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Examining Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria: Advocating for Women's Security in the Face of Ritual Killings

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ABSTRACT

Ritual killings in Nigeria are a deeply unsettling form of gender-based violence. They are rooted in a complicated mix of cultural beliefs, economic inequalities, and failures in governance. This paper examines the various factors that lead to these terrible acts. These include the strong influence of patriarchy, the lasting impact of religious blending, widespread economic hardship, and the ongoing spread of harmful cultural myths. The analysis also looks at how these killings affect gender security and the stability of society as a whole. Such acts create fear, worsen gender inequalities, and limit women's basic rights. While recognizing the good intentions behind existing laws, especially the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act of 2015, this paper evaluates their effectiveness and points out serious gaps in how they are carried out and enforced. Using a thorough review of academic literature and reports, this study offers a set of clear policy recommendations and intervention strategies. These include legal reforms, targeted awareness campaigns, community-led projects, and economic empowerment programs. All of these aim to improve women's security and create a society that values human life.

Keywords: *Ritual killings, Women, Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act, Gender-Based Violence, Women's Security*

1.0 Introduction

The disconcerting resurgence of ritual killings, as well as continuing prevalence in Nigeria, has proven an issue of concern among citizens, academic institutions, as well as governmental institutions (Ayandiji, 2022). Such concern is based on the understanding that numerous causative elements such as unemployment, poverty, disrespect for deities, wickedness, ignorance, moral rot, superstition, lack of adequate security protocols, as well as punitive measures being insufficient feature a considerable contribution in large-scale prevalence of ritual killings (Ayandiji, 2022). These offenses of violence, customarily characterized by gruesomely horrific murder as well as severance of important body parts, are further detailed as per Usman (2017) in relation to inclusion of practices with deadly force, violent crimes, cranial arson, consumption of human blood, as well as rape, thus serving as a deeply dangerous means of violence with considerable negative impacts on societal structure as well as security apparatus of the country (Nigeria Watch, 2022). Ayandiji (2022) further places emphasis on the rising rate of ritual killings as an embarrassment as well as a

reason for worry among citizens, while Nigeria Watch (2022) refers to rising fears of ritual killings across the country. Despite accurate statistical data being at times lacking due to large-scale under-reporting, Jimoh (2018) suggests that actual numbers of persons murdered in relation to financial rituals remain unknown due to the absence of a systematic record, with Nigeria Watch (2022) further referring to the difficulty in obtaining accurate statistical data due to large-scale under-reporting. Available evidence illustrates unsettling trends. For example, National Bureau of Statistics [NBS] (2022) reported over 9,000 cases of ritual killings to authorities across the period of twenty years prior to 2022. This shows a large number of reported cases, thus establishing the prevalence of such events among large groups of citizens. Nigeria Watch (2024) reveals an even worse situation, which identified over 168 ritual killings in 20 states in 2022, with estimates predicting roughly 100 cases in 2024. These observations of ritual killings show both the prevalence of such activity and the catastrophic impact it has on Nigerians.

Historically, the practice of human sacrifice in Nigeria can be traced to the pre-colonial era, where certain African societies, including the Yoruba, occasionally offered human sacrifices to deities, often during times of national disaster or before military expeditions (Ayegboyin, 2009; Oyewole, 2016). This explains that human sacrifice was the highest and costliest ritual sacrifice resorted to by communities in times of national disaster to propitiate divinities and purify the community, noting that the Yoruba in South-western Nigeria had a ritual tradition that included human sacrifice before military expeditions. These acts were generally communal and believed to benefit the wider community (Ayegboyin, 2009). In essence, using human beings for ritual was not out of a lack of respect for human life, but a personal philosophy that sacrificing individual life was for the good of the community. However, with the advent of colonialism, practices like human sacrifice were criminalised in the penal code from 1916, and the focus shifted towards individual acts, often performed in consultation with shamans or witch doctors for personal gain, such as wealth and power (Gbinije, 2014; Oyewole, 2016). This exposed how colonial powers outlawed human sacrifice and witchcraft, driving the practice underground, while the cases of individuals killing family members for money-making rituals were cemented. This demonstrates that this fostered the development of private rituals, especially among the upper class and economic elites seeking special protection and wealth.

