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Masculinity Norms and Gender-Based Violence in Nigerian Higher Education

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Abstract

Patriarchal constructs and entrenched masculinity norms continue to shape power dynamics in higher education institutions (HEIs), reinforcing gender-based violence (GBV) as a systemic issue in Nigeria. This review critically examined the impacts of entrenched patriarchal norms and traditional constructs of masculinity on violence against women and girls within HEI settings, exploring their implications for policy and intervention strategies and examining how feminist theories can suggest appropriate interventions to address this troubling issue. Drawing on feminist perspectives, we consider patriarchal norms and masculinities that affect females in the HEIs in Nigeria. We argue that deeply rooted patriarchal and rigid masculinity norms in HEIs drive GBV by promoting dominance, aggression, and entitlement. Institutional silence and weak policies further enable such behaviours. We recommend strengthening institutional policies, redefining masculinity norms through education, encouraging bystander intervention, providing support services for survivors, and collaborating with external organisations to prevent and address GBV in HEIs. Tackling GBV in HEIs involves dismantling harmful masculinity norms, enforcing stricter policies, and promoting a culture of accountability and support to foster safer and more inclusive academic environments.

Keywords: *masculinity norms, gender-based violence, higher education, patriarchy, institutional policies.*

Introduction

Nigerian universities are meant to be havens of knowledge, personal growth, and professional development, but recent findings reveal a harsh reality: sexual harassment persists unchecked, undermining trust in our higher education institutions (HEIs). In this article, we review this troubling social phenomenon and consider how feminist perspectives may suggest pathways to address this issue. We begin by reviewing the problem, and then we introduce feminism as an organisational framework. We analyse the issue of gender-based violence (GBV) in HEIs in Nigeria using feminist perspectives and provide practical suggestions about interventions that could help reduce such GBV.

The Scope of GBV in HEIs

Gender-based violence is violence directed at an individual because of their gender or that disproportionately affects persons of a particular gender (European Commission n.d.). This definition includes sexual assault, rape, and other acts that are considered violence against women. GBV also includes *gender-based harassment* (also known as sexual harassment): unwelcome, gender- or sex-based conduct, verbal, non-verbal or physical, that violates a person's dignity or creates an intimidating environment (European Commission,

n.d.) and *intimate partner violence*: that is, the physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm is inflicted on a person by a current or former spouse or partner.

Evidence suggests that GBV is widespread and systemic within Nigerian HEIs. For example, a national survey of 12 universities with 3,528 respondents found that 63% of female students experienced harassment, while 40% of non-academic staff and 30% of academic staff were also affected. Perpetrators included 26% non-academic staff, 24% academic staff, and 66% students. Another source indicates that 70% of Nigerian female college graduates reported experiencing sexual harassment (Jimoh, 2024; Bolaji, 2024; Ogunfowokan et al., 2024). A culture of silence and underreporting appears to be common, with over 80% of respondents citing fear of stigmatisation, insufficient institutional support, power imbalances between victims and perpetrators, the absence of clear policies and procedures for reporting incidents, and societal norms and perceptions that discourage survivors from speaking out as reasons for not reporting these incidents (Bolaji, 2024). In sum, GBV persists in Nigerian HEIs, driven by deeply rooted patriarchal norms, toxic masculinities, weak institutional accountability, and harmful cultural and religious practices. Despite existing laws and policies, underreporting, impunity, and poor enforcement continue to enable abuse such as sexual harassment, “sex-for-grades,” child marriage, and female genital mutilation (Idowu et al., 2023; Saheed et al., 2026).

Similarly, we can consider the case of Nigerian Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan, who was suspended after accusing the Senate president of sexual assault. Her report, which led to her six-month suspension, brought attention to sexual violence and violence against women within political institutions (Shibayan, 2025). These developments reveal the need for continued efforts to address and transform harmful gender norms that perpetuate sexual violence in Nigeria, particularly in HEIs, where it adversely affects learning outcomes.

