



Jubilee Campaign Submission to the United Nations Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls

Women's Activism in Nigeria: Obstacles and Objectives

Jubilee Campaign promotes the human rights and religious liberty of ethnic and religious minorities; advocates for the release of prisoners of conscience imprisoned on account of their faith; assists refugees fleeing religious-based persecution; and protects and promotes the dignity and safety of women and children from bodily harm and sexual exploitation. Jubilee Campaign holds special consultative status with ECOSOC at the United Nations.

I. Status of Women's Participation in Politics and Public Advocacy

Numerous scholars have noted that Nigerian women's participation in governmental positions and public office has remained low since the nation transitioned into a constitutional democracy in 1999, and that there has been no visible uptick in women's political participation within the last twenty or so years.¹ In fact, while the global average of women's political participation in elective and appointed government positions is 22.5%, and the subregional average for West Africa is 15%, Nigeria's average is just 6.7%, highlighting that "the more women demand political inclusion in the Nigerian nation, the less democratic the spaces for inclusion open to women seem to become."² For instance, the number of women elected into Nigeria's Senate declined from seven in 2015 to six in 2019, and the House of Representatives experienced an even more significant decline from 20 women elected in 2015 to just 12 in 2019; such a deteriorating trend in Nigerian women's political participation negatively correlates to the rising demand for gender equality in governments across the world.

While the representation of women in national politics has unfortunately remained steadily low, there has been in recent years an increase in women's participation in advocacy and activism at smaller, more local levels, usually via non-governmental organizations (NGOs). One of the primary reasons women have become more engaged in grassroots advocacy is that social media has facilitated outreach to stakeholders, collaborations among NGOs, receiving donations, and gaining

¹ Luke Kelly, "[Barriers and enablers for women's participation in governance in Nigeria](#)", *University of Manchester, Knowledge, evidence and learning for development Helpdesk*, 24 May 2019.

² Adeline Nnenna Idike, Remi Chukwudi Okeke, Cornelius O. Okorie, Francisca N. Ogba, & Christina A. Ugodulunwa, "[Gender, Democracy, and National Development in Nigeria](#)", *Sage Journals*, May 2020.

international attention.³ However, it is not without struggle and backlash that these women are able to conduct advocacy.

II. Obstacles to Women's Participation in Politics

It goes without much explanation that the majority of obstacles faced by women attempting to participate in politics and other national government positions are based upon the male dominance within these spheres as well as within the broader construct of society. Listed below are the obstacles most frequently cited by women and researchers on this topic:

i. *Traditional Gender Roles, Gendered Stereotypes, and Sexism*

Perhaps the greatest testament to the influence of gender roles and the pervasiveness of sexism in Nigerian politics is a remark made by President Muhammadu Buhari in 2016; in response to his wife Aisha Buhari's criticism of his political choices, President Buhari stated "I don't know which party my wife belongs to. But she belongs to my kitchen and my living room and the other room."⁴ Not only does this statement convey expectations of domestic servitude and sexual objectification of wives, but it also raises the question: if even the most powerful First Lady Aisha Buhari cannot escape sexism when she shares her political opinions, what hope do less influential political women of avoiding gender expectations and sexist vitriol? Nigerian politician Ayisha Osori shared of the similar remarks made towards her while she was running for the House of Representatives in 2014. Despite her remarkable credentials as a well-renowned lawyer, opinion columnist, and former Chief Executive of Nigerian Women Trust Fund (NUTF), she remembers being repeatedly told that she should relinquish her political dreams and instead focus on issues of the family and home, that she was not smart or experienced enough for her aspired position, that she was too young, and that she simply was not serious enough.⁵ In the worst cases, women involved in politics often face negative stigma and accusations that they are "loose" or sexually immoral; such dehumanizing and false labels alone often act as a deterrent for women to engage in the political sphere.

Sexist remarks and gender stereotyping at high levels of governments are harmful, as they often result in major deterioration of women's confidence and determination for achieving political goals, and discourage women's participation on political stages. It is also important to highlight that instances of sexism towards female politicians is likely higher than reported, as many feel that their concerns will be overlooked or invalidated.⁶

ii. *Electoral Violence and Voter Intimidation*

Numerous studies have revealed just how potentially dangerous it is for Nigerian women to become involved in politics, as they have on numerous occasions been targeted for violence. For example, especially during the 2015 presidential elections, female politicians and even wives and female relatives of male politicians have been subjected to physical assault, sexual violence, threats,

³ Adebukola Dagunduro & Adebimpe Adenugba, "[Failure to Meet up to Expectation: Examining Women's Activist Groups in the Post-Colonial Period in Nigeria](#)", *Open Cultural Studies*, 2020.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, "[Nigeria's President Buhari Owes an Apology: Sexist Remarks Are No Joke](#)", 14 October 2016.

⁵ Laura Seay, "[How does a woman run for office in Nigeria? The answer's in 'Love Does Not Win Elections.'](#)", *The Washington Post*, 7 June 2019.

