

Unveiling The Social Roots and Emotional Costs of Online Gender-based Violence In Nigeria: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Nigerian online spaces have turned out to be important platforms of expression, activism and exchange of information. However, they mirror the ingrained patriarchal, cultural, and religious hierarchies that inform the daily interactions of gender. This paper analyses the cultural factors, institutional and legal loopholes, and psychosocial reactions to digital gender-based violence (DGBV) in Nigeria. The study is based on a systematic review of 30 academic publications published from 2020-2024 and explores the role of socio-cultural norms, poor frameworks of institutions, and insufficient implementation of policies in increasing the predisposition of women and gender minorities to online harassment. The study uses an intersectional and feminist institutionalist approach to explain the manner in which digital misogyny is mutually reproduced by the tradition, religion, and state apparatus. Results indicate that DGBV is institutionalised by deep-rooted patriarchal structures within the context of which the digital presence of women is perceived as an act of moral trespass to patriarchy. Lack of digital governance mechanisms, legal ambiguity, and institutional inertia also serve to promote impunity among the offenders. Digital withdrawal, social isolation, peer support, and activism are some of the strategies adopted by the victims psychologically. This paper suggests that feminist-informed institutional changes, culturally-aware digital education, and survivor-based mental health intervention are the actions that need to be taken to tackle online gender violence in Nigeria.

Keywords: patriarchy; Nigeria, digital gender-based violence, institutional gaps, feminist governance, psychosocial responses.

Introduction

The growth of digital media in Nigeria has significantly reshaped social interaction, public discourse, and political participation. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok have broadened opportunities for women to challenge dominant gender norms, participate in civic debates, and assert autonomy in ways previously constrained in offline spaces. However, increased online visibility often comes with severe consequences: digital gender-based violence (DGBV) has emerged as a pervasive extension of Nigeria's entrenched patriarchal structures, reproducing offline patterns of discrimination and social control in digital form.

Empirical research demonstrates how online harassment and misogynistic abuse manifest across Nigerian digital spaces. For example, a report by Paradigm Initiative found that more than half of Nigerian girls aged 15–25 surveyed during COVID-19 had experienced online harassment or abuse, including sexualised insults, threats, and cyberstalking (Paradigm Initiative, 2020). Similarly, a social-listening study published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* analysed over 300,000 online conversations related to GBV in Nigeria and identified recurring

narratives of trolling, discrediting, and online shaming directed at women (Olamijuwon et al., 2023). Another peer-reviewed study published in *Convergence* showed that Nigerian female journalists experience targeted online harassment—such as threats, character attacks, and sexualized abuse—that limits their ability to participate in public discourse (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2023). These studies illustrate that digital platforms in Nigeria have become continuous spaces of gender policing and public shaming, reinforcing cultural expectations of modesty and silence for women.

Recent high-profile cases illustrate how cultural, religious, and regional norms shape online attacks against women. During the 2020 #EndSARS protests, activist Aisha Yesufu became a target of intense online harassment, insults, threats, and curses, especially from conservative northern audiences who portrayed her activism and public visibility as culturally inappropriate for a woman (Web Foundation, 2022). Similarly, the #ArewaMeToo movement, which amplified women’s experiences of sexual violence in Northern Nigeria, triggered coordinated online retaliation; campaign leaders faced misogynistic slurs, character assassination, and allegations linking their advocacy to “immoral” Western or LGBTQ agendas as a strategy to delegitimise their voices (Hashim, 2020). In journalism, Kiki Mordi, who produced a 2019 investigative documentary on sexual harassment, faced sustained cyberstalking, doxxing, and sexualised online abuse after the film’s release (Brainbuilders Network, 2025). More recently, Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan, one of the few female senators in Nigeria, experienced online trolling, sexist commentary, and fabricated rumours after challenging patriarchal practices and raising gender-sensitive issues in the National Assembly (AP News, 2025). These cases demonstrate how women who deviate from prescribed gender roles—by challenging authority, engaging in activism, or leading public conversations—become targets of digital aggression framed through cultural, religious, and regional rationales.

Institutional and legal responses to DGBV in Nigeria remain inadequate. Although the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act of 2015 provides a general legal framework for online offences, it does not contain explicit gender-responsive protections. A recent policy analysis identified persistent barriers such as weak enforcement, victim-blaming by authorities, and limited institutional capacity to investigate digital harassment (Adeleke University Law Review, 2023). Complementing this, a 2024 factsheet on online gender-based violence in Nigeria highlights the state’s insufficient data collection and inconsistent response mechanisms (Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative, 2024). These limitations contribute to widespread underreporting and reinforce a culture of impunity.

The psychosocial consequences of DGBV are equally concerning. The Paradigm Initiative (2020) report documented that many victims of online abuse experience anxiety, fear, withdrawal from digital spaces, and self-censorship. Such findings align with broader global studies showing that tech-facilitated violence has long-term consequences for women’s mental health, self-esteem, social relationships, and civic engagement (Olamijuwon et al., 2023). These patterns demonstrate that digital violence is not confined to virtual spaces but has real-life implications for women’s economic, social, and psychological well-being.