These practices threaten women’s rights, educational progress, and well-being, while also reinforcing gender inequality and hindering national development (Adelakun et al., 2025). In the context of such cultural practices, even access to higher education does not eliminate women’s vulnerability to gender-based violence (Akintayo & Olatunji, 2022).

We argue that the high prevalence of GBV (including sexual harassment) in HEIs reflects entrenched patriarchal power relations, which feminist theorists identify as central to understanding how gendered inequalities and male dominance are reproduced within institutional structures (Walby, 1990; Hooks, 2000). Addressing this issue requires deconstructing patriarchal constructs and reshaping masculinities to promote gender-equitable norms, thereby fostering safer, more inclusive educational environments. We now discuss feminism in more depth.

Feminism as a Conceptual Framework

Feminism, broadly, is a social, political, and intellectual project aimed at dismantling gendered hierarchies and securing substantive equality for all genders. Feminist principles can be employed to understand and to make recommendations for social change surrounding gender-based violence (GBV) and sexist policies and practices. Feminism is a broad umbrella term encompassing many different, sometimes conflicting, schools of thought. However, most feminists adhere to certain principles that can help better understand and address sexism. Here, we will introduce some terms that, as used within feminist perspectives, can help us analyse the problem of GBV in HEIs in Nigeria.

First, within feminism, the term *patriarchy* refers to the way society is structured to privilege men’s power and dominance over women and other marginalised genders (Walby, 1990).

Gender roles are socially constructed expectations and behaviours associated with men and women, shaped through cultural and institutional processes rather than biological differences (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Gender stereotypes are widely shared, oversimplified beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviours appropriate for men and women, which function to sustain gendered social hierarchies (Ellemers, 2018).

Hegemonic masculinity is the culturally idealised form of manhood that legitimises men's dominance over women and other masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Studies show that sexual harassment and violence are widespread in Nigerian universities, often linked to power imbalances and gender norms (Ogunfowokan, 2024).

Toxic masculinity refers to socially constructed masculinity norms that promote dominance, misogyny, homophobia, emotional repression, and violence, emerging from and reinforcing hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Harrington, 2021). Nigerian HEIs, such norms are reflected in male-dominated power structures, the normalisation of sexual harassment, and the silencing of victims, thereby perpetuating gender-based violence and inequality (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kupers, 2005; Ogunfowokan et al., 2024).

Globally, the major strands of feminist thought - liberal, radical, Marxist, intersectional, postcolonial, and decolonial feminisms examine different roots and mechanisms of women's subordination, and propose corresponding pathways for redress (Donovan, 2012). In our analysis, we centre radical feminism and African feminism—two strands of feminism that have significant implications for understanding GBV in Nigerian HEIs.

Radical Feminist Perspectives

Radical feminism is a branch of feminism that can be defined as a conflict theory because it is based on the assumption that a society consists of opposed factions (sexes) whose relations are based on the domination of men over women, as well as the one that a society and different relations within it can be best described by observing these relations and the attitudes of sexes toward them (Vukoičić, 2013). It aims to challenge and dismantle the patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality by addressing the root causes of women's oppression. Though alternative frameworks—for example, Social Norms Theory and the ecological model offer valuable insights into GBV, they have limitations (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019; Nyagumbo & Ross, 2025).

Social Norms Theory tends to emphasise behavioural expectations without sufficiently examining power and domination, while ecological models map multi-level influences but often lack a critical focus on patriarchy as a unifying structure. Their limited attention to power and patriarchy restricts their effectiveness. For instance, in Nigerian universities, where sexual harassment and “sex-for-grades” are rooted in hierarchical power relations and male-dominated institutional cultures, such frameworks may address immediate risk factors without tackling underlying structural inequalities. Consequently, GBV persists despite formal policies, driven by power imbalances and a culture of silence (Eniola & Dada, 2023). By contrast, radical feminism explicitly centres systemic inequality, making it more suitable for this study. Radical feminism thus enables a critical interrogation of these structures while advocating transformative change through institutional reform, cultural re-socialisation, and education as a tool for achieving gender equality (Alabi et al., 2024).

