Review Article

Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria: Exploring the Role of Communication in Prevention and Intervention Strategies

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Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive issue in Nigeria, affecting individuals across different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Despite existing laws and policies, the prevalence of GBV continues to rise, largely due to deeply entrenched societal norms, weak law enforcement, and inadequate support systems for survivors. This study explores the role of communication in the prevention and intervention of GBV, examining how media platforms, digital activism, and community-based communication strategies contribute to addressing the issue. Using secondary research (desktop research) as the methodology, the study analyzes scholarly literature, reports, and case studies to assess the effectiveness of communication strategies in combating GBV. Findings reveal that media campaigns such as #SayNoToRape and #MeToo have significantly raised awareness, influenced policy discussions, and encouraged survivors to speak out. Investigative journalism, as seen in the BBC Africa Eye documentary *Sex for Grades*, has also played a crucial role in exposing perpetrators and prompting legal reforms. However, challenges persist, including sensationalized reporting, victim-blaming narratives, and limited access to digital advocacy tools in rural areas. The study concludes that effective communication strategies are key to preventing GBV and supporting survivors. Recommendations include strengthening ethical media reporting, leveraging digital media for advocacy, promoting community-based awareness programs, and improving policy implementation and survivor support **services**. By adopting a multi-sectoral approach that integrates media, government, civil society, and community efforts, Nigeria can make significant progress in the fight against GBV.
Keywords: Gender-Based Violence, Communication, Media, Digital Activism, Nigeria, Prevention, Intervention.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive issue in Nigeria, manifesting in various forms such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation (FGM), and human trafficking (Adebayo, 2020). The persistence of GBV is rooted in socio-cultural norms, economic disparities, and weak legal frameworks, which contribute to the normalization of violence against women and other vulnerable groups (UN Women, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) reports that one in three women globally experiences some form of GBV, a statistic that reflects the severity of the crisis in Nigeria as well. Despite legal instruments such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act of 2015, enforcement remains weak due to cultural resistance and institutional inefficiencies (Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019).

Communication plays a critical role in the prevention and intervention of GBV through awareness campaigns, media advocacy, and community engagement. Studies have shown that media narratives influence public perception and policy responses to GBV (Eze, 2018). For example, digital and traditional media platforms have been instrumental in breaking the culture of silence surrounding GBV, as seen in the #MeToo and #SayNoToRape movements (Okafor, 2021). Furthermore, communication strategies such as interpersonal communication, social marketing, and behavioral change campaigns have been effective in promoting positive attitudes toward gender equality and violence prevention (García-Moreno *et al.*, 2019; Ezeaka, & Ezebuenyi, 2015).

This paper explores the role of communication in preventing and addressing GBV in Nigeria, focusing on media strategies, policy advocacy, and grassroots mobilization. It examines how communication interventions can challenge harmful gender norms, empower survivors, and influence legal reforms. By drawing insights from both Nigerian and international

perspectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of communication as a tool for social change in combating GBV.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive issue in Nigeria, with widespread cases of domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, female genital mutilation (FGM), and human trafficking (Adebayo, 2020). Despite the enactment of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) of 2015, the prevalence of GBV continues to rise due to deep-seated cultural norms, weak enforcement of laws, and societal stigmatization of survivors, which discourage victims from seeking justice (Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) estimates that one in three women globally experience gender-based violence in their lifetime, a figure that reflects the severity of the crisis in Nigeria. The persistence of GBV not only threatens individual well-being but also reinforces gender inequality and social injustice.

A critical challenge in addressing GBV in Nigeria is the inadequate and ineffective use of communication in prevention and intervention efforts. While various public awareness campaigns have been launched to address GBV, many have failed to create significant impact due to poor message framing, limited audience reach, and inadequate grassroots engagement (Eze, 2018). Additionally, mainstream and digital media often perpetuate gender stereotypes, trivialize GBV issues, or fail to provide platforms that amplify survivor voices (Okafor, 2021). The inconsistent and, at times, counterproductive media representation of GBV undermines efforts to shift societal attitudes and influence policy reforms.

Furthermore, the absence of a coordinated communication framework that integrates media advocacy, community engagement, and policy-driven messaging has resulted in fragmented responses to GBV in Nigeria (García-Moreno *et al*., 2019). While legal measures focus on punitive actions, survivor support services prioritize victim rehabilitation, and civil society organizations emphasize community awareness, these efforts often lack synergy, reducing their overall effectiveness. Without a well-structured communication strategy that fosters behavioral change, strengthens survivor support systems, and holds perpetrators accountable, efforts to combat GBV will remain insufficient.

