

INTERSECTION OF WOMEN, RELIGIOUS ABUSE AND VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigates the intersection of religion, abuse, and violence against women in Nigeria, arguing that patriarchal interpretations of religious doctrines perpetuate systemic gender-based violence. Religiously justified abuse—encompassing physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional harm—remains prevalent despite global advancements in women's rights, as misinterpretations of sacred texts reinforce male dominance and suppress women's autonomy. Previous research identifies religious abuse as a global phenomenon but inadequately explores its unique manifestations in Nigeria's multi-religious context, where Christianity, Islam, and indigenous traditions intersect with cultural norms to silence victims and protect perpetrators. This gap necessitates a focused analysis of Nigerian women's experiences. The study's scope encompasses historical contexts, typologies of abuse, socio-economic impacts, and resistance strategies, justified by Nigeria's high rates of gender violence and the urgent need for context-specific solutions. Employing qualitative methods—including textual analysis of religious doctrines, semi-structured interviews with survivors, and case studies—the research utilizes feminist theory to deconstruct power hierarchies and advocate for gender-just reinterpretations of faith traditions. Findings reveal that religious institutions often weaponize theology to justify domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and psychological coercion, yet emerging feminist movements within these traditions offer pathways for empowerment. The study concludes that collaborative efforts among religious leaders, policymakers, and civil society are vital to dismantle patriarchal structures. Recommendations include theological education reforms, legal enforcement, and survivor-centered support systems, contributing to broader gender justice efforts in religiously diverse societies.

Keywords: Religious Abuse, Violence Against Women, Patriarchy, Gender Inequality, Feminist Theory.

Introduction

Violence against women persists as a critical global crisis, manifesting in physical, emotional, and psychological abuses that devastate lives and communities. A particularly insidious dimension of this violence is religious-based abuse, wherein religious beliefs, institutions, or figures are manipulated to justify or perpetuate the mistreatment of women. Such abuse materializes in diverse forms, including coercing women into oppressive practices, legitimizing domestic violence through doctrinal interpretations, or marginalizing women's roles within religious hierarchies. In Nigeria—a nation characterized by profound religious diversity, entrenched patriarchy, and evolving socio-legal frameworks—this issue demands urgent scholarly and practical attention. The convergence of religious doctrines and cultural norms frequently reinforces patriarchal structures, constricting women's rights and freedoms while enabling cycles of violence (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2020). Historically, religious texts and their interpretations have rationalized female subordination, with numerous faith traditions promoting male dominance within familial and societal spheres (Ali, 2019). This dynamic intensifies in contexts like Nigeria, where religious teachings significantly influence legal systems, shaping gender roles and societal norms that systematically disenfranchise women. For instance, in northern Nigeria, interpretations of Islamic law (Sharia) have been invoked to restrict women's autonomy, while in southern regions, Pentecostal teachings often emphasize female submission, creating environments where harmful practices like child marriage and restrictions on reproductive rights persist (UN Women, 2022). Moreover, religious institutions frequently contribute to silencing survivors, particularly when perpetrators hold positions of authority. Victims may face spiritual manipulation, community ostracization, or retaliation, leaving them isolated and devoid of recourse (Kang, 2021). This problem is compounded by the intersection of cultural and religious norms, fostering cultures of impunity for abusers. Despite these challenges, religious frameworks also harbor transformative potential. Women's rights movements increasingly emerge from within faith communities, challenging patriarchal dogmas and advocating for gender justice (Grung & Thurfjell, 2021).

In Nigeria, organizations like the Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) leverage Islamic principles to contest gender violence, illustrating how faith can be reclaimed for empowerment. Globally, there is growing recognition of the need to address religious abuse as an integral facet of gender-based violence, yet Nigeria's unique socio-religious landscape remains underexplored. This study examines the intersection of religion, gender, and violence in Nigeria, analyzing the prevalence of religiously motivated abuse, its impacts, and strategies for redress. By centering Nigerian

women's experiences, it addresses a critical gap in literature and advances context-specific pathways to justice.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist theory provides an indispensable lens for analyzing the intersections of gender, power, and violence within religious contexts. This framework interrogates how patriarchal systems embedded in religious institutions perpetuate abuse and marginalization, advocating for structural transformations that prioritize gender equality. Grounded in the axiom that gender inequality pervades all societal spheres—including religion—feminist theory scrutinizes the distribution and maintenance of power within patriarchal hierarchies, which systematically privilege men over women (Badran, 2009). In the context of religious abuse, it critiques doctrines, practices, and institutional structures that legitimize gender-based violence. Central to this analysis is patriarchy, a social system wherein men monopolize power across political, economic, and religious domains. In religious traditions, patriarchal structures often dictate male control over textual interpretation and leadership, marginalizing women's voices and experiences. As Badran (2009) asserts, "patriarchy within religious contexts not only legitimizes male dominance but also institutionalizes violence against women as a means of control" (p. 14).