African Feminist Perspectives

To ensure contextual relevance, we also engage with African feminist perspectives, which challenge Western universalism and describe the lived realities of African women.

Scholars such as Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), Oyěwùmí (1997), Mama (1995), and Nnaemeka (2004) promote culturally grounded and decolonial approaches to gender analysis.

African feminist thought both engages with and departs from Western canons, centre histories of coloniality, race, class, culture, and communal ethics. Canonical African perspectives STIWANISM (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994), gender as a colonial imposition (Oyěwùmí, 1997), gender and state power (Mama, 1995), and Nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004) reject “universal womanhood,” emphasise context, and often position men as potential allies in transforming gender relations through negotiation, reciprocity, and social change. Recent African feminism emphasises praxis across universities, workplaces, and policy spaces. It also cautions against cultural essentialism and advocates feminist strategies that are locally grounded yet rights-affirming (Tsikata & Ossome, 2024; Mensah, 2024; Musingafi, 2023).

In Nigeria, feminist work addresses the everyday aspects of patriarchy in areas such as household labour, sexuality, law, religion, and institutional culture, while emphasising the need for supportive policy environments and accountability systems. African feminism operates within cultural contexts to demand gender justice, yet progress remains uneven because laws and policies often fail to translate into real improvements in women’s lives (Nnaemeka, 2004). Conversely, Mama (1995) argued that although women’s movements have secured policy gains across Africa, the persistent gap between commitment to feminist principles and the implementation of feminist policies limits transformative change. Similarly, national and regional reports since 2024 illustrate uneven progress: notable advances in advocacy and policy commitments are paired with ongoing gaps in implementation, data, and enforcement (The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, 2024). This is evident across many African contexts, including Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa, where policy frameworks on GBV seem to exist despite persistent challenges such as underreporting, weak enforcement, and limited institutional accountability (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, 2024; UN Women, 2024; Muluneh et al., 2020).

In Nigerian HEIs, patriarchal norms, religious influences, and traditional gender roles continue to shape access, participation, and advancement, often privileging male education and reinforcing women’s domestic positioning (United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative, 2024). These African feminist perspectives call for culturally grounded, explicitly anti-colonial solutions that are sensitive to local institutions and power relations (Salami, n.d.; Masha & Mogoboya, 2024; Oyewumi, 1997). In this frame, feminist thinking must account for: (a) the country’s ethnic, religious and regional diversity; (b) the legacies of colonial legal pluralism (formal, customary and religious laws); and (c) entrenched patriarchal norms that shape public and private institutions, including HEIs. African-feminist insights, therefore, advocate policies and interventions that combine legal reform, institutional accountability, community engagement, and curricular and pedagogical change within HEIs, ensuring that reforms are both effective and locally legitimate (Musingafi, 2024). Next, we consider some of the prominent challenges women face and how feminist perspectives suggest they can be ameliorated.

Problems Experienced by Nigerian Women and Their Relation to GBV in HEIs

Based on our literature review, we identified six urgent and interconnected challenges faced by Nigerian girls and women, emphasising the importance of feminist perspectives in addressing structural inequalities that lead to GBV in HEIs.

Sexual harassment, sexual coercion (including “sex for grades” and “sex for admission”), rape, intimate-partner violence (IPV) and other forms of GBV are, as we reviewed previously, widely reported across Nigerian universities. Underreporting is endemic

due to victims' fear of stigma, reprisal and institutional inaction; multiple surveys and qualitative studies document a high prevalence of harassment, and many survivors do not report incidents. Recent mixed-methods research and investigative reports continue to indicate pervasive sexual misconduct in tertiary institutions (Mapayi, Oloniniyi, Oginni, Harrison, 2023). In Adebayo and Uche's (2022) survey, 70% of female students reported experiencing harassment, yet both the institution and women dismissed the cases as normal male behaviour. Adimora (2025) also found that 68% of female students experienced sexual violence. The *Sex for Grades* and *Sex for Admission* hashtag video published by BBC World Service TV in 2019, *Africa Eye Undercover*, revealed a professor at a prestigious Nigerian university harassing female students in exchange for grades, referring to the staff club as a cold room for such misconduct (Steeves et al., 2025).