Given the complexity of these socio-cultural, institutional, and psychosocial dimensions, this study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to map and synthesise existing evidence. While an SLR cannot generate new empirical data or capture the constantly evolving landscape of online harassment incidents in real time, it offers a rigorous and structured method for analysing available scholarship, identifying patterns, and clarifying gaps in knowledge. Accordingly, the objectives of this review are deliberately scoped within the methodological boundaries of an SLR. Thus, this paper aims to do the following:

1. To systematically identify and synthesise existing evidence on the cultural, religious, and regional factors influencing online gender-based violence (DGBV) in Nigeria.
2. To review and evaluate the institutional, legal, and policy frameworks documented in the literature regarding prevention, response, and regulation of DGBV in Nigeria.
3. To examine and synthesise scholarly findings on the psychosocial impacts of DGBV on victims, as well as the coping mechanisms highlighted across existing studies.

Through these focal dimensions, the paper will add knowledge to feminist literature on digital cultures, governance and mental health in sub-Saharan Africa. It holds that the continued high rate of DGBV in Nigeria is not a technological problem only, but the manifestation of more structural and cultural imbalance that requires systemic, feminist-based adjustment of the system.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in Feminist Institutionalism and Intersectional Feminism. While intersectionality explains how overlapping identities—such as gender, class, religion, and region—create compounded vulnerabilities, feminist institutionalism focuses on how formal and informal institutions embed gender biases in their norms, structures, and procedures. Foundational work on feminist institutionalism (Chappell, 2006; Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010) argues that institutions—legal, political, cultural, and bureaucratic—are not gender-neutral but are historically shaped by patriarchal interests. Institutions determine who participates, whose narratives are legitimized, and whose grievances are ignored. In the Nigerian context, several studies show that law-enforcement agencies frequently fail to treat online misogyny and digital harassment against women as forms of violence, contributing to systematic neglect of complaints (Paradigm Initiative, 2020; Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative, 2024).

This model helps explain why, despite increasing awareness of digital gender-based violence (DGBV), institutional inertia persists. Patriarchal cultures embedded within state systems and digital governance frameworks reinforce impunity and weaken enforcement. Complementing this, intersectional feminism (Crenshaw, 1989) situates DGBV within the interplay of multiple identities and systems of oppression. Cultural and religious expectations placed on women differ across Nigerian regions, shaping both their exposure to and experience of online harassment. For example, online attacks against activist Aisha Yesufu during the #EndSARS movement drew heavily on conservative Northern religious and cultural expectations that Muslim women should remain modest and publicly restrained (Web Foundation, 2022). Likewise, social-listening research shows that women from southern Nigeria, especially journalists and activists, more frequently experience sexualized abuse, body-shaming, and misogynistic threats in digital spaces (Olamijuwon et al., 2023; Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2023). Everyday, Nigerian women—students, journalists, activists, and professionals—report forms of harassment shaped by intersectional factors including region, religion, class, and online visibility. Collectively, these patterns reveal how socio-cultural norms and institutional weaknesses interact to reproduce gendered digital violence in distinctly different ways across women's identities.

Methodology

Research Design

The current research used a systematic literature review (SLR) to integrate the available empirical and theoretical literature on the cultural, institutional, and psychosocial aspects of online gender-based violence (DGBV) in Nigeria. The methodological procedure supported transparency, repeatability and thoroughness in collecting and examining literature pertinent to the three main priorities: (1) defining cultural, religious and geographical drivers of DGBV; (2) assessing institutional and legal reactions; (3) discussing psychosocial effects and coping strategies among the victims and activists. The SLR design was chosen due to the inconclusive nature of the studies on the topic of digital violence in Nigeria, spanning across several disciplines, including gender studies, media, psychology, law, and sociology.

The review was done according to the Preferred Reporting Items of systematic Reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) but modified to accommodate qualitative synthesis. Every step, such as the search strategy to data synthesis, was recorded to have methodological rigour.

Search Strategy

Between January 2025 and June 2025, extensive searching of various databases of academic and policy literature was carried out. It was aimed at locating peer-reviewed articles, policy

briefs, and reliable NGO reports addressing the topic of digital gender-based violence in Nigeria from 2020-2025.

The databases and repositories consulted in this review were accessed through a combination of institutional subscriptions and open-access platforms. Access to paywalled academic databases such as Scopus, JSTOR, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, and ProQuest Central was made possible through the institutional library subscriptions available at Niger Delta University (NDU), which provides authenticated access to these resources for research purposes. Articles retrieved from African Journals Online (AJOL), ResearchGate, and expert repositories such as the Nigerian University Institutional Repositories (NOUN, UNILAG, NDU, Covenant University) were primarily open-access. For content on SSRN, UNFPA, UN Women, Paradigm Initiative, STER, and the archives of the African Governance and Policy Journal, open-access versions of policy briefs, reports, and working papers were used.