⁶ Prerna Dhoop & Vandana Dhoop, "[Women Politicians Face Sexism and Misogyn\[y\] in the 'Boys' Club'](#)", *The Leaflet*, 7 May 2021.

and harassment for their or their male relatives' political actions.⁷ A 2015 study focusing specifically on electoral violence in Kogi State, Nigeria found that women in state elections have reported being stalked during campaign tours and raped by groups of men in cars or bushes; regrettably, many of the perpetrators view nonconsensual sexual violence of female politicians as a form of political patronage which they are entitled to in exchange for support.⁸ Often, these acts of sexual violence are followed by threats by the perpetrators that the female victims will suffer much worse if she does not renounce her political candidacy.⁹

In 2018, 26-year-old Zainab Sulaiman Umar, a candidate running for a position in Kano State's House of Assembly, reported being ambushed by a group of men wielding knives and threatening her in response to her political campaign. Fortunately, Umar was able to avoid her assailants.¹⁰ In August 2015, female politician and head of the Accord Party, Ronke Adelugba, was at her home in Ondo State when a group of police officers entered her property and hit her on the head with a gun butt, which led to her death likely as a result of blunt force trauma; to this day, there is no clarification on why police targeted Adelugba.¹¹ Female politician Nnenna Elendu-Ukeje began to experience electoral violence immediately following the start of her political campaign when she barely escaped being shot at by a group firing guns in her direction; fortunately, her security personnel also broke away, though some did suffer minor injuries.¹²

iii. *The Patronage System and Financial Dependency*

The aforementioned politician Ayisha Osori has also highlighted how the Nigerian political system is fraught with patronage, a system by which "political leaders distribute resources and favors to constituents (also known as 'clients') in exchange for their loyalty." Osori reflected on struggling to find the financial ability to distribute gifts to nearly every person she met during her political candidacy. Usual gifts for political patronage include meals, fabric, salt, rice, and cash; she highlights that "to outsiders, this might look like bribery, but as a strong norm, gift giving is mandatory." It is seemingly impossible to win elections and garner political backing on merit alone and without spending large swaths of money on appeasing constituents.

Patronage, combined with Nigeria's emphasis on traditional gender roles which often relegate women to the household while their husbands work and control the family's financial assets, it is exceedingly difficult for women with political aspirations to find the money – or their husbands' or male partners' financial support – to participate in elections and other political campaigns.¹³ The situation of financial dependency for Nigerian women has only been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic which forces many to conduct unpaid domestic labor at home, such as taking care of and homeschooling their children while schools are temporarily shut down.¹⁴ Furthermore,

⁷ Alexandra Z. Safir & Mayesha Alam, "[Special Report: The 2015 Nigeria Elections & Violence against Women in Politics](#)", *Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security*, 2015.

⁸ Professor Oluwafunmilayo J. Para-Mallam, "[Stop-VAWIE Project: A Report](#)", October 2015.

⁹ Stop-VAWIE (Violence against Women in Elections) Project, "[Violence against Women in Elections: A Threat to Democratic Gains](#)", May 2016.

¹⁰ Neille Peyton, "[Women shut out of Nigeria's poll by violence, fraud and sexism](#)", *Reuters*, 14 February 2019.

¹¹ Josiah Oluwole, "[Ondo female politician dies after police attack](#)", *Premium Times Nigeria*, 31 August 2015.

¹² Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, "[When Women Rule: Nigerian lawmaker fears violence is scaring women away from politics](#)", *Reuters*, 24 October 2017.

¹³ Adeline Nnenna Idike, Remi Chukwudi Okeke, Cornelius O. Okorie, Francisca N. Ogba, & Christina A. Ugodulunwa, "[Gender, Democracy, and National Development in Nigeria](#)", *Sage Journals*, May 2020.

¹⁴ Rebecca Sewall, "[The Pandemic Brings The Value Of Women's Unpaid Work Into Focus](#)", *Insights*, 9 April 2020.

“Then there’s the money problem. Campaigns are expensive, fundraising requires skills some women may not have and can’t afford to hire due to intersecting inequalities such as economic inequality, social inequality and structural inequality. Women may not be as forthright in asking for donations and may not have built the social capital needed for a successful campaign.”¹⁵

iv. *Insufficient Legal Framework*

Unfortunately, despite the rise of feminism not only domestically but across the African continent, Nigeria has failed to implement laws that guarantee gender equality and non-discrimination based on sex, which is directly why “Nigeria globally sits within the 0.1% - 4.9% range for women’s representation in government and it is at the bottom of the whole African continent in terms of representation of women in elective offices.”¹⁶ The Nigerian Senate continues to vote against the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill, which would incorporate parts of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa into domestic legislation, tackle gender-based violence (GBV) and discrimination, and expand the space for Nigerian women to occupy political and governmental positions.¹⁷ The National Gender Policy, adopted in 2006 to “achieve gender equality and political empowerment for women and encourage inclusiveness in the process of governance” and achieve 35% female occupation of elective and appointed public service positions, has made little to no progress towards reaching its goals within the past decade.¹⁸

Even the Nigerian Constitution itself is lackluster in its promotion of gender equality. Chapter II Section 17 states that “every citizen shall have equality of rights, obligations and opportunities before the law”, which many scholars and activists have interpreted to mean that all Nigerian citizens shall be treated equally regardless of gender. Unfortunately, however, the entirety of Chapter II of the Constitution is not justiciable and merely serve as policy guidelines.¹⁹ It is important to note that, while Section 40 of the Constitution grants all Nigerian civilians to associate and form political parties of their choice regardless of gender²⁰, and while there are no provisions in the Constitution which excludes women from participation in politics, “it is thus evident that although the Nigerian Constitution has the intention to protect women’s rights, it does not take into consideration that women are vulnerable and that the fact that Nigerian society is a patriarchal one invariably affects the realization of such rights.”²¹

While it does not directly have any connection to women’s political participation, the Violence against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP), which includes provisions criminalizing violence against women (i.e., rape and sexual violence, spousal battery, forced financial dependence, female genital mutilation)²², could offer great protection to Nigerian women from electoral violence as previously mentioned. However, VAPP currently only applies to violent crimes that take place in the nation’s

¹⁵ Vweta Chadwick, [“Nigerian Women In Politics: Biases, Barriers, Solutions By Vweta Chadwick”](#), *Sahara Reporters*, 14 December 2018.