A recent documentary also displayed a high level of sexual harassment against female students in HEIs in Nigeria and Ghana. Similar cases indicate a high prevalence of abuse and sexual harassment extending beyond academia; employers often demand sexual favours from female job seekers, while male bosses and male professors exploit female employees and female colleagues for promotions and incentives (Aborisade, 2020). For instance, in 2021, lecturers were dismissed for sexual misconduct, and some lecturers are documented to have impregnated students at a good number of reputable universities in Nigeria (Morphy, 2023). Reports from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, cite cases of sexual misconduct, economic violence, victimisation, online abuse, sextortion, cyberstalking, and body shaming, perpetrated by male students and lecturers (SERVICOM, 2023). Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) dismissed three lecturers over sexual harassment. In June 2022, two lecturers at the University of Abuja, Nigeria, were also dismissed over sexual misconduct, yet none were prosecuted (Morphy, 2023).

Rape and sexual assault. Ogunfowokan et al. (2024) also reported that approximately 37% of students across Nigerian universities, polytechnics, and colleges, particularly female students, have experienced sexual violence, including rape, attempted rape, and harassment. Female students report incidents twice as often as males. In Kano State, Nigeria, a separate survey found that 51.7% of female higher-education students endured some form of sexual assault, ranging from unwanted touching to rape, perpetrated by faculty and staff.

Economic constraints and educational inequality, including household poverty and gender-biased norms, continue to depress girls' enrolment and persistence in HEIs, reproducing skill gaps and constraining women's future earnings. These losses compound at the societal level through reduced innovation, leadership diversity, and economic growth. National progress notes for 2024–2025 show slow progress on parity targets and the underrepresentation of women in decision-making (UN Women, 2025).

Economic challenges in most families lead to the prioritisation of male children's education over female children's, reflecting traditional views that undervalue women's roles outside the home. This financial bias restricts women's access to higher education and encourages early marriage. According to Jibril (2003), funding is one of the major challenges to girl-child enrolment in higher education in Nigeria. This invariably affects women's access to education; many may be required to learn a trade or marry so that a male child can be sponsored to attend school (Lewin, 2009; Durowaiye & Khan, 2017). Durowaiye and Khan (2017) argue that existing socio-cultural gender norms in the Nigerian context prevent girls' access to education, as there is an assumption that all their education leads only to the kitchen and childbearing. This denial of educational opportunities, unfortunately, predisposes women to GBV. The interplay of gender-biased forces and gender role stereotyping, along with widespread poverty, not only keeps many women out of school but also fosters oppression and exploitation when they do manage to attend HEIs (Makama, 2013).

Each of the aforementioned factors is a form of or directly related to GBV in HEIs, but radical feminism and African feminisms also entreat readers to consider the larger cultural contexts in which members of HEI communities operate. To this end, we consider some additional gender-based practices that ultimately contribute to GBV toward women in HEIs.

Femicide remains a critical concern, with rising cases and weak accountability mechanisms. Recent civil-society reports have documented a rise in killings of women, impunity, and gaps in data and prosecution, reflecting institutional fragility (Egbejule, 2025). Studies indicate that femicide and sexual harassment fall along a continuum of GBV rooted in patriarchal norms. Research on university environments shows that female students experience pervasive sexual harassment within institutional settings that mirror broader societal patterns of violence against women, including gender-related killings (Adimora, 2025; Oriola & Moen, 2025; Erimife, 2022). Feminist analysis links femicide to GBV by showing how patriarchal norms that normalise male dominance and dehumanise women also underpin and sustain broader patterns of GBV, including within Nigerian HEIs.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) similarly remains widespread across Nigeria, with severe health, psychological, and social consequences. In Nigerian higher education, the World Health Organisation reports that FGM involves the non-medical removal of female genitalia, causing complications such as infections, childbirth risks, and trauma (WHO, 2025). Despite global efforts, millions of women are affected, with Nigeria showing high prevalence rates (Okeke et al., 2012). FGM is linked to reduced educational participation, sexual dysfunction, mental health challenges, and increased vulnerability to violence (Childlight, 2024; Adelekan et al., 2022; Ofor et al., 2024).