The Boolean operators and controlled vocabulary were used in the search. Sample search terms were:

- ◆ digital gender-based violence OR online harassment OR cyber violence AND Nigeria (OR Nigerian women).
- ◆ AND (not only online misogyny but also social media abuse or image-based sexual abuse) AND (not only culture or religion but also institution).
- ◆ psychosocial impact" OR coping) AND women (and Nigeria).

Citation chaining was used to make sure that the articles were relevant in the field; articles that are commonly referred to in other articles were then reviewed and included.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria: The studies included were done on the basis of the following criteria:

1. The research should be based in Nigeria or they should provide Nigeria as a comparative African analysis.
2. The research should directly deal with digital or online or technology-mediated gender-based violence.
3. At least one of the following dimensions, which are cultural/religious drivers, institutional/legal response, or psychosocial outcomes, must be discussed in the study.
4. Peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, book chapters, conference papers and high-quality NGO or policy reports were all eligible.
5. The period 2018-2025, which will secure the current applicability to the digital era in Nigeria.

The exclusion criteria were used to filter out the sources that:

1. Concentrated on physical GBV in digital form;
2. Were opinion pieces which were neither empirically nor theoretically grounded; or
3. Failed to give full-text access or verifiable information.

Data Mining and Data Extraction

The extraction of the data was based on a structured matrix that was used to extract the following: bibliographic data (author, year, source of publication), the geographical setting and sampled population, the nature of DGBV under research (e.g., cyberstalking, doxxing, sextortion, online shaming), the cultural or institutional orientation, the methodology (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed), and the main findings and conclusions. The data were entered into a spreadsheet and checked by two independent reviewers to make sure that they were accurate. Redundant records were eliminated, and the inconsistent interpretations were solved by consensus. The review ended up providing 30 studies pertaining to this article. These articles dealt with a wide range of disciplinary approaches.

Table 1: Summary of the 30 Studies

S/N	Author(s) & Year	Country/Region	Title	Journal / Source	Design / Method	Key Findings
1	Falobi (2025)	Nigeria	Effect of tech-facilitated GBV on social media communication	Konfrontasi Journal	Content analysis	TFGBV alters women's online behaviour and communication.
2	Silva et al. (2023)	Nigeria	GBV narratives in internet conversations	Journal of Medical Internet Research	Social listening	Identifies GBV patterns and trending discourse.
3	Okorie & Olagunju (2025)	Nigeria	Digital feminism, campaigns & VAW	Agenda	Ethnographic	Digital feminism reshapes activism and public attitudes.
4	Ezeaka & Bartholomew (2025)	Nigeria	Role of communication in GBV prevention	Saudi Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences	Qualitative	Communication influences GBV prevention outcomes.
5	Aborisade (2022)	Nigeria	Image-based sexual abuse in conservative society	Sexuality Research & Social Policy	Narrative analysis	Cultural norms silence victims; significant psychosocial harm.
6	Okonofua et al. (2024)	Rural Nigeria	Mobile technology for GBV response	Health Systems & Reform	Mixed methods	Digital tools helpful but adoption is limited by culture.
7	Balogun (2021)	Nigeria	Government responses to SGBV	Int'l Journal of Advanced Research in Public Policy	Policy analysis	State response inconsistent; major gaps remain.
8	Iyanda et al. (2021)	12 African countries	Physiological effects of GBV	Journal of Interpersonal Violence	Mixed methods	Widespread physical and psychological consequences.
9	Okpokwasili (2024)	Nigeria	GBV as barrier to human rights & SDGs	APAS Conference Proceedings	Review	GBV undermines SDG 3, 5 and 16.
10	Ike et al. (2025)	Nigeria	Public attitudes towards GBV	Journal of Gender-Based Violence	Mixed methods	High tolerance for certain forms of GBV persists.
11	Airaoje et al. (2025)	Nigeria	GBV as a public health crisis	Britain International Journal of HSS	Review	GBV has severe health and social consequences.
12	Ogunlana et al. (2024)	Nigeria	Rape & femicide during COVID-19	Journal of Gender Studies	Content analysis	Lockdown increased exposure to SGBV.
13	DeKeseredy (2021)	Global	Image-based sexual abuse	Current Addiction Reports	Review	IBSA is rising; weak legal responses worldwide.
14	Sparks (2022)	Global	Way forward for IBSA	Sexuality Research & Social Policy	Thematic analysis	Advocates survivor-centred interventions.
15	Ikuteyijo et al. (2025)	Nigeria	Perpetrators of GBV in tertiary institutions	Ife Social Sciences Review	Mixed methods	Identifies drivers and cultural facilitators of campus GBV.
16	Aborisade (2025)	Nigeria	COVID-19 and sexual violence	Int'l J. Offender Therapy & Comparative Criminology	Mixed methods	Sexual violence increased during lockdown.
17	Njila (2024)	Nigeria	Legal framework to protect women	East African Journal of Law	Legal review	Nigerian legal system still discriminatory in practice.
18	Paradiso et al. (2024)	Global	Image-based sexual abuse systematic review	Journal of Family Violence	Systematic review	Establishes global IBSA risk factors.
19	Obisesan et al. (2024)	Nigeria	Telemedicine and IPV	NIU Journal of Humanities	Mixed methods	Telemedicine helps but constrained by cultural silence.
20	Osimen et al. (2025)	Nigeria	Gender inequality & social media governance	Apple Academic Press	Book chapter	Shows gender bias in online governance structures.
21	Chiluwa (2025)	Nigeria & Ghana	Online campaigns against GBV	New Media & Society	Critical discourse analysis	Shows digital campaigns' role in anti-GBV mobilisation.
22	Sharda et al. (2024)	LMICs	Tech-facilitated GBV	Journal of Mental Health & Human Behaviour	Review	Recommends psychosocial response frameworks.
23	Makinde et al. (2021)	Sub-Saharan Africa	TFVA among young adults	Emerald Handbook	Qualitative	Young adults face high TFVA exposure.
24	Diala (2024)	Nigeria	Gendered violence, law, culture & religion	Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal	Legal/cultural analysis	Legal protections weakened by cultural norms.
25	Akeusola (2023)	Nigeria	Impact of tech-facilitated sexual violence on students	Indonesian J. Social Science Research	Survey	TFSV harms students' well-being.
26	Datiri (2020)	Africa	Online activism against GBV	Debats	Content analysis	African feminism effectively uses Twitter.
27	Oreoluwa et al. (2024)	Lagos	Online harassment of female journalists	POLIT Journal	Mixed methods	High harassment; weak institutional response.
28	Mapayi et al. (2023)	Southwest Nigeria	Sexual harassment protocol for universities	JMIR Research Protocols	Mixed methods protocol	Provides framework for campus GBV research.
29	Airaoje et al. (2023)	Nigeria	Media dimension of GBV	Middle East Research Journal	Critical review	Media underreports structural GBV.
30	Akudolu et al. (2023)	Africa	Rise in GBV during COVID-19	Cogent Arts & Humanities	Review	Pandemic significantly increased GBV exposure.