This study, therefore, explores the role of communication in the prevention and intervention of GBV in Nigeria. It aims to examine how strategic communication through media campaigns, public discourse, and grassroots mobilization can be leveraged to challenge harmful gender norms, enhance public awareness, and promote the effective implementation of GBV policies. By addressing these gaps, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how communication can serve as a transformative tool in the fight against gender-based violence.

1.3 Objectives of Study
The following objectives guided the study:
1. To examine the effectiveness of communication strategies in preventing gender-based violence (GBV) in Nigeria
2. To analyze the role of media in shaping public perception of gender-based violence in Nigeria.
3. To evaluate the impact of communication-based interventions on policy implementation in Nigeria.

2.1 Conceptual Framework
2.1.1. Conceptualizing Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender, often disproportionately affecting women and girls (UN Women, 2021). It includes various forms such as domestic violence, sexual assault, female genital mutilation (FGM), human trafficking, and psychological abuse (WHO, 2022). In Nigeria, GBV remains a critical public health and human rights issue, with deep-rooted cultural, economic, and institutional factors sustaining its prevalence (Adebayo, 2020). Despite legislative measures like the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) of 2015, enforcement remains weak, and many victims face challenges in accessing justice (Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019).

2.1.2 The Role of Communication in GBV Prevention and Intervention

Effective communication strategies are crucial in addressing gender-based violence (GBV) as they help to raise awareness, challenge harmful norms, and influence policy responses (García-Moreno *et al*., 2019). Various media platforms, including television, radio, newspapers, and digital media, have been instrumental in shaping public discourse on GBV (Eze, 2018). In Nigeria, communication strategies such as public awareness campaigns, investigative journalism, digital activism, and community-based programs have played significant roles in combating GBV.

2.1.3 Media Campaigns and Digital Activism in GBV Prevention

Several high-profile media campaigns and digital movements have brought GBV issues to public attention, leading to both social and legal changes. For example:

1. The #SayNoToRape Campaign in Nigeria

In 2019, the #SayNoToRape movement gained momentum in Nigeria after the rape and murder of Uwaila Omozuwa, a 22-year-old student in Edo State.

Uwaila was attacked inside a church, sparking national outrage. Social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Facebook, became a rallying ground for activists and citizens demanding justice. The widespread media coverage pressured law enforcement agencies to investigate the case thoroughly, and the perpetrators were eventually arrested and prosecuted (Okafor, 2021).

This campaign demonstrated the power of digital activism in mobilizing public opinion, holding authorities accountable, and advocating for stronger legal action against sexual violence. Following the public outcry, some Nigerian states implemented stricter policies on rape cases, and more victims felt encouraged to speak up about their experiences.

2. The #MeToo Movement and Its Global Impact

The #MeToo movement, which started in the United States in 2017, became a global phenomenon, inspiring survivors worldwide to speak out against sexual harassment and assault. In Nigeria, #MeToo influenced the Busola Dakolo vs. Biodun Fatoyinbo case, where Dakolo, a well-known photographer, accused a prominent pastor of rape. The case sparked intense media discussions about power dynamics, victim-blaming, and institutional failures in addressing GBV. While the legal proceedings were inconclusive, the widespread media coverage challenged the culture of silence around sexual abuse in religious institutions and encouraged other victims to share their stories (Nwankwo, 2021).

2.1.4 Media Framing of GBV: Positive and Negative Effects

Studies indicate that media framing of GBV significantly influences public perception. The way news organizations present GBV incidents can either help empower survivors or reinforce harmful stereotypes (Chukwu, 2020).

- **Negative Framing: Reinforcing Victim-Blaming and Stereotypes**

In many cases, Nigerian media outlets have been criticized for sensationalizing GBV cases and focusing on survivors' actions rather than perpetrators' crimes. For example, when rape cases are reported, some news headlines emphasize the survivor's clothing, location, or behavior, subtly implying that they were responsible for the assault (Adekeye, 2019). This kind of framing discourages victims from reporting cases, fearing stigmatization and further trauma.