Unlike in wider societal customs before colonial interventions, in which sacrificial rituals involved mostly enslaved individuals, slavery abolition increased the vulnerability of children, thus promoting the prevalence of gbómo gbómo (abduction of children) (Oyewole, 2016). This illustrates that with the ending of the slave trade as well as a ban on ritual murder, there was a need for surreptitious action, thus making children prime targets. Modern-day ritual homicides in Nigeria have developed in intricacy, with victims consisting of a diverse range of age groups as well as sexual orientations, most of them attributed to organized groups in possession of human remains with the intent to use in magical practices (Gbinije, 2014; Jimoh, 2018). This suggests that the exact number of victims murdered in conjunction with financial rituals is inconclusive due to a lack of systematic data, as modern-day ritualists' crime is not restricted to child abduction, with victims suffering regardless of age, gender, as well as status in society.

No less importantly, this phenomenon is inherently gendered, with women experiencing proportional impacts (Womankind, 2015; TheCable, 2021). This implies that violence targeting females is deep-seated and prevalent in conjunction with gender inequality across the country. There is no shortage of reports confirming that females feature as primary victims in killings aimed at ritualistic ends (George et al., 2015). This identified that females are more commonly subjected to

ritualistic killings in comparison with males due to being seen as easy targets. This vulnerability is due to societal views of females as soft targets as well as objects carrying inherent enrichment value for ritualistic preparations (Womankind, 2015; TheCable, 2021; George et al., 2015). This clearly shows that socio-cultural views as well as patriarchal systems lead towards viewing females as inferior as well as objects designed with inferior value than males. Targeted attack on female body parts such as breasts, vulva, ovaries, as well as other internal organs, towards get-rich-quick rituals further defines this violence as being gendered in nature (Vanguard, 2017). This connotes females' body parts being in higher demand due to being perceived as capable in financial rituals.

The study is conceptualized with four major goals in view: First, it seeks to examine those socio-cultural and economic considerations responsible for ritualistic killings in Nigeria, such as elements of patriarchy, religious syncretism, economic uncertainty, as well as cultural myths. Second, it assesses the impact of such killings on gender security and general societal cohesion because of how such killings promote fear, consolidate gender imbalances, as well as inhibit gains in gender-oriented financial policies. Third, it critically assesses policies, such as the VAPP Act, aimed at stemming gender-based violence, with emphasis on deficits in implementation and effect. Fourth, it identifies possible policy directions as well as intervention strategies, such as legislative correction, sensitization projects, community-based initiatives, as well as financial empowerment projects capable of improving security among Nigerian females.

2.0 Socio-Cultural and Economic Factors Contributing to Ritual Killings

Ritual killings in Nigeria cannot be seen as unconnected events, but they are deeply related to several socio-cultural as well as economic issues, resulting in their continuous phenomenon (Dakuku, 2021; Nigeria Watch, 2022). The killings are noted as widespread belief that ritual killings being effective is shaped substantially by baffling economic difficulties, especially widespread poverty, while suggesting that economic marginalisation and inequality push people towards such extremes.

Patriarchy and Devaluation of Women

The primary root of gender violence, such as ritualistic killings, is deeply rooted patriarchal structure inherent in Nigerian society (TheCable, 2021). The situation demonstrates that violence against women is systematic as it is engendered in unequal power structures, which explain the role of patriarchal thinking that degrades women as inferior beings. This structure systematically de-emerges the status of women as weaker individuals in relation to men and worse as mere chattels or next in succession after slaves, prone to ritualistic uses (Eteng & Nnam, 2022). This simply explains that societal norms and patriarchal institutions perpetuate women as inferior in status to men, as well as next in succession after slaves, towards ritualistic uses. This societal structure considerably determines the choice of women since reproductive elements such as breasts, as well as the vulva, feature as especially powerful elements in get-rich-quick concoctions prepared by herbalists (Vanguard, 2017). It signifies an increased market for female body parts as an indication of presumed power in monetary rituals. Universally prevalent opinion of women's bodily structures harboring inherent enriching value in such rituals is evidence of utter disrespect for women as human as well as in her autonomous self (Okondu, 2023). Historical as well as continuous inequalities in power relations between women as well as men feature as a main predisposition contributing towards violence towards women (Applin, Simpson & Curtis, 2023). The situation explains gender imbalance in education, employment, as well as in economic empowerment as predisposition towards higher rates of partner violence. The ubiquitous devaluing of human life makes women

especially vulnerable to violence and exploitation because they can be seen as disposable in pursuit of illicit wealth or power (TheCable, 2021).

