

The Unspoken Verdict: Sexual Assault of Female Lawyers by Colleagues in Nigeria's Legal Practice

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Abstract

This article examines the pervasive yet under-documented issue of sexual assault and harassment of female lawyers by their colleagues within the Nigerian legal profession. Despite the profession's role as a custodian of justice, it is rife with significant gender-based discrimination, abuse, and impunity. This study synthesises data from recent empirical reports, analyses the existing legal and regulatory frameworks, and evaluates the cultural and structural factors that perpetuate this problem. Through an examination of landmark cases, such as *Ejike Maduka v Microsoft Nigeria*, and the policies of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), this research highlights the profound disconnect between legal ideals and the lived realities of many female practitioners. It finds that a combination of patriarchal societal norms, hierarchical professional structures, economic vulnerability, and inadequate reporting mechanisms creates an environment in which sexual misconduct thrives, and victims are silenced. The research concludes with comprehensive recommendations for legislative, institutional, and cultural reforms to foster a safe, equitable, and just legal profession for all practitioners in Nigeria.

Keywords: Sexual Assault, Sexual Harassment, Female Lawyers, Legal Practice.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The legal profession in any society is expected to be an epitome of justice, integrity, and the rule of law. Lawyers are the guardians of the law, sworn to uphold the highest ethical standards. However, when the profession itself becomes a site of the very injustices it purports to fight, it signals a deep-seated crisis that warrants critical examination.

In Nigeria, a growing body of evidence reveals a disturbing prevalence of sexual assault and harassment against female lawyers, perpetrated by their male colleagues, particularly those in senior positions. This issue represents a profound contradiction. A profession dedicated to protecting rights is failing to protect its own. The vulnerability of female lawyers to sexual misconduct is not an isolated phenomenon but is deeply embedded

within the broader context of gender inequality that characterizes Nigerian society.[1] While women have made significant strides in entering the legal profession, with near-equal numbers of male and female students in law faculties, this parity vanishes at the senior levels of practice.[2] Women constitute 40% of all lawyers in Nigeria, but only 4% of the prestigious rank of Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN).[3] This gross underrepresentation at the top is both a cause and a consequence of a professional culture that remains largely patriarchal and, in many instances, hostile to women. This research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the sexual assault and harassment of female lawyers by their colleagues in Nigeria. It seeks to move beyond anecdotal evidence by synthesising findings from recent reports, legal analyses, and media investigations to present a structured overview of the

¹ Joyce Oduah FICMC, *Sexism in the Legal Profession: Times' Up* (Panel Discussion, Commonwealth Lawyers Conference, 6 September 2021).

² International Bar Association, *50:50 by 2030: A longitudinal study into gender disparity in law – Nigeria Results Report* (IBA Legal Policy and Research Unit with

LexisNexis Rule of Law Foundation, April 2023) at IBA+Gender+Progress+Report+2024+final.pdf <https://share.google/9kLnIbmQQwPIeYXN> accessed 1st November, 2025.

³ Ibid

problem. The objectives are to define the scope and nature of sexual misconduct in the legal workplace; examine the adequacy of existing legal and professional regulatory frameworks; analyse the cultural and structural factors that enable such abuse; assess the impact on victims and the profession; and propose concrete recommendations for reform.

This article makes three principal contributions. First, it provides a structured socio-legal analysis of sexual harassment and assault within Nigeria's legal profession, an area that remains under-examined in formal legal scholarship despite its prevalence. Second, it critically evaluates the adequacy of existing legal and professional regulatory frameworks, highlighting gaps between normative commitments and lived professional realities. Third, it advances concrete, profession-specific reform proposals to strengthen accountability, prevention mechanisms, and institutional culture within the Nigerian legal community.