Evidence suggests that harmful practices such as FGM are rooted in patriarchal control and associated with increased vulnerability to GBV intersect with institutional contexts in Nigeria where female students already face disproportionately high risks of sexual harassment, indicating that those with prior vulnerabilities may experience compounded exposure to violence within and around campus environments (Ogunfowokan et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2024).

Child marriage. Child marriage in Nigeria, according to Abdallah (2011), is deeply rooted in tradition, culture, and religion, with 42% of girls married before 18, making it one of the highest rates globally. Recognised as a violation of human rights (Stith, 2015), child marriage disempowers girls, hindering education, decision-making, and autonomy. Harmful practices and health issues such as child marriage also remain widespread in Nigeria and are major drivers of interrupted education, early pregnancy, and lifelong economic dependence (Fang et al., 2024). Globally and in Nigeria, early marriage is strongly associated with poorer health and social outcomes for girls (Onodugo et al., 2025). Such practices as child marriage and FGM not only violate rights but also perpetuate intergenerational poverty, worsen maternal and newborn outcomes, and normalise control of women's bodies and undermine public health, education, and economic development (Onodugo et al., 2025). Child marriage shapes the experiences of some girls who manage to access higher education in Nigeria, often undermining their academic participation while simultaneously increasing their exposure to GBV.

Research shows that child marriage decreases a girl's likelihood of completing secondary or higher education by 22.98%, while earnings for women who married in childhood in Nigeria today are 12% lower than what they could have earned without child marriage (Fang et al., 2024). The early transition into marital roles often exposes young women to various forms of abuse and hinders their academic pursuits. Study shows that 37% of Nigerian higher education students reported experiencing sexual violence, indicating that female students, including those already vulnerable due to early marriage, face heightened

risks in and around campus environments (Ahinkorah et al., 2022). A study on 300 female university students in Kano, Northern Nigeria, revealed a GBV prevalence rate of 58.8% reporting physical (22.8%), sexual (22.2%), and emotional (50.8%) violence. Furthermore, factors such as marital status were significant predictors of GBV, as married students might be more susceptible to such experiences (Iliyasu et al., 2011).

Undoubtedly, GBV results in societal harm, reduces educational attainment, increases dropout rates, and diminishes labour-market participation for women; it imposes physical and mental health costs, reduces research productivity, and undermines institutional reputations, all of which, in turn, reduce the nation's human capital and development prospects.

Masculinities and the Risk in HEIs

Conceptualisations of masculinity suggest that societal expectations placed on men, such as being physically strong, dominant, sexually virile, emotionally restrained, and successful, can foster aggression and violent behaviour when internalised (Hall, 2024). Men are often expected to conform to rigid gender roles/gender norms, including participating in male-oriented activities, protecting honour, and asserting authority. Among various forms of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity represents the dominant and socially valued ideal, characterised by assertiveness, heterosexuality, control, and the subordination of women and marginalised masculinities, thereby reinforcing patriarchal power structures (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This form is sustained by institutions such as corporate systems, government, education, and the media (Acker, 1990; Walby, 1990).

Excessive attempts to assert masculinity may lead to hyper-masculinity, where aggression, emotional suppression, and dominance are viewed as legitimate expressions of power (Ratele, 2008). Similarly, protest masculinity emerges among socioeconomically disadvantaged men, who adopt exaggerated masculine behaviours as a coping mechanism for insecurity and marginalisation (Connell, 2005). Across these forms, the domination of women remains a unifying feature (Morrell, 1998).

