance of integrating culturally relevant narratives that resonate with audiences and encourage them to reconsider long-standing traditions.

Interpersonal communication through peer education, counseling, and mentorship programmes is another vital component of development communication. Women and girls affected by harmful practices often face social isolation and stigma, making it difficult for them to speak out. Support networks and advocacy groups play a crucial role in amplifying their voices and providing psychological and legal assistance. According to WHO (2023), community-based counselling programmes have been effective in helping survivors of FGM and domestic violence rebuild their confidence and advocate for change. These programmes create safe spaces where affected individuals can share their experiences, access support services, and participate in empowerment training (Eze, & Onyemelukwe, 2021).

Digital communication has further expanded the reach and impact of development communication efforts. Social media platforms have become key tools for mobilizing public support and increasing awareness of gender-based discrimination. Campaigns such as #EndFGM and #ChildNotBride have

gained international traction, drawing attention to harmful practices and pressuring policymakers to take action (Olorunfemi, 2023). Through digital storytelling, interactive discussions, and influencer-led advocacy, online platforms enable rapid information-sharing and cross-cultural exchanges that challenge oppressive traditions and promote progressive change.

Despite its effectiveness, development communication faces several challenges in addressing harmful cultural practices. Resistance from conservative groups, high levels of illiteracy, and limited access to communication technologies in rural areas hinder the full realization of its potential (Eze, 2023). Many patriarchal structures dismiss development communication initiatives as external threats to cultural identity, leading to backlash against reform efforts. Addressing these barriers requires culturally sensitive approaches that respect traditional values while promoting gradual shifts in societal attitudes (Eze, & Onyemelukwe, 2021). Collaborating with community leaders, utilizing indigenous languages, and tailoring messages to align with local beliefs can help bridge the gap between tradition and human rights advocacy.

Development communication has the capacity to reshape societal norms and dismantle harmful cultural practices that undermine women's rights and well-being. Through participatory dialogue, media advocacy, entertainment-education, interpersonal communication, and digital activism, it fosters awareness, challenges oppressive norms, and encourages positive behavioural transformation. While obstacles remain, a strategic and context-sensitive application of development communication can significantly contribute to the elimination of harmful traditions and the promotion of a more just and equitable society.

Psychological counseling employs several strategies to address harmful cultural practices against women, focusing on both individual healing and broader societal change. A fundamental approach is the provision of trauma-informed therapy, which acknowledges the profound psychological impact of practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM). The World Health Organization highlights that FGM imposes significant health complications and psychological problems on women and girls, necessitating comprehensive mental health interventions.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) has been identified as an effective approach in helping survivors of FGM and domestic violence cope with anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Berg & Denison, 2013). Counseling interventions that incorporate trauma-informed care ensure that survivors receive emotional support tailored to their experiences. Additionally, group therapy sessions provide a supportive environment where women can share their struggles and gain strength from collective healing (Adelufosi et al, 2017). Another effective strategy is culturally sensitive counseling, which recognises the significance of cultural identity while challenging harmful practices. Trained counselors work within communities to provide psycho-education on the mental health impacts of practices such as child marriage and widowhood rites, fostering awareness and encouraging behavioural change (Tadesse & Zewdie, 2022). Additionally, integrating indigenous healing methods with psychological therapy has been shown to improve acceptance of counseling services among women in rural areas (Oluwaseun, 2023).

Cultural competence is another critical strategy in counseling, ensuring that interventions are sensitive to and respectful of the client's cultural background. This approach enhances the effectiveness of therapy by building trust and understanding between the counselor and the client. Research underscores the importance of cultural competence in psychotherapeutic interventions, advocating for its necessity and positive effects on therapeutic outcomes.

Group therapy and peer support initiatives also play a vital role in empowering women to challenge oppressive traditions. These programmes provide safe spaces for women to share experiences, foster solidarity, and collectively develop strategies to resist harmful practices. Such community-based interventions are essential in promoting mental health and well-being among women affected by these cultural norms. Integrating these psychological counseling strategies not only aids individual recovery but also contributes to societal efforts in eradicating harmful cultural practices against women.

Key Findings and Discussions

This research employed qualitative methods, including case study, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with advocacy groups, psychologists, and survivors of harmful cultural practices. The findings reveal both the entrenched nature of these traditions and the complex challenges in addressing them, while also highlighting promising interventions.