By shedding light on this unspoken verdict, this research paper argues for urgent, concerted action to ensure the Nigerian legal profession upholds its foundational ideals of justice and equality.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITIONS

To comprehend the scope of the issue, it is crucial to establish clear definitions of sexual assault and sexual harassment, as the terms are often used interchangeably but carry distinct legal and social meanings. Sexual assault generally refers to any form of sexual contact or behaviour that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient. This can range from unwanted touching to rape. Sexual harassment, on the other hand, is a broader term encompassing unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that creates a hostile or intimidating work environment.[4]

Although Nigeria lacks a comprehensive standalone workplace sexual harassment statute, sexual harassment is recognised and addressed through a combination of constitutional protections, criminal statutes, and labour-related adjudication, particularly within the National Industrial Court framework. [5]

⁴ Sexual Harassment Laws: Nigeria in Context (World Policy Center, March 2023).

⁵ *Legal Considerations on Sexual Harassment in the Workplace*, Mondaq (2023) <https://www.mondaq.com/nigeria/employee-rights-labour-relations/1336894/legal-considerations-on-sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace>

⁶ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), General Recommendation No. 19: Violence against women (11th Session, 1992) accessed 12th November, 2025.

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in its General Recommendation No. 19, defines gender-based violence as violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. It clarifies that this includes acts of sexual harassment, which it describes as:

"...such unwelcome sexually determined behaviour as physical contact and advances, sexually colored remarks, showing pornography and sexual demands, whether by words or actions.

Such conduct can be humiliating and may constitute a health and safety problem; it is discriminatory when the woman has reasonable grounds to believe that her objection would disadvantage her in connection with her employment, including recruitment or promotion, or when it creates a hostile working environment." [6]

In the Nigerian legal profession, these definitions take various forms. Testimonies reveal a spectrum of misconduct ranging from inappropriate comments and unwanted advances from both senior colleagues and clients to quid pro quo propositions where career progression is tied to sexual compliance. [7] At its most severe, it involves criminal acts of rape and sexual assault, often perpetrated by senior lawyers who exploit their positions of power and the vulnerability of their junior colleagues. [8] Understanding this spectrum is essential for developing a legal and institutional response that addresses all facets of the problem.

III. LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Nigeria has a multi-layered legal framework that, in theory, offers protection against sexual assault and harassment. However, its effectiveness is severely undermined by gaps in legislation, poor enforcement, and a lack of specific focus on the workplace context.

Notably, the Labour Act does not expressly prohibit sexual harassment, leaving victims to rely on fragmented criminal provisions and judicial

⁷ Hauwa Saleh Abubakar, 'The Working Realities of Nigeria's Female Lawyers'(HumAngle, 15 October 2023) <https://humanglemedia.com/the-working-realities-of-nigerias-female-lawyers/>. Accessed 15th November, 2025.

⁸ 'Female lawyers' harassment by senior colleagues takes centre stage at NBA conference' (Premium Times, 27 August 2019) @ <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/355917-female-lawyers-harassment-by-senior-colleagues-takes-centre-stage-at-nba-conference.html>. Accessed 1st December, 2025.

interpretation rather than clear statutory workplace protections. [9]

A. International and Regional Instruments Nigeria is a signatory to several international and regional treaties that guarantee the right to dignity and freedom from discrimination. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified by Nigeria in 1985, provides a robust framework for ensuring gender equality. The African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, which has been domesticated into Nigerian law, also guarantees the right to dignity and prohibits all forms of degradation. [10] Furthermore, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 111 explicitly prohibits discrimination in employment and occupation, a category under which sexual harassment falls. [11] These instruments provide a legal basis for holding the state and institutions accountable, as demonstrated in key court judgments.

B. DOMESTIC LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The primary domestic law is the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), which provides foundational protections. It guarantees the right to the dignity of the human person, and it prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex. [12]. However, these constitutional provisions are not self-enforcing and require specific legislation to be made effective. The most significant piece of legislation is the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act. [13] The Act represents a major step forward by providing a comprehensive legal framework for addressing all forms of violence, including sexual harassment. It defines sexual harassment and provides for a penalty of imprisonment for up to three years. [14] However, its application is limited. As a federal law, it is only directly applicable in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. For it to apply nationwide, each of the 36 states must domesticate it. As of early 2025, several states have yet to do so, creating a patchwork.