Quality Assessment

In order to ensure the credibility and reliability of the reviewed studies, they were evaluated using a multi-tool appraisal process. Evaluation tools included:

- ◆ The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist of qualitative studies.
- ◆ The JBI quantitative study checklist.
- ◆ The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) of qualitative and quantitative studies.

The studies were evaluated in the context of clarity of research aims, sampling used, data collection, analytical rigour and reliability of the conclusions. Articles with low scores less than a mean of 3.0 on a 5-point scale were excluded when they did not provide some contextual features. This procedure was done to make sure that no literature that was included had low methodological grounds and that it had a contribution to the review.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Thematic narrative synthesis was used in the analysis, and it involves bringing together various evidence into logical themes based on the aims of the study. With the help of coding, the main findings of the analysed literature, patterns were observed under three major themes: the cultural, religious and geographical factors influencing online gender-based violence; the legal, institutional, and policy responses to DGBV and the psychosocial and coping processes in the victims.

Empirical examples, illustrative tables, and cross-study comparisons were available to support each of the themes. The presence of contradictory findings was not rejected but rather was used to clarify the contextual interpretation of such contradictions, which may be variation in study location, population group or study design. The narrative synthesis did not just focus on summarising available evidence but also to draw conceptual links between digital harassment and the global feminist struggles within the social political context of Nigeria.

Reflexivity

As researchers, we acknowledge that our interpretations are shaped by our social locations, academic training, and lived experiences within Nigerian society. Our positionality is therefore central to how we frame, understand, and interpret digital gender-based violence (DGBV). Coming from a sociological background with longstanding engagement in gender, development, and digital rights issues, we recognise that our orientation is informed by feminist epistemologies – particularly intersectional feminism, which emphasises how gender intersects with class, culture, sexuality, and socio-political identities in shaping experiences of violence.

We are also conscious that researching DGBV in Nigeria requires reflexive sensitivity to the cultural, religious, and political contexts that influence both the production and interpretation of gendered harms. Our professional experience working with survivors, digital rights advocates, and policy communities informed the questions we asked, the analytic lenses we used, and the kinds of narratives we prioritised. This reflexive stance ensures that our analysis does not treat DGBV as a series of isolated individual incidents but rather as a structural, culturally produced phenomenon deeply embedded in Nigeria's socio-digital ecosystem.

This approach aligns with the intersectional feminist standpoint that gendered violence – offline or online – is never merely a matter of individual deviance but is rooted in broader power structures. Recognising this in our own positionality helps us interpret DGBV not simply as technological misuse, but as the digital extension of historical gendered inequalities in society.

By foregrounding reflexivity in this way, we explicitly acknowledge how our perspectives shape the research process, and we situate our interpretations within broader feminist epistemological traditions that understand violence as cultural, political, and systemic rather than merely personal.