¹⁶ Victoria Ojeme, [“Senate, UN call for public support for Gender & Equal Opportunities Bill”](#), *Vanguard Nigeria*, 28 September 2021.

¹⁷ Hanibal Goitom, [“Nigeria: Gender Equality Bill Fails in the Senate”](#), *Library of Congress*, 28 March 2016.

¹⁸ Onyeka C. Okongwu, [“Are laws the appropriate solution: The need to adopt non-policy measures in aid of the implementation of sex discrimination laws in Nigeria”](#), *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law*, 2021.

¹⁹ Bolanle Oluwakemi Eniola, [“Gender Parity in Parliament: A Panacea for the Promotion and Protection of Women’s Rights in Nigeria”](#), *Frontiers in Sociology*, 2018.

²⁰ Godiya Allanana Makama, [“Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Nigeria: The Way Forward”](#), *European Scientific Journal*, 2013.

²¹ Bolanle Oluwakemi Eniola, [“Gender Parity in Parliament: A Panacea for the Promotion and Protection of Women’s Rights in Nigeria”](#), *Frontiers in Sociology*, 2018.

²² Cornell Law School, [Violence Against Persons \(Prohibition\) Act](#).

capital of Abuja, and it would first need to be implemented by or incorporated into the laws of each of Nigeria's 36 states.²³

III. Objectives and Best Practices

Much more concrete action must be taken by the Nigerian government and other state actors to ensure that women feel safe to engage in politics at local and national levels, including legislative reforms and implementation, as well as social changes to emphasize women's agency.

i. Transformation of Gender Stereotypes and Traditional Gender Roles

Gender stereotypes tend to perceive that men are more suitable for leadership positions as well as thought-oriented careers, and women are biologically tailored for household duties; it is imperative that we transform these perceptions, though it is especially difficult due to cultural and sometimes even religious norms that enforce these harmful stereotypes. Literacy and education for Nigerian women and girls is perhaps the most essential step, especially mastery education in areas such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math), international relations, micro- and macro-economics, political science, public administration, and communications. Increasing the population of formally educated Nigerian women forces the male-dominated society to confront the reality that women can do achieve more than cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing. Furthermore, early socialization in education is another main tactic towards sparking a shift in gender stereotypes. Children naturally internalize the ideas and concepts that they observe in the world around them; it is therefore imperative to teach girls and boys at a young age the importance of gender equality and mutual respect, and discourage discussions that may mischaracterize women's roles or invalidate their goals and aspirations.²⁴ It is also important to engage with and educate men, especially local and religious male leaders by introducing educational programs, as securing their support is crucial for societal change.

Transforming society's stereotypes of women also depends on the amplifying female voices and insights in the production of media that depicts women. Numerous researchers and activists have emphasized that "of the many influences on how we view men and women, media are the most pervasive and one of the most powerful [...] All forms of media communicate images of the sexes, many of which perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical and limiting perceptions."²⁵ In Nigerian media, women have most frequently been "unrepresented" – thus degrading their importance – and "misrepresented" as sexual or domestic commodities. They have been portrayed as sexually exploitable via pornography, as dependent and submissive wives to their husbands, and as dutiful mothers to their children. A 2020 survey of print media coverage of women in Nigeria revealed that 23.7% of surveyed media sources (from *Vanguard*, *Punch Nigeria*, *The Guardian Nigeria*, and *ThisDay*) represented women in a positive light, whereas 56.2% represented women with a negative tone; moreover, stories about women are usually centered around the entertainment industry and domestic work.²⁶ Both studies indicate a need for a shift towards positive media

²³ Akindare Okunola, "[Everything You Need to Know About the Law That Could Reduce Gender-based Violence in Nigeria](#)", 27 August 2021.

²⁴ Vanessa Wisnia-Weill & Marie-Cécile Naves, "[Report – Gender stereotypes and how to fight them: new ideas from France](#)", *République Française & France Stratégie*, 13 February 2014.

²⁵ Hangeior Degarr & Flora Ogbenyi Okpeh, "[Newspaper Framing and Women Perception of Media Gender Stereotypes in Nigeria](#)", *Kwararafa Journal of Contemporary Research*, 2016.

²⁶ Aladi Alice Jonah & Okoro M. Nnanyelugo, "[Print Media Representation of Nigerian Women in the News: A Study of Four Selected National Newspapers](#)", *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*, 2020.

representation of women by emphasizing their professional and career capabilities in order to influence society's perceptions of women's agency, roles, and aptitudes. This, again, raises the importance of female journalists and women's representation in media.

ii. *Deconstructing Patronage and Promoting Leadership by Merit*

As already briefly discussed in this submission, Nigerian politics are dominated by the patronage system which depends on gifts and favors to garner support from constituents. In September 2020, Former Nigerian Ambassador to The Netherlands, Mrs. Tokunbo Awolowo-Dosunmu called for Nigerian leaders to appoint – and civilians to elect – individuals based on their merit, competence, and leadership qualities rather than their popularity and economic power, which she explains has regrettably “only succeeded in promoting corruption [and] nepotism [...] instead of fostering unity among the people.”²⁷ Numerous other scholars have noted that Nigeria's transition from meritocratic civil services in the 1960s and 1970s to non-merit based recruitment has directly resulted in “mediocrity” in the nation's, political leadership, judicial system, and security forces.²⁸ By combating the focus on candidates who have plentiful financial aspects and a large following and instead promoting candidates who have displayed broad capabilities and intelligence, women in politics – who are often less popular and have fewer economic assets than their male counterparts – will have hope that they will be elected or appointed fairly and for their merits to political and even non-political positions. The UNDOC, Sweden, and UKAID-sponsored report in 2020 explained the necessity of merit as a tool for recruitment for public sector positions, but it can also be easily applied to political appointments and elections.