- **Positive Framing: Promoting Justice and Systemic Accountability**

Conversely, media coverage that focuses on justice, empowerment, and systemic accountability can drive societal change (Okechukwu & Adeyemi, 2022). One example is BBC Africa Eye's investigative documentary, "Sex for Grades", which exposed sexual harassment in Nigerian and Ghanaian universities. The documentary, released in 2019, led to public outrage, policy discussions, and disciplinary actions against lecturers involved in sexual misconduct. The Nigerian Senate responded by passing the Sexual Harassment Bill, which criminalized sexual harassment in tertiary institutions (BBC News, 2019). This case highlights how investigative journalism and responsible media reporting can lead to real policy changes.

2.1.5 Community-Based Communication Strategies in GBV Intervention

Beyond mainstream and digital media, grassroots communication efforts have also played a crucial role in GBV intervention in Nigeria.

1. Radio and Community Theater Programs

In rural areas where internet access is limited, radio programs and Community Theater have proven effective in raising awareness about GBV. Programs like "Talk Your Own – Make Naija Better", supported by BBC Media Action, use radio dramas and interactive discussions to educate communities on women's rights, domestic violence, and reporting mechanisms (Ogunyemi, 2019).

2. Faith-Based and Traditional Leaders as Communication Agents

Religious and traditional leaders hold significant influence in many Nigerian communities. Organizations such as Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC) have engaged pastors, imams, and traditional rulers to promote anti-GBV messages. By integrating discussions on gender equality and domestic violence prevention into sermons and community meetings, these leaders help change societal attitudes toward GBV (Ajayi, 2020).

Communication remains a powerful tool in preventing and addressing issues in Nigeria (Ezeoke, Ezeaka & Nwodu, 2020; Ezeoke, Ezeaka & Nwodu, 2022). Whether through mass media, social media activism, investigative journalism, or community-based initiatives, effective communication strategies can raise awareness, shift harmful norms, and push for stronger policy enforcement (Ezeaka, 2024; Ezeaka &Umennebuaku, 2024). However, the way GBV is framed in the media is crucial while responsible reporting and digital activism can drive social change, sensationalized or victim-blaming narratives can reinforce stigma and discourage survivors from seeking justice. Strengthening ethical media practices and integrating community-led communication approaches help in ensuring a sustained fight against GBV in Nigeria.

2.1.6 Digital and Traditional Media as Tools for GBV Awareness

Both traditional and digital media play critical roles in GBV advocacy. Traditional media, such as newspapers and radio, have long been used to educate communities about GBV, particularly in rural areas where digital access is limited (Ogunyemi, 2019). However, the rise of social media has expanded the reach of GBV campaigns, allowing survivors and activists to share experiences, mobilize protests, and demand policy reforms (UNESCO, 2020). The widespread use of platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp in Nigeria has made digital communication a powerful tool in the fight against GBV (Nwankwo, 2021; Obiora, 2025;Obiora & Uche, 2024).

Despite these advancements, challenges persist. Media sensationalism, misinformation, and the trivialization of GBV cases can undermine efforts to combat violence (Adekeye, 2019). Additionally, survivors who share their experiences online often face cyberbullying, victim-blaming, and threats, discouraging others from speaking out (Okeke, 2021). Addressing these challenges requires responsible media practices, ethical reporting standards, and media literacy initiatives to ensure effective and sensitive coverage of GBV issues.

2.1.7 Policy and Legal Frameworks on GBV Communication in Nigeria

Nigeria has made legal strides in tackling GBV, with policies such as the VAPP Act of 2015, the Child Rights Act of 2003, and the National Gender Policy of 2006 (Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019). These legal frameworks recognize the role of communication in preventing GBV and emphasize the need for public awareness campaigns, community engagement, and media partnerships (UNDP, 2021). However, implementation gaps, weak law enforcement, and societal resistance continue to hinder progress (Ajayi, 2020).

International organizations such as UN Women, WHO, and Amnesty International advocate for integrating behavior change communication strategies into GBV interventions. These strategies involve targeted messaging, community dialogue, and participatory media approaches to shift harmful gender norms and promote zero tolerance for GBV (García-Moreno et al., 2019).

This study seeks to bridge these gaps by exploring how communication through media advocacy, digital activism, and grassroots mobilization can be optimized to prevent and intervene in GBV cases in Nigeria.