Ethical Considerations

Even though no direct human subjects were used in this research, the study conformed to the ethics of using secondary data. The sources were all referenced and the data were discussed

according to the values of academic integrity and feminist ethics of care, which both stress on respecting the voices of survivors and using contextual sensitivity to cultural differences. Also, While institutional access reduced barriers to retrieving peer-reviewed materials, it is important to acknowledge that the review still relied significantly on open-access publications. This reliance reflects a structural limitation common to research in low-and middle-income contexts, where access to certain proprietary journals may be restricted. To address this limitation, efforts were made to cross-check findings across multiple databases and include grey literature from reputable NGOs and policy organisations, ensuring a comprehensive and methodologically transparent evidence base.

Results

The findings of the systematic review synthesised in this section are presented based on the three core objectives of the study. The final analysis covered thirty studies: both empirical and theoretical and policy-based research. The results uncover the multifaceted mechanisms through which cultural norms, institutional and psychosocial facts influence the experiences of online gender-based violence (DGBV) in Nigeria.

Factors that Drive Online Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria

Across the studies reviewed, cultural and religious ideologies consistently emerged as major drivers of online violence against women in Nigeria. The socio-cultural context—deeply patriarchal and morally conservative—constructs women’s digital visibility as transgressive or improper. As demonstrated in Falobi (2025) and Chilwa (2025), Nigerian online spaces frequently reproduce offline masculine hierarchies, enabling men to assert dominance through misogynistic language, slut-shaming, and policing of women’s self-expression.

Women who publicly discuss gender equality, sexuality, or bodily autonomy are often labelled immoral or wayward. This is reinforced by wider cultural narratives that treat men’s online assertiveness as confidence but interpret women’s participation as indecency. Such asymmetry mirrors the broader gendered power relations identified by Okorie and Olagunju (2025) and Airaoje et al. (2023), who show that social media discourse routinely delegitimises women’s voices while amplifying patriarchal norms.

Religious conservatism further intensifies these dynamics, particularly in Northern Nigeria, where discussions of sexuality remain taboo. As shown in Uduak’s findings reflected in Silva et al. (2023) and supported by Ezeaka and Bartholomew (2025), women who participated in the #ArewaMeToo movement faced severe moral condemnation from community and religious leaders. Their digital activism was framed not as a call for justice, but as an attack on Islamic values and cultural expectations of female modesty.

The #ArewaMeToo movement brought long-silenced cases of abuse into public discourse, encouraged survivors to share their stories, and pressured institutions to respond. Studies such as Chilwa (2025) confirm that such digital campaigns were crucial in provoking public debate, energising NGOs, and pushing for stronger legal protections. However, the backlash also revealed how deeply patriarchal and religious ideologies shape online reprisals against women.

Regional differences further shape experiences of DGBV. Evidence from Makinde et al. (2021) and Oreoluwa et al. (2024) indicates that women in South-West and South-South Nigeria—regions with higher literacy and internet penetration—tend to encounter more cyberstalking, trolling, and image-based abuse. In contrast, online attacks against women in the North are more likely to be framed through religious and moral rhetoric. An intersectional reading, supported by Iyanda et al. (2021) and Okpokwasili (2024), shows that vulnerability is mediated by class, education, region, religion, and perceived respectability.

Women in urban or educated settings may face reputational smearing, while women in rural or conservative areas risk social ostracism and communal backlash. Ogbonna and Ijeoma’s (2023) findings on queer Nigerian women further illustrate how layered harassment—misogynistic and homophobic—reflects deeply entrenched gendered and heteronormative hierarchies.

Collectively, these findings align with intersectional feminist perspectives, which argue that DGBV is not an individual behavioural problem but a culturally and structurally produced phenomenon embedded in Nigeria's socio-digital environment.

Table 2: Cultural, Religious, and Regional Drivers of Online Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria

Type of Driver	Description	Affected Group	Important Sources
Patriarchal norms and gendered cultural expectations	Online spaces reproduce offline masculine hierarchies; women's visibility is framed as immoral or improper.	All Nigerian women, especially those active on social media.	Falobi (2025); Okorie & Olagunju (2025); Airaoje et al. (2023)
Religious conservatism	Female expression on sexuality, rights, or abuse is interpreted as a moral or religious violation, especially in conservative Muslim contexts.	Northern Muslim women; #ArewaMeToo activists.	Silva et al. (2023); Ezeaka & Bartholomew (2025)
Moral policing and sexualised misogyny	Use of slut-shaming, sexualised insults, and reputational attacks to silence women.	Urban women, activists, journalists, influencers.	Oreoluwa et al. (2024); Makinde et al. (2021)
Regional inequality in risk exposure	Higher internet connectivity and visibility in the South increase trolling, while Northern harassment is framed in moral/religious terms.	Women in South-West, South-South, and Northern Nigeria.	Makinde et al. (2021); Oreoluwa et al. (2024)
Intersectional discrimination	Gender, sexuality, religion, and class intersect to produce layered harassment, including homophobic and misogynistic abuse.	Queer women; educated/urban women; women in conservative communities.	Ogbonna & Ijeoma (2023); Iyanda et al. (2021)
Cultural stigma and communal backlash	Women who challenge norms or disclose abuse face ostracism, blame, or reputational damage.	Women in rural or conservative communities.	Okpokwasili (2024); Airaoje et al. (2023)

Weaknesses in the Institutional and Legal Response to Online GBV

The analysis revealed major institutional and legislative gaps that heighten the digital vulnerability of women. Although laws such as the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act (2015) and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015) exist, their impact is weakened by poor enforcement, gender-neutral framing, and culturally embedded biases within institutions.