Toxic masculinity refers to harmful beliefs and behaviours rooted in extreme interpretations of traditional male roles, promoting aggression, misogyny, homophobia, and emotional repression, with negative consequences for individuals and society (Morin, 2024). In contrast, positive masculinity challenges restrictive norms by encouraging emotional expression, empathy, and healthy self-awareness, while still allowing for traits such as resilience and competitiveness (Coen, 2020).

The endorsement of rape myths and supportive attitudes towards sexual violence further foster sexual aggression, particularly among male students, who may minimise the seriousness of their actions (Campus Sexual Assault, 2024). In Nigerian higher education institutions, confraternities (student cults) sometimes reinforce these norms through violent initiation rituals, including coercion into acts of sexual violence, which reflect deeply rooted patriarchal values (The Economist, 2008).

In Nigeria, traditional gender norms often emphasise male dominance and female submissiveness, creating a societal backdrop in which sexual violence is more likely to occur. These entrenched beliefs contribute to a culture in which men feel entitled to exert control over women and perpetuate cycles of violence (Onyemelukwe & Centre for Health Ethics, Law and Development, 2022). Sexual violence is significantly influenced by gender norms. These norms are understood as the 'subset of social norms that relate specifically to gender differences' (Pulerwitz et al., 2019). They are informal, deeply rooted, and widely held beliefs about gender roles, power relations, standards or expectations that govern human behaviours and practices within a particular social context at a specific time (UNICEF, 2020).

Gender norms in Nigeria are predominantly patriarchal, casting men as higher in social status than women (Amusan et al., 2017) and promoting the idea that women are or should be subordinate to men. Norms related to violence also tend to normalise certain aspects of sexual violence, especially sexual harassment against women. This limited understanding of violence creates an environment in which men, whether younger or older, engage in behaviours that make women and girls uncomfortable, such as catcalling, teasing, and physical touching - that is, sexual violence. Gender norms surrounding masculinity emphasise that men and boys are invincible and should not be punished for perpetuating sexual harassment (Fakunmoju et al., 2016).

Gender norms have been identified as the main cause of exploitative male-female relations reported in HEIs (Odejide, 2014). For example, female students have been observed to cook and clean for male students, and women who do not conform to these domestic roles are perceived as not being 'wife material' (Odejide, 2014). Although there are no school policies that explicitly assign women a secondary role, many believe that, given women's 'natural place', they are best suited to assisting or supporting roles. As a result, women mainly serve as vice presidents or assistant executives in student fellowships and unions, while men hold the executive positions (Odejide, 2014). The presumed 'nurturing' nature of women also casts them as responsible for the welfare aspects of their school societies. Within HEIs in Nigeria, patriarchal attitudes common in wider society create fertile ground for the perception that women are subservient or submissive to men and lack ownership of their own bodies. These attitudes often reflect permissive attitudes towards sexual assault and a belief that young women are unable to refuse unwanted sexual advances from their peers, intimate partners, lecturers, and other authority figures within these institutions. Furthermore, norms associated with chastity often focus on women and girls, reinforcing victim shaming and blaming when sexual violence occurs.

GBV in Nigeria is socially accepted male behaviour and a mechanism for curbing transgression against the culturally perceived male superiority (Abayomi & Olabode, 2013; Nelson, 2017). Within Nigeria, researchers have linked the belief in male superiority, grounded in the acceptance of gender stereotypes and roles, to discrimination against women and general tolerance of GBV (Fakunmoju et al., 2016; Odimegwu et al., 2010). Likewise, religious beliefs that position men as the heads of the family and grant them greater control and decision-making power have been associated with GBV in Nigeria (Abayomi & Olabode, 2013). According to Amusan et al. (2017), patriarchal ideologies embedded in religious beliefs may entrench male dominance in social life, oppress women, and excuse men's use of GBV in Nigeria.

In sum, we argue that masculine norms effect gender-based violence in higher education, and that understanding these norms can help dismantle harmful constructs and promote positive, gender-equitable masculinities which will, in turn, reduce GBV.