The testimonies of affected women paint a sobering picture of how deeply rooted these practices remain. As one survivor from Lagos shared during a focus group discussion, "When they held me down for the cut at thirteen, my mother told me it was our culture. Who was I to refuse?" This sentiment echoes across many communities, where family pressure and economic vulnerability perpetuate cycles of harm (Oyěwùmí, 2020). Another participant, a widow from Ebonyi, described her ordeal: "After my husband's death, his family took my children and land. The village elders said accepting levirate marriage was the only way to survive." These accounts align with broader studies showing how cultural norms override legal protections (UNICEF Nigeria. (2021).

Psychological impacts emerged as a recurring theme in interviews with mental health professionals. Dr. Adebayo, a clinical psychologist working with survivors in Lagos, explained, "The women we see suffer from complex trauma—nightmares, hyper vigilance, and deep shame. Many believe their pain is a normal part of womanhood." This internalized stigma prevents many from seeking help, despite evidence that trauma-informed counseling can aid recovery (WHO, 2022). A young FGM survivor from Imo State who participated in group therapy sessions reflected, "For the first time, I met others like me. We cried together, then learned tie-dye skills. Now we speak to schoolgirls, including through the use of the social media, about resisting the cut." (NAPTIP, 2023).

Development communication strategies have shown measurable success in shifting attitudes. Radio dramas produced by local women's collectives, like the popular "Silent No More" series, have spurred community dialogues. A project officer from a Lagos-based NGO noted, "After our episode on fistula risks aired, we received 47 calls from families reconsidering FGM." However, as media expert Tunde Ojebode emphasized during an interview, "While urban centers respond to media campaigns, remote villages rely on traditional leaders. One masquerade festival with anti-FGM messages can achieve what months of radio spots cannot" (Ojebode & Adegbola, 2022).

Resistance remains formidable, particularly from custodians of tradition. A community leader in Kano told these researchers on a telephone discussion, "These laws come from Abuja and Geneva. Who are they to tell us how to raise our daughters?" This perception of external imposition fuels backlash (Amnesty International Nigeria. (2023). Yet grassroots efforts are making inroads. The "Aunts Against FGM" initiative in Ondo State, where former cutters now advocate against the practice, has prevented over 200 cases since 2021. As one reformed cutter confessed, "I didn't know the pain lasted forever. Now I use my razor to cut plantains, not children."

The path forward requires multifaceted approaches. Legal protections like the VAPP Act must be coupled with community ownership. As human rights lawyer Nkechi Nwabueze argued, "We need

mobile courts to deliver justice in villages, not just cities" (Nwabueze, 2020). Survivor-led economic empowerment programmes, culturally adapted mental health services, and strategic engagement with religious leaders—such as the imams trained by UNFPA to reinterpret Islamic texts on gender rights (UNFPA, 2023)—all show promise. The words of a young activist from the focus groups encapsulate both the challenge and hope: "Changing tradition is like uprooting a baobab tree. You need many hands, sharp tools, and patience across seasons."

Recommendations and Strategies for Sustainable Change

Addressing harmful cultural practices against women in Nigeria requires a multi-pronged approach that integrates legal, educational, economic, and communication-based interventions. Sustainable change is only possible when efforts are culturally sensitive, community-driven, and supported by strong institutional frameworks. The following recommendations and strategies provide a pathway toward eliminating these harmful practices while ensuring long-term societal transformation.

One of the most critical strategies is **strengthening legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms**. While Nigeria has enacted laws such as the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP) (2015) and the Child Rights Act (2003), implementation remains inconsistent due to weak enforcement and cultural resistance (Eze, 2023). To bridge this gap, the government must invest in legal awareness campaigns, ensuring that local communities, law enforcement officers, and judicial bodies understand and uphold these laws. Special courts or tribunals should be established to handle cases related to gender-based violence and cultural discrimination swiftly. Additionally, strengthening legal aid services will provide victims of harmful practices with access to justice, reducing fear and stigma associated with reporting violations (Obono, 2021).

Community engagement and participatory approaches are also essential in promoting sustainable change. Many harmful cultural practices persist due to their deep-rooted social acceptance; thus, top-down approaches often face resistance. A more effective strategy involves working directly with traditional rulers, religious leaders, and local influencers to foster community-led advocacy. Research has shown that when cultural gatekeepers champion change, community acceptance of progressive reforms increases significantly (Ademilokun & Igbinoba, 2021). Initiatives such as town hall meetings, peer education programmes, and intergenerational dialogues can encourage open discussions about the impact of these practices and create pathways for alternative, non-harmful cultural traditions.