“Formal, merit-based and transparent recruitment processes should become universal practice. Monitoring of the recruitment processes and gender equality among applicants and recruitment panels could be considered in order to improve transparency and gender equality in public sector recruitment and subsequent career paths.”²⁹

iii. *Quotas for Equitable Political Participation*

Currently, only seven out of 109 senators and 22 out of 360 representatives in Nigeria are women, despite that approximately half of the nation's population is female. Scholars and experts have presented numerous different tactics to increase women's representation in politics in proportion to their male counterparts and to better mirror the nation's gender demographics. For example, affirmative action and quota systems such as those in Rwanda and South Africa have promoted opportunities for women and other marginalized groups to engage in the political sector and even in high offices; presently in Rwanda, more than 50% of political positions are occupied by women. Senegal operates under a quota system, and Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has formally reserved half of all ministerial positions for women.³⁰ Similarly, a quota system in Nigeria would “reserve a fraction of electoral positions for women”.³¹

²⁷ James Ogunnaike-Abeokuta, [“Cho\[ose\] your leaders on merit, competence. Awolowo-Dosunmu advises Nigerians”](#), *Vanguard*, 14 September 2020.

²⁸ Ayokunle Adedokun, [“Nigeria has democracy but not development: Book review”](#), *United Nations University, UNU-Merit*, 23 August 2021. ; Eluozo Collins, [“Meritocracy To Mediocrity In Nigeria: Experience Of The 4th Republic”](#), *International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences & Humanities Research*, 2019.

²⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Sweden Sverige, & UKAID, [Gender and Corruption in Nigeria](#), December 2020.

³⁰ Linus Unah, [“The battle to create more space for women in Nigeria's politics”](#), *TRT World*, 14 February 2019.

³¹ Damilola Agbalajobi, [“Nigeria has few women in politics: here's why, and what to do about it”](#), *The Conversation*, 3 May 2021.

There are three distinct types of electoral quota systems: (1) party quotas, by which political parties voluntarily adopt tactics to ensure that room is made for women to participate; (2) legislative quotas, by which governments or parliaments pass laws requiring political parties to nominate a certain proportion of women as potential candidates; and (3) reserved seat quotas, by which room is made for women in political groups until a certain representation threshold is met. Rather than 'make room' by adding more political positions for women, it is a better strategy to ensure that an equitable percentage of already-existing positions are reserved for women; with 360 seats in the Nigerian House of Representatives, it would not be feasible to add positions and thus expand the financials necessary to do so.³²

With regards to the question of why more women must be involved in Nigerian politics, one scholar noted that "the refusal of both governments [Nigeria and Ghana] in fulfilling their international pledges domestically reminds women of the necessity to set of mobilization for the actualization of corresponding affirmative measures."³³ It is therefore incumbent for Nigerian women to work towards their equitable representation in politics as is already guaranteed by domestic legislation and international obligations, yet is repeatedly ignored by Nigerian male state actors. Moreover, as already briefly touched upon in this submission, despite domestic legislation and Nigeria's commitment to international conventions which compel Nigeria to take measures to protect women's rights and freedoms, numerous issues in the nation disproportionately target women (i.e., intimate partner violence, sexual abuse and rape, kidnapping, displacement, etc.). Therefore having women in leadership positions will ensure that women's problems are sufficiently acknowledged and solved.

i. Increased and Improved Electoral Security

It goes without much explanation that Nigeria is dealing with a multitude of security concerns, such as violent attacks by terrorist groups Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have resulted in numerous deaths, displacement, and kidnapped individuals; police brutality against mostly peaceful protesters; and Fulani militants operating within the Middle Belt.³⁴ Therefore, more attention must be paid to increasing security measures to ensure the protection of civilians on a broader scale, but one specific arena where this is especially necessary is in election areas and on political campaigns. Past Nigerian elections have been fraught with violence, and as already discussed, women in electoral politics face discouragement through threats, attacks, and more.

It is essential that legislation is put into place that criminalizes electoral offenses including electoral and political campaign-related violence, the spread of inflammatory speech as well as misinformation, voter harassment and intimidation, and more. This will not only increase women's confidence in their security while engaging in politics, but it will offer greater security to all political agents regardless of gender and other demographic determinants.³⁵

More funding and human capital must be invested in the national and municipal electoral boards' capacity to identify risk factors pre-emptively, "identify triggers for election related violence at

³² Damilola Agbalajobi, "[Nigeria's National Assembly: why adding seats for women isn't enough](#)", *The Conversation*, 31 May 2021.

³³ Ronke I. Ako-Nai & Babatunde F. Obamamoye, "[The Women's Movement for Gender Quotas in Nigeria and Ghana](#)", *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, 2018.

³⁴ Ryan Cummings, "[Security, Violence Could Impact Outcome of Nigeria's Election](#)", *International Peace Institute Global Observatory*, 14 February 2019.