Religion and Culture

In Nigerian society, religion and culture significantly shape and sustain gender norms, often creating conditions that enable sexual violence to persist (Winkel, 2019). Religious teachings can reinforce harmful norms, including the culture of silence around abuse, leading to the dismissal of survivors' experiences and, in some cases, encouraging women to endure abuse (Scarsella & Krehbiel, 2019). While religion itself may not intend harm, its interpretation and application have been used to perpetuate violence and disadvantage women (Kullima et al., 2010; Scarsella & Krehbiel, 2019).

Nigeria's major religions, such as Islam and Christianity, play influential roles in shaping social norms (CIA Factbook, 2019). Within Christianity, interpretations that emphasise divine wrath may justify dominance and "righteous" violence, whereas teachings

on mercy promote compassion (Westenberg, 2017). However, some doctrines portray women as subordinate and encourage forgiveness, even in abusive contexts, potentially increasing survivors' vulnerability and shifting focus away from accountability for perpetrators (McDugal & Behel, 2021; Scarsella & Krehbiel, 2019). Religious teachings on female submission further hinder progress toward gender equality (Nwafor, 2023).

Religious and cultural norms broadly influence gender roles and expectations, including beliefs that wifely submission entails sexual compliance, with refusal framed as deviance (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Feminist scholars argue that such beliefs reinforce women's subordination and contribute to violence against women (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Igbelina-Igbokwe, 2013). These norms also sustain rape myths, such as justifying sexual violence based on women's behaviour or appearance, particularly in higher education institutions (Fakunmoju et al., 2020).

Addressing GBV in HEIs

Addressing gender-based violence requires collective action, including the active involvement of men as allies and change agents. Men can challenge harmful norms, model equitable behaviour, and influence peers (Council of Europe, 2024). The Istanbul Convention emphasises the responsibility of all, especially men and boys, in preventing GBV and dismantling patriarchal values. Combating GBV, therefore, demands integrated approaches, including feminist frameworks, institutional accountability, and resistance to anti-gender movements.

Table 3. Feminist-Informed Interventions for GBV in Nigerian HEIs

Problem	Intervention	Feminist Framework	Expected Outcome
Underreporting of GBV Cases	- Mandatory, time-bound investigations with independent oversight. - Legal literacy workshops.	Walby's patriarchal structures; feminist accountability frameworks.	Increased reporting rates, survivor trust, and institutional responsiveness.
Weak institutional accountability and impunity	- Codified sanction matrices for all offenders - Annual anti-GBV policy audits - Integration of GBV compliance into accreditation standards.	Walby's structural critique; Odejide on campus hierarchies	Zero tolerance culture for GBV; institutional reputations tied to gender-equitable practices.
Toxic masculinities and gender norms	- Men-as-allies programs co-led by male students/faculty - Curriculum reforms on gender,	African Masculinities Theory (Ratele, Morrell); Nego-feminism; gender-transformative	Redefinition of masculinity; men as co-advocates for gender equity; reduced peer normalisation of GBV.

	masculinities, and pedagogy. African feminism - Bystander intervention training.		
Harmful Cultural and Religious Practices	- Faith and traditional leader partnerships for anti-GBV teachings - Survivor-centred public forums - Alternatives to harmful rites (e.g., FGM).	Nego feminism; African communal ethics; postcolonial feminist approaches.	Religious/cultural legitimacy for anti-GBV advocacy; reduced child marriage, FGM, and harmful traditions.
Policy-law Disconnect (e.g., VAPP Act)	- Campus-wide legal awareness campaigns - Policy translation into local languages + infographics - Student-union monitoring for compliance.	Feminist legal Theory; Walby's public/private patriarchy framework.	Laws are understood, owned, and enforced at grassroots campus levels, closing the gap between law and action.

The prevalence of GBV in HEI remains a pressing concern; understanding the role of societal norms, particularly those related to patriarchy and masculinity, is crucial to addressing this issue. Research informed by feminist perspectives suggests that patriarchal constructs and masculinity norms perpetuate GBV against female students and staff in HEI and underscores the need for systemic change. By examining the roles of institutional cultures, religious influences, and gender dynamics, feminist perspectives offer insights to inform policies and practices that create safer, more inclusive academic environments and promote gender equality.