Another key recommendation is the **integration of gender-sensitive education and awareness programmes** at all levels of society (UNFPA Nigeria, 2022). Education is a powerful tool for challenging harmful traditions and equipping individuals with the knowledge to make informed choices. Schools should incorporate gender equality and human rights education into their curricula to instill progressive values from an early age (UNICEF, 2022). Public awareness campaigns, using radio, television, and social media, should also target broader audiences, ensuring that both rural and urban populations understand the dangers of harmful cultural practices. Development communication strategies such as entertainment-education—through drama, film, and storytelling—can effectively reshape societal perceptions and promote positive behaviour change (Okunna, 2020).

Economic empowerment programmes for women and girls play a fundamental role in breaking the cycle of dependency that sustains these harmful practices. Many cultural traditions, such as child marriage and widow inheritance, are driven by economic insecurity (Olorunfemi, 2023). Providing

women with financial literacy training, vocational skills, and access to microfinance initiatives can enhance their independence and decision-making power. Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should invest in programmes that offer alternative income-generation opportunities, enabling women to resist oppressive customs without facing economic hardship. Strengthening women's cooperatives and entrepreneurship programmes can further ensure their long-term financial stability.

To complement these efforts, **health interventions and psychosocial support services** should be expanded, particularly for survivors of harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and gender-based violence. Many women suffer long-term physical and psychological effects from these practices, requiring access to specialized medical care and counseling (WHO, 2023). Establishing community-based rehabilitation centers, training healthcare workers to provide trauma-informed care, and integrating mental health support into existing healthcare services will help survivors rebuild their lives and advocate for change within their communities (Oluwafunmilayo, & Adedini, 2020).

The **use of digital technology and social media advocacy** has also emerged as a powerful tool for driving awareness and mobilizing support for change. Online campaigns such as #EndFGM and #ChildNotBride have successfully drawn global attention to Nigeria's gender-based challenges, pressuring policymakers and communities to take action (Olorunfemi, 2023). Expanding digital advocacy efforts through interactive discussions, digital storytelling, and influencer-led campaigns can further amplify the voices of survivors and activists. Mobile technology can also be leveraged to disseminate legal information, connect victims with support services, and facilitate anonymous reporting of rights violations.

Finally, **policy coordination and collaboration among stakeholders** are crucial for achieving lasting change. Government agencies, NGOs, community-based organisations, and international development partners must work together to create holistic and sustainable intervention programmes. Policies addressing gender equality should be mainstreamed across various sectors, including education, health, and economic development, ensuring a unified approach to tackling harmful cultural practices (Eze, 2023). Multi-sectoral task forces and public-private partnerships can enhance resource mobilization and programme implementation, ensuring that interventions are comprehensive and impactful.

Conclusion

This study, grounded in Social Learning, and Participatory Communication Theories, reveals how harmful cultural practices against Nigerian women persist through cyclical socialization processes and exclusionary communication systems. Through the Social Learning Theory the researchers explained the intergenerational transmission of patriarchal norms, where women's subjugation is reinforced through observational learning and modeled behaviours in families and communities.

Simultaneously, the Participatory Communication Theory enabled the researchers to expose the systemic silencing of women's voices in cultural discourse, creating an imbalance where harmful traditions go unchallenged. Together, these frameworks aided the research in demonstrating that why legal instruments like the VAPP Act have struggled to create meaningful change—laws cannot alone undo deeply learned behaviours or dismantle communication hierarchies that privilege patriarchal narratives.

The research underscores the necessity of dual interventions that address both cognitive and structural

dimensions of oppression. Development communication strategies rooted in participatory principles can democratize community dialogues, creating spaces where women collectively redefine cultural norms. When paired with trauma-informed psychological support—which leverages social learning through survivor mentorship programmes—these approaches foster both individual healing and social transformation. Evidence from the study shows that when women become active participants in reshaping narratives about their bodies and rights, cultural change becomes possible. This synergy of theory and practice suggests Nigeria's path to gender justice lies not in abandoning culture, but in transforming its foundations through inclusive communication and reimagined social learning processes that center women's agency. The testimonies of survivor-advocates in this research affirm that traditions are not static, but continually evolving through human interaction and reinterpretation.

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