³⁵ ACE Project: The Electoral Knowledge Network, [Electoral Management: The Case of Nigeria](#).

different stages of the electoral cycle”, and respond to these indicators in a timely manner to prevent violence.³⁶ along that same vein, security authorities must be trained to de-escalate conflicts and apprehend perpetrators. As such, more investment is necessary to improve planning during the pre-election time period to ensure that risky areas, political campaign destinations, and political candidates are protected. Electoral candidates at all levels of government should be provided with security officers to ensure their safety, especially women who have been targeted for attacks while alone or insufficiently guarded. USAID highlights the following:

“The objective of programming for security force training in electoral security practices is to [1] establish standards on the rules of engagement for public order management, [2] enhance protection of electoral violence targets, and [3] create incentives to pursue justice for victims, all within the bounds of the legal and policy restrictions [....]”³⁷

Social media has increasingly been used as a tool by stakeholders to increase electoral security and safety; for example, the monitoring of social media to identify incendiary speech towards and misinformation about political candidates, disinformation that may “risk entrenching or hardening pre-existing divisions”, and propaganda that can easily mislead the voting population and broader civil society.³⁸ The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) has played a major role in aiding Nigerian civil society organizations in predicting and preventing electoral violence through its Election Violence Education and Resolution (EVER) project. Moreover, IFES collaborated with Kimpact Development Initiative (KDI) to expand tracking of electoral violence specifically targeting women; KDI also started a social media campaign, “We Can Do Better”, emphasizing obstacles to women’s participation in politics and encouraging viewers to condemn and report instances of electoral violence against women.³⁹

IV. Obstacles to Women’s Participation in Public Activism

Naturally, some of the obstacles Nigerian women face in terms of public activism, including leadership and participation in non-government organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) reflect the hardships faced by women in the political sphere. Furthermore, many NGOs and CSOs in general also face many financial difficulties regardless of the gender of the workers or the beneficiaries; to start off, we would like to share the experiences of some of our female colleagues who work for NGOs operating on the ground in Nigeria:

“Oh yes, we face constant difficulties. In fact, we have never gotten any funding. Not once. Everything we do, we are able to do because individuals and private organizations help out sometimes. But we are yet to get any funding or win any grant. Instead, the government perceives us as enemies of the State, because they see us as those who expose what is really going on in the state. They would rather not have the stories [of displacement] told at all. Another difficulty we face is that the displaced people are not allowed to stay in camps, where it would have been easier for us to capture their data and where it would be easier to give emergency relief. Victims are left with no help from

³⁶ Ifeanyichukwu Agoha, “[Security Risks in the Electoral Process in Nigeria: Experiences and Challenges](#)”, *Electoral Risk Management Conference*, 2015.

³⁷ US Agency for International Development (USAID), [Best Practices in Electoral Security: A Guide for Democracy, Human Rights and Governance Programming](#), 2013.

³⁸ Idayat Hassan, “[Using Social Media to Improve Nigeria’s Electoral Management](#)”, *School of Foreign Service Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 22 April 2021.

³⁹ International Foundation for Electoral Systems, “[Violence Monitoring Contributes to Peaceful Elections in Nigeria](#)”, 12 May 2021.

[the] government and are left at the mercy of kind-hearted individuals. Because of this, it's hard to get to those in need sometimes. Especially those who move further away from the villages that other displaced people settle at."

"The government has never supported my work at all. And I work directly with survivors of Boko Haram, those who were kidnapped and forced into marriage and abused on a regular basis. Another experience is ageism; I started the organization at a young age and most times the comments I get from potential donors is usually, 'she is too young', 'she can't deliver.' Often times I would get to the interview stage of a proposal and then start getting sexually harassed by one of the panel members, normally they pick my contact from the form, call me up to meet with them somewhere private with a promise of ensuring I get selected for the grant."

i. Gendered Stereotypes and Sexism

Numerous women involved in the public advocacy sector have reported being subjected to sexist remarks and even intimidation in response to their activities. Dr. Oby Ezekwesili, who founded the #BringBackOurGirls movement following the 2014 Boko Haram abduction of 276 primarily Christian schoolgirls from the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, faced serious blows to her credibility. Despite her numerous exceptional titles as former Vice President of the World Bank, co-founder and Founding Director of Transparency International, and former Nigerian Minister of Education, and her therefore undeniable dedication to improvement of Nigerian society, her advocacy on the #BringBackOurGirls movement was "viewed through the prism of partisan politics" because the kidnapping and subsequent advocacy efforts occurred on the brink of the 2015 presidential elections. Numerous actors baselessly accused Dr. Ezekwesili of using the abduction and #BringBackOurGirls movement as "a front to gain political capital", and even the former Presidential Aide, Reno Omokori, accused her of being in cahoots with the opposition political party. Though Dr. Ezekwesili's activism was founded on her genuine and altruistic intentions to improve educational safety and secure the release of the hundreds of abducted schoolgirls, "her personal integrity was not only questioned but shredded" due to false allegations of political greed.⁴⁰

In a similar turn of events, Fakhriyyah Hashim started the #ArewaMeToo movement in 2019 in response to the tweets of fellow Nigerian woman, Khadija Adamua, which exposed the tremendous and heinous physical abuse inflicted upon her by her ex-boyfriend. Despite the #ArewaMeToo movement's success in generating a dialogue on the ubiquity of rape, sexual violence, and gender-based violence against Nigerian women, and its progress in drawing attention to the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP) which would criminalize specific acts of violence against women, Hashim faced "consistent backlash, threats, and trash talk". When she and other women active in the #ArewaMeToo movement worked towards exposing an abuser working in the Nigerian Ministry of Finance, individuals angered over the movement's work launched a social media campaign to falsely accuse them of being associated with the LGBTQ+ movement, which resulted in a wave of targeted harassment of #ArewaMeToo activists and attempts to delegitimize the movement itself.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Nwachukwu Egbunike, "[Women in Nigeria face a caustic landmine of political advocacy online](#)", *Global Voices*, 19 May 2020.