Older laws like the Criminal Code Act (applicable in Southern Nigeria) and the Penal Code Act

(applicable in Northern Nigeria) contain provisions on assault and indecent assault but do not specifically define or address sexual harassment in the workplace, making them ill-suited for tackling the nuances of the problem. [15]

C. PROFESSIONAL REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Recognising the growing crisis, the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), through its Women Forum, launched a Sexual Harassment Policy in 2021. [16] The Nigerian Bar Association formally adopted a Sexual Harassment Policy in 2021, acknowledging the prevalence of sexual misconduct within legal practice and the need for profession-specific safeguards. [17]

The policy aims to provide a framework for preventing and addressing sexual harassment within the legal profession. It defines prohibited conduct, establishes reporting procedures, and outlines sanctions. While a commendable initiative, its effectiveness is contingent on robust implementation and enforcement by the NBA and the Legal Practitioners Disciplinary Committee (LPDC). A critical gap remains in the Rules of Professional Conduct for Legal Practitioners (RPC), the primary code governing lawyers' ethics. As of 2023, the RPC contained no specific provisions on sexual harassment or bullying, a failure that senior lawyers at the NBA Annual General Conference highlighted. [18] This omission signals that such misconduct is not considered a core issue in professional ethics, thereby weakening accountability.

III(A). Methodology and Scope of the Study

This study adopts a doctrinal and qualitative socio-legal research methodology. It relies on the analysis of primary and secondary legal materials, including international human rights instruments, Nigerian constitutional and statutory provisions, professional regulatory frameworks, judicial decisions, and policy documents of the Nigerian Bar Association.

In addition, the study synthesises qualitative data drawn from published empirical studies, reports by

⁹ Action4Justice Nigeria, *What Does the Law Say About Sexual Harassment?*

https://nigeria.action4justice.org/legal_areas/sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace/what-does-the-law-say-about-sexual-harassment/ Accessed 1st December, 2025.

¹⁰ *Ejike Maduka v Microsoft Nigeria Ltd & Ors* (2014) 41 NWLR (Pt 125) 67.

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² Section 42, 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended)

¹³ Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015 (VAPP Act).

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ 'Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Case Study of the Nigerian Legal Sector (2019) 86 Journal of Law,

Policy and Globalization 94. Accessed 1st December, 2025.

¹⁶ Nigerian Bar Association Women Forum, 'Sexual Harassment Policy' (2021). 1st December, 2025

¹⁷ *NBA to Tackle Sexual Harassment with New Policy*, The Nation (2021) <https://thenationonline.net/nba-to-tackle-sexual-harassment-with-new-policy/> 1st December, 2025

¹⁸ 'Female lawyers' harassment by senior colleagues takes centre stage at NBA conference' (Premium Times, 27 August 2019) @ <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/355917-female-lawyers-harassment-by-senior-colleagues-takes-centre-stage-at-nba-conference.html>. 1st December, 2025

international and domestic organisations, media investigations, and documented professional testimonies of legal practitioners. These sources are utilised not as statistically representative samples, but as illustrative evidence of recurring patterns of sexual harassment and assault within Nigeria's legal profession.

Given the pervasive underreporting of sexual misconduct in hierarchical professional environments, empirical research confirms that sexual harassment within Nigeria's legal profession is both prevalent and under-reported, with sector-specific studies identifying systemic professional and institutional factors that discourage formal complaints. [19]

This study does not purport to present a comprehensive quantitative account of prevalence; rather, it focuses on identifying structural trends, institutional gaps, and normative failures that enable sexual misconduct and silence victims.

The scope of the study is limited to sexual harassment and sexual assault occurring within professional legal practice in Nigeria, particularly interactions among legal practitioners. While intersecting factors such as economic vulnerability and professional hierarchy are acknowledged, the primary analytical focus remains gender-based power dynamics within legal institutions.