They emphasise the importance of reshaping societal norms to prevent violence and support survivors. Exploring the dynamics of GBV within Africa, particularly in HEIs in Nigeria, requires examining the interplay between patriarchal constructs and prevailing masculinity norms. These cultural frameworks often perpetuate environments where such violence is tacitly accepted or inadequately addressed. Cultural and societal norms that contribute to the prevalence of GBV include patriarchal norms and practices (e.g., child marriage, female genital mutilation) and the stigmatisation of survivors and victim-blaming. For instance, 60% of survivors experience stigma and blame, are silenced, and have limited opportunities for education and economic empowerment for women and girls (Project Alert, 2020).

The role of traditional and religious leaders is also crucial in facilitating a cultural shift, which may include influencing community attitudes and behaviours, promoting education and economic empowerment, encouraging reporting and survivor support, and raising awareness within their communities.

In Nigeria, laws and government policies address GBV, including the Violence against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act, 2015, the Child Rights Act, 2003, and the National

Policy on Gender Equality, yet these laws and policies still face serious implementation challenges. Such challenges in enforcing existing laws stem from limited resources and capacity, corruption and a lack of political will, inadequate data collection and reporting, and a lack of victim support and witness protection.

Suggestions for improving GBV laws include strengthening law enforcement and justice systems, increasing funding for support services, enhancing public awareness and education, and providing victim and witness support, as well as victim compensation and welfare support.

GBV is prevalent in HEI and often goes unreported due to stigma and a lack of institutional supportive action. Masculinity norms that emphasise dominance, aggression, and entitlement contribute significantly to GBV. Institutional cultures often perpetuate a culture of silence, which creates difficulty for survivors to seek justice. Religious beliefs and institutions can sometimes perpetuate GBV by reinforcing patriarchal norms, discouraging reporting, promoting male dominance and female submissiveness, though they can also serve as platforms for advocacy and survivor support. Vulnerable groups, including women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and economically disadvantaged students, face heightened risks. GBV leads to severe psychological, social, and academic consequences for survivors.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) need to implement comprehensive anti-GBV policies that confront the negative effects of patriarchal, cultural, masculine, and religious norms. They should also incorporate gender equality training for staff and students. Furthermore, institutions must enhance survivor support systems, collaborate with religious and community leaders to promote inclusive, non-violent values, and foster an environment that encourages reporting and accountability.

Based on our review of the literature, we make the following recommendations informed by prominent feminist perspectives.

- 1) Strengthen institutional policies with clear reporting mechanisms and survivor protections.
- 2) Integrate gender awareness programs designed to redefine masculinity norms.
- 3) Encourage bystander intervention and create safe, anonymous reporting channels.
- 4) Promotion of religious institutions should promote gender equality, challenge patriarchal interpretations, and actively support survivors of GBV through education, advocacy, and providing safe spaces for reporting and healing.
- 5) Provide accessible support services, including counselling and legal aid for survivors.
- 6) Collaborate with external organisations to improve GBV prevention and response strategies.
- 7) Redefine institutional policies and masculinity norms through education.

Conclusion

Deconstructing patriarchy in Nigerian HEIs requires an approach that draws on African-feminist Theory and radical feminist perspectives to suggest practical institutional reforms. The harms of GBV, child marriage, FGM, and discriminatory institutional cultures are quantifiable: they lower educational achievement, worsen health outcomes, undermine public trust, and hinder national progress. African-feminist frameworks (such as STIWANISM, Oyewùmí's relational critique, and other decolonial perspectives) highlight that interventions must be co-designed with communities, not solely imposed upon them, and must resist generic, one-size-fits-all solutions. By integrating legal reform, institutional accountability, survivor-centred services, male engagement, and community-led prevention, each adapted to local history and culture, we can develop realistic paths to safer, more equitable HEIs in Nigeria.

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