Research demonstrates that significant conceptual and definitional ambiguities in Nigerian cyber law hinder the criminalisation of technology-facilitated abuse. For instance, Njila (2024) highlights persistent legal uncertainties that limit the protection of women against discriminatory and harmful digital practices. Furthermore, offences such as online misogyny, doxxing, and image-based sexual abuse remain inadequately addressed in law; DeKeseredy (2021) and Aborisade (2022) show that existing legal provisions fail to capture the complexity of image-based and technology-facilitated abuse, often reducing them to civil defamation rather than gendered violence.

Similarly, although the VAPP Act offers a groundbreaking framework for addressing physical gender-based violence, it does not explicitly anticipate technology-facilitated harms. Weak investigative capacity further undermines its implementation. Studies reveal that institutional actors lack the digital forensic skills required to trace or interpret digital evidence; Ogunlana et al. (2024) note that this significantly contributes to low conviction rates for tech-facilitated offences. Institutional responses are also shaped by patriarchal norms embedded within bureaucratic culture. As Oreoluwa et al. (2024) show, complaints of online harassment—especially among women journalists—are often dismissed as personal or moral issues rather than violations of rights. In addition, Aborisade (2025) observes that victims of image-based abuse are frequently blamed for sharing private content, illustrating systemic victim-blaming within justice processes.

Civil society organisations attempt to fill these institutional gaps. Reports by groups such as Paradigm Initiative and STER underscore the growing importance of rights advocacy, legal aid, and awareness-raising. However, Osimen et al. (2025) argue that Nigeria's ICT governance structure lacks gender-responsive frameworks, and coordination between state actors and civil society remains weak. This fragmented approach aligns with the broader inefficiencies noted by Balogun (2021) concerning state responses to gender-based violence. At the policy level, Nigeria's digital governance model—led by bodies such as NITDA—continues to prioritise cybersecurity and data protection over digital safety, failing to integrate gendered perspectives (Osimen et al., 2025).

Moreover, high bureaucratic overlap and unclear ministerial mandates further weaken accountability. As Makinde et al. (2021) note, technology-facilitated violence thrives in systems where institutional responsibilities are diffuse and gender-sensitive structures, such as gender desks in cybercrime units, are absent. Consequently, institutional failure has contributed to a pervasive culture of impunity, where digital abuse is normalised, and perpetrators encounter little to no deterrence.

Table 3: Institutional and Legal Lapses in DGBV (Updated Summary of Cited Studies)

Dimension	Status Quo	Gap Identified	Study
Cybercrimes Act (2015)	Focuses on impersonation, fraud, phishing, identity theft	Does not recognise technology-facilitated misogyny, doxxing, or image-based abuse as gendered offences	Njila (2024); DeKeseredy (2021)
VAPP Act (2015)	Provides coverage for physical and domestic GBV	Limited applicability to digital harms; lacks provisions for TFGBV	Ogunlana et al. (2024)
Legal Treatment of IBSA	Handled under civil defamation or morality offences	Fails to classify IBSA as gender-based violence; victims often blamed	Aborisade (2022); Sparks (2022)
Digital Evidence Handling	Investigators lack forensic capacity	Low conviction rates due to inability to trace or interpret digital evidence	Ogunlana et al. (2024)
Police and Judicial Response	Complaints often trivialised or reframed as moral or domestic disputes	Patriarchal biases shape institutional responses and undermine justice delivery	Oreoluwa et al. (2024); Aborisade (2025)
Government Response System	Existing ministries operate in silos (Women Affairs, Interior, Communications)	Bureaucratic overlap and unclear mandates limit accountability	Balogun (2021)
ICT Governance Institutions (e.g., NITDA)	Focus largely on data protection, cybersecurity, platform regulation	Absence of gender-sensitive frameworks for digital safety	Osimen et al. (2025)
Civil Society Support	Provides legal aid, advocacy, survivor support, and awareness campaigns	Fragmented efforts; weak coordination with state agencies	Osimen et al. (2025)
Patterns of TFGBV in Society	Rising online misogyny, harassment, and image-based violence	Cultural acceptance reinforces online violence; weak institutional deterrence	Aborisade (2025); Makinde et al. (2021)

Psychosocial and Coping Responses between Victims and Activists

DGBV has long-lasting psychological and social consequences. The reviewed studies consistently show that online harassment produces emotional distress, trauma, fear, and in many cases, social withdrawal among victims.