IV. PREVALENCE AND MANIFESTATIONS

The problem of sexual harassment in the Nigerian legal profession is not one of isolated incidents but a widespread pattern of abuse. Sector-specific empirical studies focusing on Nigerian legal practitioners indicate that sexual harassment is widespread within legal workplaces, with power imbalance and professional hierarchy identified as key risk factors. [20]

While comprehensive data remains challenging to collect due to underreporting, available statistics and qualitative evidence paint a grim picture.

A. STATISTICAL EVIDENCE

Recent studies reveal alarming rates of sexual harassment in Nigerian workplaces. A 2023 report by the World Policy Centre found that over half (54.5%) of Nigerian women reported experiencing sexual harassment at work in the past year. [21] Specific research on the legal sector indicates a prevalence of 64%, suggesting the problem is even more acute in this profession. [22] These figures align with earlier findings, such as a 2016 EEOC report cited in Nigerian media, which stated that 60% of women confirmed experiencing workplace sexual harassment. [23]

This high prevalence of harassment is directly linked to the stark gender imbalance in positions of power. As noted by the International Bar Association (IBA), while women comprise 40% of lawyers, they are severely underrepresented in senior roles, holding only 33% of senior positions in the judiciary and a mere 4% of SAN titles. [24] This power disparity creates fertile ground for abuse, in which senior male colleagues can exploit their influence over junior female lawyers whose career progression depends on their goodwill.

B. Manifestations of Sexual Misconduct in Legal Practice

The forms of sexual misconduct experienced by female lawyers are varied and insidious:

Firstly, one of the most common forms is where senior lawyers demand sexual favours from junior colleagues in exchange for career opportunities, favourable work assignments, or even job security. The hierarchical nature of law firms, where junior lawyers are heavily dependent on the mentorship and approval of seniors, makes them particularly vulnerable to this form of exploitation.

Secondly, female lawyers report being subjected to a toxic work culture characterised by sexually suggestive comments, unwanted physical contact, and a general atmosphere of disrespect. One lawyer described being forced to "walk on eggshells" and avoid being friendly for fear of her actions being misinterpreted by male colleagues and clients. [25]

¹⁹ Aina-Pelemo, A. D. et al., *Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Case Study of the Nigerian Legal Sector* (2019) Journal of Law, Policy and Globalisation. at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334131604_Sexual_Harassment_in_the_Workplace_Case_Study_of_the_Nigerian_Legal_Sector_Journal_of_Law_Policy_and_Globalisation_2019_86_121-137 1st December, 2025

²⁰ Aina-Pelemo *et al.*, (2019), *Sexual Harassment in the Nigerian Legal Sector* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334131604_Sexual_Harassment_in_the_Workplace_Case_Study_of_the_Nigerian_Legal_Sector_Journal_of_Law_Policy_and_Globalisation_2019_86_121-137

²¹ Sexual Harassment Laws: Nigeria in Context (World Policy Center, March 2023) @ Nigeria - Sexual harassment.pdf. Accessed 1st December, 2025

²² Ibid

²³ Hauwa Saleh Abubakar, 'The Working Realities of Nigerias' Female Lawyers'(HumAngle, 15 October 2023) <https://humanglemedia.com/the-working-realities-of-nigerias-female-lawyers/>. 21st December, 2025

²⁴ Supra @ note 2

²⁵ Hauwa Saleh Abubakar, 'The Working Realities of Nigerias' Female Lawyers' Supra @ note 19

Thirdly, a particularly egregious form of abuse involves senior lawyers deliberately failing to arrange separate hotel accommodation for junior female colleagues during out-of-town assignments or conferences. This tactic is used to force female lawyers into a compromising position, leaving them in the hotel rooms of their principals and vulnerable to sexual assault. [26]

Fourthly, the most severe manifestations involve criminal acts of violence. During the 2019 NBA conference session, a panellist recounted a documented incident involving a young female lawyer who ran out of her principal's office in tears, having just been raped. The victim, however, refused to make a formal complaint for fear of losing her job, highlighting the immense pressure and fear that ensures perpetrators impunity. [27]

Media investigations and practitioner-focused reports further document hostile professional environments faced by female lawyers, including sexualised work cultures, exclusion from advancement opportunities, and harassment linked to career progression. [28]

V. STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS

The prevalence of sexual assault in the Nigerian legal profession cannot be attributed solely to individual misconduct. It is a systemic problem rooted in deep-seated structural and cultural factors that create and sustain an environment conducive to abuse.