2.2 Theoretical Framework
2.2.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

The Agenda-Setting Theory provides a relevant framework for understanding the role of communication in addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in Nigeria. Originally developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), the theory posits that the media influence public perception by determining which issues are given prominence in news coverage. This means that while the media may not dictate what people think, it significantly influences what they think about. In the context of GBV, media coverage or the lack thereof can shape societal attitudes, influence public discourse, and drive policy action on the issue (Eze, 2018).

In Nigeria, GBV often suffers from inadequate media attention unless high-profile cases emerge, prompting public outrage and advocacy (Okafor, 2021). The Agenda-Setting Theory highlights the need for sustained and strategic media coverage to keep GBV in the public consciousness, thereby increasing awareness, influencing attitudes, and pressuring policymakers to take action. Research has shown that consistent media framing of gender-related issues can challenge harmful cultural norms and promote positive social change (García-Moreno et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the theory underscores the power of both traditional and digital media in amplifying survivor voices and advocacy campaigns. Hashtag movements such as #MeToo and #SayNoToRape have demonstrated how agenda-setting through social media can mobilize public discourse and policy engagement on GBV (UN Women, 2021). The effectiveness of communication in preventing and intervening in GBV thus depends on how well media platforms prioritize the issue and sustain public engagement over time.

By applying the Agenda-Setting Theory, the study examines how media-driven communication strategies influence awareness, advocacy, and policy responses to GBV in Nigeria. Understanding this relationship will provide insights into how communication efforts can be optimized to drive meaningful societal and legislative changes.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a secondary research (desktop research) methodology, which involves the systematic review and analysis of existing literature, reports, policy documents, and other relevant sources on gender-based violence (GBV) and communication strategies in Nigeria. Secondary research allows for a comprehensive examination of data from academic journals, governmental and non-governmental organization (NGO) reports, media publications, and international agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Women (UN Women).

The study analyzes key themes related to media advocacy, public awareness campaigns, policy responses, and grassroots interventions in addressing GBV. By synthesizing findings from previous studies, this research provides insights into the effectiveness of communication strategies in GBV prevention and intervention. This approach is particularly relevant given the sensitivity of GBV, as it enables the use of well-documented cases and statistical analyses without direct interaction with survivors, which may present ethical concerns.

The sources for this study were selected based on credibility, relevance, and timeliness. Peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, media reports, and NGO publications from both Nigerian and international perspectives were critically examined. The research employs a qualitative analysis approach to identify patterns, gaps, and emerging trends in GBV communication strategies.

Through this methodology, the study aims to provide a well-informed perspective on the role of communication in preventing and addressing GBV in Nigeria, offering recommendations for improving existing interventions and shaping future policies.

CONCLUSION

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a significant challenge in Nigeria, affecting individuals across different social and economic backgrounds. Effective communication strategies play a crucial role in both preventing and addressing GBV by raising awareness, shifting societal norms, empowering survivors, and influencing policy changes. Various platforms including traditional media, digital activism, investigative journalism, and community-based initiatives have proven instrumental in combating GBV.

However, the way GBV is framed in the media has far-reaching consequences. While responsible reporting and campaigns such as #SayNoToRape and #MeToo have helped challenge stigma and hold perpetrators accountable, sensationalized or victim-blaming narratives continue to discourage survivors from speaking out. Additionally, gaps remain in policy enforcement, public awareness, and the accessibility of survivor support services.

To ensure sustainable progress, communication strategies must be ethical, survivor-centered, and culturally relevant. Strengthening media ethics, increasing digital literacy, and integrating community-led approaches will be critical in fostering a society where GBV is no longer tolerated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper suggests the following recommendations:

- **Strengthen Ethical Media Reporting on GBV:** Media organizations should adopt guidelines for responsible reporting to avoid sensationalism and victim-blaming. Journalists should receive specialized training on GBV-sensitive reporting.
- **Leverage Digital Media for Advocacy and Support:** Expand the use of social media campaigns to educate the public on GBV and encourage survivor-led storytelling. Enhance online reporting mechanisms to make it easier for victims to seek help.
- **Promote Community-Based Awareness Programs:** Engage traditional and religious leaders in promoting gender-sensitive messaging. Use radio dramas, theater performances, and town hall discussions to reach rural populations.
- **Enhance Policy Implementation and Survivor Support Services:** Government and NGOs should ensure strict enforcement of GBV laws and eliminate delays in the judicial process. Provide accessible shelters, counseling, and legal support for survivors, especially in rural areas.

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