Several studies document these harms. For instance, Aborisade (2022) and Iyanda et al. (2021) report high levels of anxiety, depression, and diminished self-worth among women exposed to image-based abuse, trolling, or non-consensual content dissemination. Many survivors display symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder. In some cases, online harassment extends into offline spaces through stalking and community shaming, intensifying victims' emotional burden. Similarly, Akeusola (2023) finds that young women subjected to technology-facilitated sexual violence often retreat from social platforms or self-censor by

deactivating their accounts, a coping mechanism that deepens digital exclusion and restricts opportunities for self-expression and professional networking.

Despite institutional gaps, women and feminist communities have created informal coping networks. Drawing from activism studies, Datiri (2020) notes that digital feminist groups rely on encrypted communication channels for emotional solidarity and the exchange of safety strategies. Likewise, Olatunji and Binta (2023) show how survivors participate in online support communities that provide anonymity, psychological counselling, and mutual aid.

These grassroots networks represent feminist resistance within hostile digital environments. As Okorie and Olagunju (2025) and Chiluwa (2025) observe, such platforms serve dual functions: they offer emotional relief and also operate as advocacy spaces where incidents are documented, justice is demanded, and digital-safety reforms are collectively promoted. However, many of these initiatives face sustainability challenges due to inadequate funding and limited institutional recognition.

Table 4: Psychosocial Effects and Coping in DGBV Victims (Updated Studies)

Type of Impact	Psychological Effects	Coping Mechanisms	Major Sources
Anxiety, Fear & Trauma	Anxiety, depressive symptoms, reduced self-worth, PTSD-like reactions	Withdrawal from online spaces; account deactivation; self-censorship	Aborisade (2022); Iyand et al. (2021); Akeusola (2023)
Depression & Social Withdrawal	Social isolation, emotional numbness, loss of motivation, avoidance of digital participation	Digital retreat, limiting exposure to social media, reduced interaction	Akeusola (2023); Iyanda al. (2021)
Community Shaming & Offline Spillover	Heightened emotional distress, panic, shame, retraumatization	Seeking safe spaces; reduced offline mobility; seeking anonymity	Aborisade (2022); Iyand et al. (2021)
Coping through Feminist Solidarity	Emotional validation, strengthened resilience, sense of belonging	Peer-support networks, encrypted messaging groups	Datiri (2020); Olatunji & Binta (2023)
Survivor-Led Advocacy & Empowerment	Increased self-efficacy; transformative coping	Digital activism, reporting cases, participating in awareness campaigns	Okorie & Olagunju (2025); Chiluwa (2025)
Anonymous Healing Spaces	Reduced shame; improved emotional stability	Anonymity-based online survivor communities	Olatunji & Binta (2023)

Discussion of Findings

This review supports the finding that digital gender-based violence (DGBV) in Nigeria is neither random nor isolated but is systematic and rooted in the convergence of cultural beliefs, institutional design, and psychosocial arrangements. Viewed through intersectional feminism and feminist institutionalism, the phenomenon reflects the migration of patriarchal power relations into the digital environment. The persistence of digital misogyny cannot be separated from the broader patriarchal moral order in Nigeria, where norms around female modesty and obedience still frame how women are expected to appear and behave online. Women who assert independence or articulate feminist views frequently experience trolling, slut-shaming, and threats—patterns widely recognised in recent research (Falobi, 2025; Silva et al., 2023; Okorie & Olagunju, 2025). This dynamic represents what scholars describe as “cultural cyber-patriarchy”: the digital reproduction of offline gender hierarchies.

Intersectional feminism further explains that these cultural logics work unevenly across class, region, sexuality, and religion. In northern Nigeria, religious idioms and moral condemnation are commonly mobilised in online harassment, whereas in southern regions secular shaming and reputational attacks are more prominent (Ezeaka & Bartholomew, 2025; Osimen et al., 2025). Women from conservative or economically disadvantaged backgrounds experience “double injustice”: they face digital aggression while simultaneously being silenced by families or communities when attempting to report abuse. Digital participation therefore becomes a gendered negotiation of safety and respectability where women must police their language, visibility, and engagement. DGBV thus operates not as spontaneous deviance but as an ideological mechanism that enforces cultural conformity. Preventing it requires more than

mentorship – it requires changing the meanings, norms, and power relations embedded in online communication.

From the lens of feminist institutionalism, the Nigerian state and its legal frameworks play a structural role in reproducing DGBV. Although the Cybercrimes Act (2015) and VAPP Act (2015) offer partial protections, they remain gender-blind in scope and application. Institutions frequently reinterpret digital abuse as private misconduct rather than public harm. These patriarchal informal norms are visible in the behaviour of police officers who routinely dismiss online harassment complaints (Balogun, 2021; Aborisade, 2025). ICT governance in Nigeria also prioritises cybersecurity and economic development over gender justice, producing what scholars identify as technocratic patriarchy – technology systems that reproduce inequality (Osimen et al., 2025). Fragmented government portfolios further dilute accountability and contribute to policy stagnation. Without deliberate gender mainstreaming, institutional patriarchy will continue to legitimise digital misogyny.