A. Patriarchal Societal Norms: Nigerian society is built on a foundation of patriarchy, reinforced by traditional, religious, and cultural norms that emphasize male authority and female subordination. [29] This societal gender bias inevitably permeates the legal profession. Professional commentary within the Nigerian Bar further recognises that entrenched patriarchal norms and male-dominated networking spaces within legal practice reinforce gender inequality and heighten vulnerability to sexual harassment. [30]

As explained by a former General Secretary of the NBA, the sexism within the profession is a resultant

effect of the sexist cultures and ideologies of the Nigerian/African society. [31] From childhood, gender roles are strictly defined, and women are often socialized to be deferential, a trait that is exploited in the hierarchical structure of legal practice.

B. The Professional Culture of Law

The culture of the legal profession itself, with its rigid hierarchy and old boys club mentality, perpetuates gender inequality. Power is concentrated in the hands of senior partners and SANs, who are overwhelmingly male. This creates a dynamic where junior female lawyers are often seen not as colleagues but as subordinates available for exploitation.

Furthermore, essential career-building activities, such as business development and networking, often occur in informal, male-dominated settings. As one female partner noted, these activities involve socializing at places, times and a frequency that most female professionals are either ill-equipped to participate in without having to worry about being propositioned, misunderstood or compromised. [32] This effectively excludes women from critical opportunities for advancement or forces them to navigate environments fraught with the risk of harassment.

C. Economic Vulnerability and Lack of Institutional Support

The economic precarity of many junior lawyers exacerbates their vulnerability. The significant gender pay gap, with women in urban areas earning up to 46% less than men, means that many female lawyers are in a financially insecure position. [33] This economic dependence, coupled with the fear of being fired and blocked within the legal community, makes it exceedingly difficult for victims to report abuse. This is compounded by the fact that many law firms lack formal Human Resources (HR) departments, leaving victims with no safe or confidential channel for lodging complaints. [34]

VI. IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES

The impact of sexual assault and harassment extends far beyond the immediate act, inflicting lasting

²⁶ 'Female lawyers' harassment by senior colleagues takes centre stage at NBA conference' (Premium Times, 27 August 2019) @ <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/355917-female-lawyers-harassment-by-senior-colleagues-takes-centre-stage-at-nba-conference.html>. Accessed 21st December 2025.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ HumAngle, *The Working Realities of Nigeria's Female Lawyers* (2023) <https://humanglemedia.com/the-working-realities-of-nigerias-female-lawyers/>; The Eagle Online, *Lawyers Identify Sexual Harassment as Factor Reducing Female Litigators* (2023)

<https://theeagleonline.com.ng/lawyers-identify-sexual-harassment-others-as-factors-reducing-female-litigators/>
²⁹ Supra @ note 1

³⁰ NBA Blog, *Combating Sexual Harassment in the Legal Profession* (2025) <https://blog.nigerianbar.org.ng/2025/03/18/combating-sexual-harassment-in-the-legal-profession-promoting-a-safe-and-inclusive-workplace/> accessed 2nd January 2026.

³¹ Supra @ note 1.

³² Supra @ note 2.

³³ Hauwa Saleh Abubakar, 'The Working Realities of Nigerias' Female Lawyers'supra @ note 19.

³⁴ Ibid

damage on the victims, the legal profession, and society at large.