⁴¹ Homosexuality is taboo in Nigerian society and is even punishable by imprisonment or even the death penalty in some Northern states.

In 2012, Nigerian woman activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gave a now globally-renowned TEDX Talk, “We Should All be Feminists” in which she emphasized the necessity of feminism for the full realization of gender equality and women’s rights. While the majority of the world viewed her TEDX Talk quite favorably, on Nigerian social media she was castigated and condemned for allegedly using her presentation as a chance to criticize Nigerian society and praise feminism – a concept which is generally scorned in Nigeria.⁴² Stories such as that of Dr. Oby Ezekwesili, Fakhriyya Hashim, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and hundreds of others, illustrate how difficult it is for Nigerian women to become involved in public advocacy given the widespread targeted defamation campaigns that result from speaking out against abuse and discrimination.

ii. *Funding and Financial Obstacles*

Similar to the financial constraints that women in the political sphere face, women-led NGOs and CSOs are confronted with similar difficulties in acquiring the funding necessary to operate sustainably and for long periods of time. Many women’s activist groups rely on funds from public offices which are predominantly headed by men. As such, “the implication of which is financial dependence and subsequent failure of groups which are perceived as confrontational by the men in charge of these institutions.” In such a patriarchal society which is either dismissive of women-specific issues or antagonistic towards feminism, it is reasonable to conclude that it is not without much difficulty that these women-led NGOs and advocacy groups receive funding; unfortunately, this also means that “without external aid, most women’s activist groups die a natural death, unless there is an inclusion of men.”⁴³ As one researcher noted, “men are the current power controllers. Gender understanding thus entails the giving up of some of the powers in the hands of men [...] Power is not usually freely given and never handed over to any group of people on a platter of gold.”⁴⁴

Hardship in acquiring funding for women-led organizations and initiatives is one of the main reasons that we have seen many such organizations serving as *ad hoc* bodies that typically receive most funding and international donations when the issues that they work on are at a critical point, often meaning that the organizations work in a reactive manner rather than a pre-emptive manner.⁴⁵ In cases where there is insufficient funding, some women-led organizations dissolve – as previously mentioned – or organizations are forced to rely on volunteer workers rather than paid staff, which can affect the quality of the work.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, this has been reported as a frequent reality for Nigerian women-led organizations tackling sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

V. *Objectives and Best Practices*

⁴² Cynthia Igodo, [“The Power of Social Media”](#), *The Republic*, 1 March 2019.

⁴³ Adebukola Dagunduro & Adebimpe Adenugba, [“Failure to Meet up to Expectation: Examining Women’s Activist Groups in the Post-Colonial Period in Nigeria”](#), *Open Cultural Studies*, 2020.

⁴⁴ Adeline Nnenna Idike, Remi Chukwudi Okeke, Cornelius O. Okorie, Francisca N. Ogba, & Christina A. Ugodulunwa, [“Gender, Democracy, and National Development in Nigeria”](#), *Sage Journals*, May 2020.

⁴⁵ Monica Adele Orisadare, [“An Assessment of the Role of Women Group in Women Political Participation, and Economic Development in Nigeria”](#), *Frontiers in Sociology: Gender, Sex and Sexualities*, 2019.

⁴⁶ The Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), Cordaid, NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, & International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), [Global Report: Civil Society Organization \(CSO\) Survey for the Global Study on Women, Peace and Security](#).

Fortunately, there has already been substantial research on obstacles to operation of women-led NGOs, CSOs, and broader advocacy initiatives. Therefore, there is no shortage of recommendations, and they are best when executed in tandem.

i. *Support Women-Led Advocacy on Issues Affecting Women*

It is imperative that we support specifically women-led organizations and activism on issues that predominantly affect women (i.e., rape and sexual violence, spousal battery, forced financial dependence, female genital mutilation). Mariam Oyiza Aliyu is the Founder & Director of Learning Through Skills Acquisition Initiative (LETSAI), which she started in 2012 as the internal displacement crisis was at its height in Nigeria's Borno State and at which point women in IDP camps struggled to lead independent lives. Through LETSAI, Mariam and other women teach vulnerable women and youth vocational skills that they can use to kickstart jobs or find employment, for example soap-making, tailoring clothing, and knitting; LETSAI also provides mental health and psychological support for survivors of sexual violence and gender-based violence.⁴⁷ Other women-led organizations, such as She Leads Africa (founded by Lola Omolola) and WAAW Foundation (founded by Unoma Okorafor) teach women and girls entrepreneurship, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math), and offer them educational scholarships and project investment.⁴⁸ Stand To End Rape (STER) Nigeria, founded by Oluwaseun Ayodeji Osowobi, offers counseling and therapy to survivors of sexual violence, works to develop prevention mechanisms, and has greatly contributed to the establishment of Nigeria's first ever national sex offender registry. #DocumentWomen is a movement founded by Kiki Mordi that focuses on "tackling the erasure of women's stories in Nigerian society"; Osowobi and Mordi came together most recently to establish the Feminist Coalition which works to educate Nigerian women, promote financial freedom, and advocate for female representation in government roles.⁴⁹ As one scholar pointed out,

"Gender activists in the Nigerian state and elsewhere are essentially engaged in contestations for power. Yet, the voice of women has not been heard in resounding trajectories on very many issues which have arisen since the restoration of democracy in Nigeria. For instance, when some 276 female students were abducted from their school dormitory at Government Girls Science School in the town of Chibok, Borno State, Northeastern Nigeria, in April 2014 by the Boko Haram terrorist group, the voice of women remained marginal."