Psychosocial effects form another dimension of inequality. Digital abuse generates emotional distress manifested as anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and reputational fear, consistent with the findings of studies on psychological effects of GBV (Ogunlana et al., 2024; Iyanda et al., 2021; Airaoje et al., 2025). Educated women often worry about reputational damage, while those from conservative communities face family-imposed sanctions, reflecting the combined influence of trauma and social identity. Thus, women's presence online does not offer the same level of emotional safety as men's, reinforcing gendered disparities in digital citizenship.

Yet, within this hostile environment, feminist activism has created counter-institutions of care. Informal governance systems – such as survivor networks, advocacy collectives, and support organisations – have emerged to fill the void left by weak state protection. Groups like STER, TechHerNG, and community-based safe-space initiatives provide empathy, counselling, and advocacy. These efforts transform isolated suffering into collective resistance, demonstrating that feminist care functions not only as healing but also as political action (Chiluwa, 2025; Datiri, 2020). Such networks reconceptualise safety as a shared responsibility and reframe vulnerability as a source of agency.

Taken together, the cultural, institutional, and psychosocial dimensions situate DGBV within a broader patriarchal politics of technology in Nigeria. Patriarchy operates not only as a social order but as a digital architecture – manifest in algorithms, bureaucratic routines, and communicative norms that determine who is credible, who is punished, and whose voice is dismissed. The psychological burden of such harms is an under-recognised public health concern requiring trauma-informed policy responses. Feminist institutionalism calls for engendering the state, while intersectional feminism emphasises context-specific reforms that account for layered identities. The integration of these perspectives suggests that meaningful change requires both structural transformation and cultural re-education. Until the cultural grammar of misogyny and the institutional grammar of indifference are dismantled, patriarchal privilege will remain embedded in digital citizenship in Nigeria – leaving women visible yet constrained, present yet persistently silenced online.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper has used the combined frame of intersectional feminism and feminist institutionalism to investigate the cultural perpetrators, institutional void, and psychosocial reactions to online gender-based violence (DGBV) in Nigeria. It determined that DGBV is not a digital phenomenon in isolation, but a behavior of the wider patriarchal structure of Nigeria shifting to the digital realm by reproducing the gender hierarchy in offline space.

Online spheres in Nigeria are culturally conservative in terms of their morals and religion, which police the voices of women and control their online presence. Such social ideologies legitimize online harassment, which is a defense of cultural and religious norms. Gender-blind legislations and bureaucratic inertia, institutionally, contribute to perpetration of impunity in perpetrators. Lack of feminist-informed digital governance in the Nigerian state apparatus has enabled the flourish of DGBV in the name of technological neutrality. Psychosocially, survivors

become traumatized, depressed, and self-censored and therefore, not included in the discussion of matters. Nevertheless, the rise of informal feminist networks, including online survivor groups and advocacy NGOs, is an indication of a kind of feminist resilience and turns personal trauma into political action.

Based upon intersectional feminism, the paper concludes that the digital experiences of women are organized around several, overlapping axes of identity and power: religion, region, sexuality, and class. At the same time, feminist institutionalism reveals how these forms of inequalities are reproduced by the formal structures by omission, ignorance, and prejudice. What it means is that the challenge of DGBV requires cultural change as well as institution change. Digital patriarchy cannot be eliminated either by law or by activism, but both should derail in a comprehensive, feminist digital policy. Based on the analysis of the literature reviewed and theoretical contributions, the following policy and practical suggestions may be offered:

1. The government of Nigeria, via NITDA and the Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy, should revise all digital governance systems regarding gender-sensitive policies. The Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act (2015) is to be changed as well to specifically define gender-based violence using the technology as a punishable offense, including image-based sexual abuse, doxxing, and online stalking.
2. There should also be Gender Digital Safety Desks at law enforcement agencies where the DGBV cases can be attended to using trained staff. There should further be gender competence training in the Nigerian Police Academy, the courts, and digital regulators. The Ministries of Women Affairs, Justice, and ICT should cooperate to co-ordinate the policies. Systems of inter-agency between the government, CSOs and digital platforms should also be established to enhance data sharing, reporting and enforcement. Moreover, there is a need to introduce educational campaigns promoting digital ethics, consent, and respect and incorporate the feminist values into the civic education programs.
3. Moreover, digital-safety classes (in cooperation with NGOs and higher education institutions), providing counseling, online-safety training, and mental health services to victims, must be created. The implementation of psychological first aid should be included in the digital literacy campaigns to provide their victims and activists with resilience and emotional well-being.
4. Finally, longitudinal studies on the psychosocial consequences of DGBV, especially concerning marginalised populations (queer women, journalists, students) and their cooperation between academia, civil society, and digital platforms to create context-specific data to inform feminist digital policy must be promoted.

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