A. Impact on Victims

For the individual victim, the consequences are devastating. Survivors of sexual harassment and assault experience significant psychological trauma, including feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety, and depression. The professional environment becomes a source of stress and fear, leading to decreased work performance and increased absenteeism. [35] Many women are forced to make a difficult choice, endure the abuse in silence or abandon their careers. The World Policy Center report found that after experiencing harassment, 56.7% of women resigned from their jobs and 51.1% took a leave of absence, disrupting their careers and financial stability. [36]

B. Impact on the Legal Profession

The legal profession suffers immensely from this culture of abuse. The attrition of talented and dedicated female lawyers, who leave the profession to escape harassment, represents a significant loss of human capital. This perpetuates the cycle of gender disparity at senior levels, depriving the profession of diverse perspectives and leadership. It also severely damages the reputation of the legal profession, eroding public trust and confidence. A profession that cannot ensure justice and safety within its own ranks can hardly be seen as a credible arbiter of justice for society.

C. Societal Impact

Ultimately, the failure to address sexual assault within the legal profession has broader societal implications. It reinforces the normalization of gender-based violence and sends a message that even in the halls of justice, women are not safe. This can deter aspiring female lawyers from entering the profession and may weaken access to justice for female clients, who may feel that a male-dominated profession cannot adequately understand or represent their interests. It undermines the very principle of the rule of law, which depends on a legal system that is fair, equitable, and just for all.

VII. BARRIERS TO REPORTING AND ACCOUNTABILITY:

Despite the high prevalence of sexual misconduct, the vast majority of incidents go unreported, creating a culture of impunity for perpetrators. This silence is not a result of victims' consent or indifference but is a product of formidable barriers that prevent them from seeking justice.

A. Institutional and Professional Barriers

The very structure of the legal workplace often lacks the basic mechanisms for addressing grievances. Legal and policy analyses consistently identify weak institutional reporting mechanisms, the absence of formal human resource structures, and fear of retaliation as major barriers to reporting sexual harassment in Nigerian workplaces. [37]

As highlighted in multiple accounts, a significant number of law firms in Nigeria operate without a dedicated Human Resources (HR) department. [38] This absence leaves victims with no formal, confidential, or impartial channel to report harassment. The only recourse is often to report to a senior partner, who may be the perpetrator, a friend of the perpetrator, or simply dismissive of the complaint to protect the firm's reputation.

Furthermore, the fear of professional retaliation is a powerful silencer. Victims, particularly junior lawyers, are acutely aware that lodging a complaint against a senior colleague could mean the end of their career. They face the risk of being fired, ostracized, and blacklisted within a close-knit legal community, making it nearly impossible to secure future employment. The case of the young lawyer who was raped by her principal but refused to complain for fear of being sacked is a stark illustration of this reality. [39]

B. Cultural and Social Barriers

A deeply ingrained culture of victim-blaming in Nigerian society places the onus of preventing sexual assault on the woman. Victims are often met with skepticism and questions about their attire, behavior, or why they put themselves in a compromising position. This societal stigma is magnified within the conservative legal profession, leading to intense feelings of shame and self-blame that discourage reporting. The culture of silence is pervasive, where everyone may know that harassment is occurring but turns a blind eye, normalizing the abuse and isolating the victim. [40]

C. Legal and Procedural Hurdles

The legal framework itself presents significant obstacles. The forementioned gaps in the Rules of Professional Conduct (RPC) mean that sexual harassment is not explicitly treated as a form of professional misconduct, making it difficult to bring disciplinary action. While the VAPP Act provides a legal avenue, the challenges of proving a case in court, coupled with the justice system's slow pace, can be daunting for victims. The burden of proof, the potential for public

³⁵ Supra @ note 4

³⁶ Supra @ note 4

³⁷ Apt Response, *Dealing with Workplace Harassment and Bullying Legally in Nigeria* (2025) <https://blog.aptrresponse.io/dealing-with-workplace-harassment-and-bullying-legally-in-nigeria/>

³⁸ Hauwa Saleh Abubakar, 'The Working Realities of Nigerias' Female Lawyers, supra @ note 19.

³⁹ Supra @ note 22

⁴⁰ Ibid

humiliation during cross-examination, and the lack of adequate legal and psychological support systems for victims all serve as powerful deterrents.

IX. CONCLUSION

The sexual assault and harassment of female lawyers by their colleagues raises serious concerns regarding professional ethics, institutional accountability, and the integrity of the legal profession.