That was until the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, kickstarted by Dr. Oby Ezekwesili, garnered attention across Nigeria and, eventually, across the entire world to the situation and harnessed the support of millions of individuals clamoring to get the Chibok girls released. Within the weeks and months after Dr. Ezekwesili first used the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag, important individuals, such as then-First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama, actor Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson, Pope Francis, internet celebrity Kim Kardashian, all shared the hashtag often accompanied with a picture of them holding a sign with the phrase itself.⁵⁰ Over the course of the seven years since the

⁴⁷ Ijeoma Thomas-Odia, "[Feminism taught me that my voice is power, freedom and empowerment](#)", *Guardian Woman*, 8 May 2021.

⁴⁸ Mary Olushoga, "[16 leading organizations changing the lives of Nigerian women and girls](#)", *Guardian Woman*, 16 July 2016.

⁴⁹ Akindare Okunola, "[Nigeria's Feminist Coalition Wants Women in Positions of Power. But Why Is That Important?](#)", *Global Citizen*, 4 March 2021.

⁵⁰ Joe Parkinson & Drew Hinshaw, "[How the 'Bring Back Our Girls' Tweets Changed a War in Nigeria](#)", *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 February 2021.

abduction, 164 of the Chibok girls have been released or rescued; 112 still remain missing.⁵¹ However, the movement and its success in raising global awareness and rescue coordination efforts shines a light on the necessity of Nigerian women's activism and leadership on issues that specifically target women.

One other specific area of advocacy that would greatly benefit from support to women-led organizations would be the realm of assistance for survivors of sexual violence and rape, as has already briefly been discussed in this section with regards to influential organizations working on the issue. While UNICEF data reveals that 1 in 4 Nigerian girls are sexually assaulted before the age of 18, the nation only witnessed 32 rape convictions between 2019 and 2020.⁵² As has been the case not only in Nigeria but in many nations across Africa, it can be exceedingly difficult for survivors of sexual violence to share their experiences due to a culture fraught with victim-blaming and shame; women are often ridiculed and accused of being sluts and liars when they do come forward with their experiences. This is only compounded for women who have expressed discomfort in detailing their cases to predominantly male police officers and state actors. Supporting women-led organizations that focus on receiving survivors' testimonies, preparing sexual violence cases on behalf of their clients, and offering psychological support to victims, can combat the major underreporting of sexual assault cases in Nigeria and can foster a more comfortable environment for survivors to seek accountability and healing.

We must reserve funding for women-led organizations and movements such as those listed above, to ensure that gender equality and women's rights in Nigeria are truly spearheaded and are not overlooked by the male-dominated political and public spheres. Already, the Women's Peace & Humanitarian Fund, in partnership with Spotlight Initiative, is funneling financial resources to grassroots women's organizations that are working on projects such as advancing women's rights in specific local government areas (LGAs), ending violence against women, promoting peacebuilding and reconciliation, conflict resolution, rape and sexual violence prevention, empowerment in agriculture, and more.⁵³

ii. *Expand Funding for Women's Organizations*

Expanding funding for women's organizations in Nigeria is essential to ensuring that they can work sustainably rather than on an *ad hoc* basis, and that they can pay workers, which will therefore benefit the quality of services provided. Donor agencies such as UN Women, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), US Agency for International Development (USAID), and more – who all have been active on Nigeria's humanitarian crisis and insecurity – should expand their outreach and grant opportunities to Nigeria's plentiful grassroots women's organizations. At the same time, they should ensure that funding grants are flexible to cover numerous interwoven initiatives; for example, women's rights advocacy is often tied to conflict prevention, peacebuilding, security sector reform, equitable political participation, climate change responses, and education rights.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Nina Stochlic, "[Six years ago, Boko Haram kidnapped 276 schoolgirls. Where are they now?](#)", *National Geographic*, 2020.

⁵² Nosmot Gbadamosi, "[Why Nigeria Is Losing Its Fight to Prosecute Rape](#)", *Foreign Policy*, 18 January 2021.

⁵³ Women's Peace & Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), [Nigeria](#).

⁵⁴ Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), Saferworld, Somali Women Development Centre (SWDC), Womankind Worldwide, Women for Women, Women's International League for Peace & Freedom Nigeria, & Women's International Peace Centre, [The Key to Change: Supporting Civil Society and Women's Rights Organisations in Fragile and Conflict Affected Contexts](#), 2020.

Along the lines of expanding funding for women's organizations in Nigeria, it is concurrently imperative to generate broader awareness among these organizations of these grants and funding opportunities. Calls for grant applications, such as The World Bank's Nigeria For Women Project's search for grantees to "support women's social and economic empowerment" in Nigeria in July 2021, must be distributed on a wider basis so that more organizations are aware of these essential opportunities.⁵⁵ Funding proposal requirements should be simplified and broadened to increase the participation of more women's organizations active on a wide variety of issues. Moreover, these calls for applications must be translated from English to multiple languages and dialects, and they should include fewer terms and focus instead on widely-consumable simplified language. One of the main obstacles NGOs and CSOs face in acquiring funding and grants is difficulty understanding application pre-requisites and criteria; another difficulty is low capacity both pre-grant and post-grant process:

"In Nigeria, when asked about the challenges faced by organisations' in applying for funding opportunities, participants cited inadequate capacity and staff time as key issues. Interview participants cautioned that 'organisations are not all the same' and that the 'issues and demands are dynamic', so a variety of training and support are required. In particular, participants discussed requiring capacity strengthening support for proposal writing, resource mobilization, policy and advocacy, partnership development, budget management and due diligence."⁵⁶