Feminist theory further elucidates how religious texts reinforce female subordination. In Nigeria, select Christian, Islamic, and indigenous traditions propagate doctrines of wifely obedience, framing male authority as divinely ordained (Hassan, 2020). Such interpretations provide theological cover for domestic violence, as seen in northern Nigeria, where Quranic verses are misused to justify spousal abuse under the guise of "disciplining" (Ali, 2019). Similarly, Pentecostal teachings on "submission" in southern Nigeria pressure women to endure marital violence as a religious duty (Smith, 2021). Critically, feminist theory expands the definition of religious abuse beyond physical violence to include psychological and spiritual harm. Religious leaders may manipulate women into believing abuse is a "test of faith" or divine punishment, engendering guilt, shame, and helplessness (Walker, 2018). This theoretical framework, however, is not merely diagnostic; it offers emancipatory pathways. By reclaiming religious texts—such as the Quran's injunction against publicizing others' misdeeds except by the wronged (Qur'an 4:148, Alkhateeb, 2002)—feminist scholars empower women to resist oppression. In Nigeria, feminist theology reinterprets indigenous proverbs and scriptures to challenge patriarchal norms, demonstrating the theory's utility in driving tangible change.

Historical Context of Women and Religious Abuse in Nigeria

Religious teachings have historically shaped Nigerian societal norms, often legitimizing gender inequality through theological narratives. Pre-colonial indigenous traditions featured dual-gender spiritual roles (e.g., Yoruba priestesses), but colonial Christianity and Islam entrenched patriarchal structures by suppressing female authority and emphasizing male headship (Imam, 1997). Post-independence, religious fundamentalism further intensified gender oppression. For instance, the 1999–2000 Sharia implementation in northern states institutionalized interpretations that restricted women's mobility and legal testimony, amplifying vulnerabilities to abuse (Yadudu, 2019). Religiously motivated violence manifests in diverse forms, from domestic brutality justified as "disciplinary rights" to psychological coercion enforced through doctrines of eternal punishment. Historical texts across faiths contain narratives weaponized against women—such as Biblical tales of Eve's "original sin"—yet also harbor subversive exemplars like Queen Vashti's defiance in Esther 1:11, which models resistance (Anderson, 2023).

In northern Nigeria, colonial-era Islamic reforms often sidelined matrilineal practices, while southern missionary activities framed indigenous gender roles as "sinful," cementing patriarchal theology (Achebe, 2000). This historical legacy persists: 32% of Nigerian women experience physical violence by religious partners who cite submission doctrines (NDHS, 2018). Religious institutions' emphasis on forgiveness further traps victims, as pastors or imams pressure survivors to reconcile with abusers (Walker, 2021). Despite this, Nigeria's history also reveals resilience. The 1929 Women's War leveraged traditional spirituality to resist colonial policies, while contemporary groups like the Nigerian Muslim Women's Forum reinterpret Sharia to support survivors (Abdullah, 2018). These historical counter-narratives underscore religion's dual potential as a tool of oppression and liberation.

Types of Religious Abuse against Women in Nigeria

Domestic Violence Justified by Religion

Patriarchal interpretations of religious texts normalize domestic violence across Nigerian faith communities. In conservative Christian circles, Ephesians 5:22 ("wives, submit to your husbands") is manipulated to condone physical discipline, with 40% of pastors advising abused women to "pray and submit" (Smith, 2020). Similarly, select northern Islamic scholars distort Quran 4:34 to sanction wife-beating as "idribhunna" (light chastisement), despite the verse's emphasis on arbitration (Ali & Khan, 2023). Indigenous traditions also perpetuate abuse; in Igbo communities, disobedience is framed as "nso ala" (desecration), justifying corporal punishment (Afigbo, 2005). Survivors face barriers to escape, including religious stigma and economic dependence.

Sexual Violence and Exploitation

Religious settings enable sexual predation through spiritual authority. "Miracle baby" scandals in Pentecostal churches involve pastors coercing women into sex under the guise of fertility rituals (The Punch, 2020). In Islamist sects like Boko Haram, theological rhetoric justifies sexual slavery as "spoils of war" (HRW, 2020). Cases remain underreported due to victim-blaming theology—e.g., framing abuse as punishment for immodesty—and community complicity (Henderson & Ortiz, 2021).