It is a betrayal of the core principles of justice, equality, and human dignity that the profession is sworn to uphold. The problem is not merely one of a few bad apples. Still, it is systemic, nurtured by a patriarchal culture, entrenched power imbalances, and a collective failure of leadership and institutional will. The persistent silence surrounding this issue has contributed to institutional inaction and professional impunity.

However, the tide is beginning to turn. The courageous testimonies of survivors, the diligent work of researchers and journalists, the landmark ruling in *Maduka v Microsoft*, and the policy initiatives of the NBA Women's Forum are all cracks in the wall of silence. For real change to occur, this momentum must be harnessed into a concerted movement for reform. The recommendations outlined in this paper provide a roadmap for action. Still, they will remain ink on paper without the political will and collective commitment of all stakeholders from the Body of Benchers and the leadership of the NBA to the managing partners of law firms and every individual lawyer.

Ultimately, creating a legal profession that is safe and equitable for women is not a women's issue; it is a fundamental issue of justice. A profession that fails to protect its own cannot command the moral authority to protect the rights of others. The time has come for the Nigerian legal community to look inward, confront its own demons, and deliver a final, unequivocal verdict in favor of justice, dignity, and equality for all its members. Beyond the Nigerian context, the findings of this study contribute to broader Global South discourses on gender, professional regulation, and access to justice, underscoring the need to interrogate power relations within institutions traditionally positioned as guardians of rights.

X. RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the systemic issue of sexual assault in the Nigerian legal profession requires a multi-faceted approach that combines legislative reform, institutional change, and a fundamental cultural shift.

A. Legislative and Regulatory Reforms

1. Enact Comprehensive National Legislation: The National Assembly should prioritize the passage of a specific, standalone law that prohibits sexual harassment

in all workplaces, including law firms. This law should provide a clear definition of harassment, mandate preventive measures for employers, establish confidential reporting mechanisms, and protect victims from retaliation.

2. Amend the Rules of Professional Conduct (RPC):

The Body of Benchers must urgently amend the RPC to explicitly define and prohibit sexual harassment and bullying as forms of professional misconduct. This would empower the Legal Practitioners Disciplinary Committee (LPDC) to sanction and, where appropriate, disbar lawyers found guilty of such acts.

3 Ensure Full Domestication of the VAPP Act: The NBA and civil society organizations should intensify advocacy efforts to ensure that all remaining states in Nigeria domesticate the VAPP Act, creating a uniform standard of protection across the country.

B. Institutional Reforms within the Legal Profession

4 Mandate and Enforce the NBA Sexual Harassment Policy:

The NBA must move from policy adoption to robust enforcement. It should be mandatory for all law firms to adopt and implement the policy. The NBA should conduct regular audits and establish a visible and trusted mechanism for receiving and investigating complaints, independent of firm management.

5 Establish Mandatory HR Structures: Regulations should be put in place requiring law firms above a certain size to establish professional HR departments with trained personnel capable of handling sensitive complaints of sexual harassment confidentially and effectively.

6 Regular and Compulsory Training: Mandatory annual training on sexual harassment, gender sensitivity, and workplace ethics should be a requirement for all legal practitioners as part of their continuing professional development.

C. Cultural Change and Support Systems

7 Promote Male Allyship and Leadership

Accountability: Senior male lawyers and leaders of the bar have a critical role to play in championing cultural change. They must move from passive bystanders to active allies by publicly condemning harassment, holding their peers accountable, and mentoring both male and female junior lawyers on ethical professional conduct.

8 Integrate Gender Justice into Legal Education: The curriculum in Nigerian law faculties and the Nigerian Law School should include comprehensive modules on gender justice, power dynamics, and workplace ethics to ensure that new entrants into the profession are sensitized to these issues from the outset.

9 Establish Victim Support Systems: The NBA, in partnership with NGOs, should establish a confidential support system for victims, providing access to counseling, legal aid, and safe houses where necessary. This would reduce the immense burden on victims and empower them to seek justice without fear.