Funding for women-led organizations in Nigeria has only become even more crucial in light of certain funding programs being terminated. In May 2021, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office prematurely ended a three-year grant for Women for Women International which would go towards training women in Nigeria's Bauchi state. In the one-and-a-half-years they operated under the grant, larger portions of women trained under the program found jobs and were elevated above the poverty line, and large numbers of men participated in the program's training courses on women's rights. Regardless of the success, the grant was immediately ended, leaving a large question mark on what the next possible steps would be for continuing essential women-based projects in Bauchi.⁵⁷

As noted in the prior section, gender-based violence and sexual violence prevention and response initiatives would benefit greatly from increased funding, especially within – though not limited to – the context of Nigeria. Regrettably, GBV has received insufficient attention, and "respondents report that 'GBV is still not considered an emergency during crisis.'" For example, following the aforementioned Chibok Kidnapping in 2014, the HRP (Humanitarian Response Plans) for Nigeria in 2016 requested only \$6 million for GBV programs, just 2.4% of the total request of \$248 million. It is also important to highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown protocols in many nations, including Nigeria, have resulted in a dramatic and observable rise in domestic violence, GBV and intimate partner violence (IPV) as women are relegated to the home where they may encounter abuse at the hands of their husbands and relatives.⁵⁸ This underscores an urgent need for funding on GBV initiatives in Nigeria in the coming years.

⁵⁵ The World Bank, ["Calls for Proposals for the Supporting Women and Girls Multi-donor Trust Fund"](#), 20 July 2021.

⁵⁶ Supra note 54.

⁵⁷ Bukola Onyishi, ["Opinion: UK funding cuts take hope from women in Nigeria"](#), Devex, 20 May 2021.

⁵⁸ The Feminist Humanitarian Network, ["Women's Humanitarian Voices: Covid-19 through a feminist lens in Nigeria"](#), 2020.

Funding for women-led CSOs and NGOs focusing on women's issues is essential and ever-growing, not just in Nigeria. As such, insufficient funding for these initiatives debilitated and discouraged Nigerian women involved in these programs:

"The funding barriers become a vicious cycle for CSOs, preventing them from scaling up and becoming sustainable. Without long-term, flexible and multi-year funds, CSOs cannot provide quality services, upgrade their organizational structures or accountability systems, build their capacity to manage funds and report on their use, or reach enough beneficiaries."⁵⁹

iii. *Harness the Power of Social Media and the Internet*

Social Media is a powerful tool that women's activist groups have increasingly used "to reach out to stakeholders and to clamor for greater public accountability towards gender equality." Female In Nigeria (FIN), which predominantly operates online and via social media, currently boasts over 1.5 million followers; FIN is a virtual platform that serves as a "safe space" free of judgement, where Nigerian women can share their experiences of discrimination, sexism, and violence, and simultaneously receive advice, form friendships and partnerships, and lend an empathetic ear to other women.⁶⁰ Hashtag movements as well, such as the aforementioned #BringBackOurGirls campaign, have become an increasing social media tactic for women-led activism.

In late 2018 and early 2019, the #JusticeForOchanya movement went viral following the death of 13-year-old Ochanya Obajae Elizabeth due to complications from a Vesicovaginal fistula (VVF) and other injuries she sustained after being raped for five years by university lecturer Andrew Ogbuja and his son; thanks in part to the advocacy on Ochanya's case, Andrew Ogbuja is set for trial in October 2021. Nigerian Professor Richard Akindele of Obafemi Awolowo University was suspended from his job when the #SexForMarks movement started after phone conversations were leaked in which he demanded "five rounds of sex" from a female student in exchange for better grades. The women-led #WeWillNotBeSilent movement drew thousands of women's and men's stories of survival of rape and sexual assault and called for accountability for perpetrators; the movement also uses funding by conducting seminars in primary schools where they teach young boys and girls about the importance and necessity of consent in sexual relationships.⁶¹

iv. *Ratify the Violence against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP) in all Nigerian States*

As already briefly touched upon in this report is the necessity of ratifying the Violence against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP) in all Nigerian states. The VAPP includes provisions criminalizing violence against women including rape, sexual violence, spousal battery, forced financial dependence, female genital mutilation, and more.⁶² This Act would provide protection to Nigerian women involved in politics and public activism who are often victims of targeted physical and sexual violence during the electoral process or in their advocacy; it would also provide a path to redress acts of violence and would aid Nigerian women in raising charges against their perpetrators.

⁵⁹ International Rescue Committee (IRC) & VOICE, [Where is the Money?: How the Humanitarian System is Failing in its Commitments to End Violence Against Women and Girls](#), 2019.

⁶⁰ Adebukola Dagunduro & Adebimpe Adenugba, "Failure to Meet up to Expectation: Examining Women's Activist Groups in the Post-Colonial Period in Nigeria", *Open Cultural Studies*, 2020.

⁶¹ Cynthia Igodo, "The Power of Social Media", *The Republic*, 1 March 2019.

⁶² Cornell Law School, [Violence Against Persons \(Prohibition\) Act](#).

The current VAPP only applies to violent crimes that take place in the nation's capital of Abuja, and it therefore should be implemented and incorporated into the laws of each of Nigeria's 36 states.⁶³ It could also be expanded to cover non-violent activities such as targeted intimidation, harassment, and threats.

VI. Conclusion

Discrimination and violence against women and girls in Nigeria is a social problem that greatly concerns us at Jubilee Campaign, especially as we engage with numerous women human rights defenders on the ground in Nigeria. We urge the United Nations Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls to raise the above issues and recommendations at the upcoming 50th Session of the Human Rights Council.

⁶³ Akindare Okunola, ["Everything You Need to Know About the Law That Could Reduce Gender-based Violence in Nigeria"](#), 27 August 2021.