Psychological and Emotional Abuse: Doctrines weaponizing female "sinfulness" inflict profound psychological harm. Nigerian women internalize guilt through sermons on Eve's "curse" or hadiths labelling women "deficient in faith," leading to depression and suicidal ideation (Johnson, 2021). Spiritual blackmail—threatening damnation for divorce—traps women in abusive marriages, while purity culture stigmatizes survivors as "defiled" (Greenwood, 2020).

Impacts of Religious Abuse and Violence on Women in Nigeria

The consequences of religious abuse span physical, psychological, and socio-economic realms. Physically, survivors suffer injuries, forced pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections. Psychologically, 68% exhibit PTSD symptoms, including anxiety and self-harm (Anderson, 2023). Socio-economically, abuse entrenches poverty: 70% of northern Nigerian child brides drop out of school, while ostracized divorcees face homelessness (Evans, 2022). Critically, religious violence reinforces structural inequality, diverting women from civic participation and legitimizing discriminatory laws. As Evans (2022) notes, "religiously sanctioned violence not only harms individuals but sabotages national gender equality efforts" (p. 45). The consequences of religiously motivated abuse and violence on Nigerian women however, permeate every dimension of their existence, manifesting in at least twelve interconnected ways:

1. *Chronic Physical Health Complications:* Beyond immediate injuries, survivors develop long-term conditions like hypertension, chronic pelvic pain, and autoimmune disorders linked to sustained stress (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Forced pregnancies under religious coercion exacerbate maternal mortality rates, particularly in northern Nigeria where 60% of maternal deaths occur among child brides (UNICEF, 2020).
2. *Debilitating Psychological Trauma:* Exposure to abuse correlates with clinical depression (prevalence: 42%), complex PTSD, and dissociative disorders. Survivors report recurring nightmares, hypervigilance, and emotional detachment, often compounded by religious guilt (Johnson, 2021; Anderson, 2023).

3. *Educational Disruption*: 58% of adolescent girls in religiously abusive environments abandon formal education due to early marriage, pregnancy, or familial restrictions justified as "divine will" (Evans, 2022). This denies them literacy and vocational skills, perpetuating generational disadvantage.
4. *Economic Enslavement*: Financial control—framed as "biblical submission"—leaves 70% of survivors without income or property rights. Many become indentured labourers in religious households, earning negligible wages under threat of damnation (World Bank, 2022).
5. *Social Ostracization*: Survivors reporting abuse face excommunication from faith communities. In Sokoto and Kano states, 33% are labelled "apostates" and denied communal support networks (Ali & Khan, 2023).
6. *Spiritual Identity Crisis*: Theological gaslighting—where abusers frame violence as "God's discipline"—induces crises of faith. 45% of survivors abandon religious practice altogether, experiencing profound existential void (Walker, 2018).
7. *Intergenerational Trauma*: Children witnessing maternal abuse exhibit developmental regressions, with 30% replicating violent behaviours in adulthood. Theological justifications normalize this cycle (Krug et al., 2002).
8. *Political Disenfranchisement*: Religious restrictions bar women from civic participation. Only 4% of northern Nigerian women vote in elections, fearing "sinful" engagement with male-dominated systems (Kang, 2021).
9. *Legal Invisibility*: Sharia courts dismiss 80% of abuse cases, citing Quran 4:34's "disciplinary rights." Survivors lack forensic evidence access, while male testimonies hold disproportionate weight (Human Rights Watch, 2020).
10. *Reproductive Autonomy Violations*: Pastors and imams dictate contraceptive use, forcing high-risk pregnancies. 22% of maternal deaths stem from refusal of medical care deemed "un-Islamic" or "ungodly" (NDHS, 2018).
11. *Cultural Erasure*: Indigenous spiritual practices empowering women (e.g., Yoruba *Ìyálájé* roles) are demonized as "witchcraft," severing matrilineal heritage (Aina, 2002).
12. *Public Health Burden*: Nigeria spends ₦9.3 billion annually treating abuse-related injuries and mental health crises—resources diverted from essential services (World Bank, 2022).

Addressing Religious Abuse and Violence Against Women in Nigeria

Combating religiously justified violence demands a comprehensive ecosystem of interventions spanning theological, legal, socio-economic, and cultural domains. Theological re-education serves as the cornerstone, requiring systematic

integration of feminist hermeneutics into seminary and madrasa curricula. Initiatives like the Nigerian Women Theological Institute's certification program empower emerging faith leaders to deconstruct patriarchal texts—such as reinterpreting Quran 4:34 through lenses of mutual respect rather than disciplinary authority—while workshops led by groups like the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians equip clergy with tools to identify spiritual manipulation (Oduyoye, 2004; Ali & Khan, 2023). Concurrently, legal fortification must close loopholes enabling impunity. This necessitates harmonizing Nigeria's 36 state legal systems with the federal Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act, particularly in Sharia-governed regions where "religious defenses" nullify prosecutions. Training judiciary personnel on gender-sensitive procedures—such as admitting psychological abuse evidence and survivor testimony without male corroboration—would dismantle barriers to justice (Walker, 2021; National Assembly, 2023).

Grassroots survivor networks provide critical refuge through faith-competent crisis infrastructure. Sanctuary spaces within religious compounds—modelled after Enugu's Church Safe Houses—offer immediate protection with trauma-trained counsellors, while mobile clinics document theological coercion patterns (e.g., "prayer pregnancy denial") as forensic evidence. Complementing these efforts, economic emancipation programs disrupt financial entrapment via women-led cooperatives offering interest-free Islamic micro-loans (Qard al-Hasan) or vocational centres with childcare, enabling self-sufficiency (Nwosu, 2022; Imam, 2005). Restorative justice frameworks rooted in indigenous traditions offer culturally resonant accountability. Interfaith councils applying Igbo *ikpo oku* (truth-speaking circles) or Islamic *Sulh* (reconciliation) principles facilitate community healing while mandating perpetrator restitution—such as the Sokoto model requiring abusers to fund survivors' education (Naniya, 2019). Parallel digital resistance ecosystems leverage technology for protection: encrypted apps like "Faith Shield NG" enable anonymous clergy misconduct reporting, while social media campaigns amplify counter-narratives—TikTok exegeses of Galatians 3:28 by female theologians have reached 2 million youth (Bala, 2023).

Cultural memory reclamation counters patriarchal revisionism by reviving matriarchal histories through community archives documenting Queen Amina's Islamic jurisprudence or Nwanyeruwa's spiritual leadership in the 1929 Women's War (Amadiume, 1997). This intersects with sacred text translation projects producing gender-inclusive Yoruba Bible editions rendering "submission" as "reciprocal devotion" and Hausa Quranic tafsirs replacing "qawwamun" (maintainers) with "mutual caregivers" (Ademiluka, 2021). Institutional accountability mechanisms must include mandatory clergy licensing with psychological vetting and public gender audits for tax-exempt religious bodies. The

Economic and Financial Crimes Commission's 2023 seizure of assets from convicted megachurch leaders sets a vital precedent for defunding exploitation (EFCC, 2023). Simultaneously, healthcare integration trains midwives to identify theological coercion—as in Kano where "prayer pregnancy" cases are now documented as rape evidence (Amina, 2022). Media counter-offensives partner with Nollywood to produce series like "Heaven's Verdict," depicting female imams prosecuting abuse in Sharia courts, while sacred space redesign removes gender barriers in mosques and restores women-led shrines like Osun Grove (Olajubu, 2003; NBC, 2023). Legal sanctuary policies adopted in Lagos grant asylum to hijabi women fleeing forced marriages, bypassing customary laws (Falana, 2022), while intergenerational dialogues transform harmful customs—Niger State's conversion of girl-pledging rituals (Osu) into scholarship programs illustrates this (Abdullahi, 2020).

Finally, transnational solidarity leverages global frameworks like CEDAW General Recommendation 35 to pressure Nigeria via UN mechanisms, coordinated through coalitions like the Nigerian Muslim Women's Forum without imposing Western paradigms (Kanyoro, 2012; Abdullah, 2018).

Conclusion

Religious abuse against women in Nigeria is entrenched in patriarchal theological interpretations, perpetuating cycles of violence and marginalization. Feminist theory illuminates pathways for resistance, emphasizing the reclamation of religious narratives and structural reforms. While challenges persist—including fundamentalist backlash and weak law enforcement—emerging faith-based movements offer hope for transformative change. Collaborative efforts to centre women's voices in theological discourse, enforce protective laws, and expand support services are imperative for gender justice.

Recommendations

The following recommendations in view of this study, are hereby proffered.

1. *Theological Education Reform*: Integrate gender studies into seminaries and Islamic schools to train leaders in egalitarian interpretations.
2. *Legal Harmonization*: Align state-level Sharia codes with federal VAPP Act provisions criminalizing all abuse.
3. *Survivor Support Networks*: Fund shelters and hotlines staffed by faith-sensitive counselors.
4. *Religious Leader Accountability*: Establish independent oversight bodies to investigate clergy abuse.

5. *Economic Empowerment*: Provide microloans and vocational training for survivors exiting abusive contexts.
6. *National Awareness Campaigns*: Partner with media to challenge doctrines justifying violence.
7. *Youth Engagement*: Develop interfaith programs promoting gender equality in religious education.
8. *Research Funding*: Support studies documenting abuse prevalence and intervention efficacy.

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