Religious Syncretism and Superstitious Beliefs

The persistence in ritual killings is enormously propelled by a general belief in magical power and supernatural happenings due to the syncretism of traditional African spiritualism with elements of modern religions (Oyegami & Alabi, 2022). This represents the vibrant belief in supernatural occurrences and ritual efficacy among Nigerians, viewing rituals as ways of enhancing spiritual health as well as improving wealth status. Many of those with some educational status, as well as those professing other faiths, have a firm belief in rituals being able to secure riches, avert death, or entice good luck (Dakuku, 2021). This demonstrates wealth as a motivating reason in ritual killings, detailing such reasons as believing in human sacrifice being functional in acquiring power, wealth, as well as security. Facilitators such as traditional practitioners, witch doctors, as well as occultists play central roles in this activity, in need of distinct human body parts such as tongues, heads, breasts, as well as sexual organs in concocting magical potions (Ayandiji, 2022; Igwebuike Research Institute, 2025). The situation expresses that individuals are carrying out killings for ritualistic motives to obtain certain human parts as required by witch doctors. The age-long belief still holds sway, thus accommodating a market in human sacrificial victims. It has moved, as this writing is concerned, from being a rare occurrence in human history to a disturbing as well as recurrent phenomenon (Oyegami & Alabi, 2022). As illustrated, this custom can be seen as a reflection of deep-seated superstitions that man has chosen.

Economic Instability and the "Get Rich Quick" Syndrome

Poverty, high unemployment rates, and widespread economic hardship are key factors pushing individuals towards desperate actions, including ritual killings (World Bank, 2023). This demonstrates economic hardship and poverty as major causes for the rise in ritual killings. The societal pressure to achieve material success, combined with a widespread get-rich-quick mentality, especially among the youth, encourages participation in these awful crimes (Ojiezele, 2023). This indicates that the pursuit of quick, unearned wealth has led to more money-related ritual killings, emphasizing the endless desire for material wealth. Society often admires individuals with flashy lifestyles, even if their wealth sources are unclear, further pushing this dangerous pursuit (Saka-Olokungboye, 2021). This notes that society tends to celebrate people without obvious means of income, encouraging engagement in blood money rituals. This situation creates a vicious cycle where economic desperation leads to deviant behaviors, and the perceived success of those engaged in illegal activities reinforces the belief that wealth can be obtained through such means (Igwebuike Research Institute, 2025). This implies that many believe in the effectiveness of money rituals due to shocking economic conditions. The decline of moral values and lack of education also play a role in this troubling trend, highlighting the involvement of youth and teenagers as perpetrators, reflecting decay in moral standards.

Cultural Myths and the Commodification of Human Body Parts

The belief in the power of human body parts for ritualistic use is deeply rooted in specific cultural myths (Oyegami & Alabi, 2022). These horrific acts are often dismissed as myths, but are very real. Ritualists focus on specific organs like eyes, tongues, breasts, private parts, heads, and hearts, believing these body parts can produce strong effects in money rituals, spiritual strengthening, or

protection (TheCable, 2021; Nigeria Watch, 2022). Human genitals, female breasts, heads, tongues, hearts, and bones have significant outcomes in money rituals. These brutal acts are often carried out while the victim is still alive and without anesthesia, as the victim's cries are believed to increase the potency of the ritual (Adeyinka, Lietaert & Derluyn, 2023). The expression is that much of this abuse occurs while the victim is alive and without anesthesia, leading many to die from shock or pain afterward. The belief that human remains can transfer luck, wealth, or power from the victim to the perpetrator supports a gruesome trade in human spare parts (Omozusi & Oluchukwu, 2023). This commodification of human life, especially among vulnerable groups like women, children, and individuals with albinism, results directly from these harmful cultural beliefs (Nigeria Watch, 2022). This emphasizes the vulnerability of children, women, and individuals with albinism, who are seen as having an enhanced capacity for ritualistic exploitation. The ongoing nature of these crimes reflects not just individual greed but a significant failure of society to challenge and dispel these deep-rooted superstitions, which are often based on hearsay and lack any solid evidence (Centre for Family Health Initiative (CFHI), 2023).

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the feminist theory first articulated by de Beauvoir (1949) and further elaborated by Millett (1970). This theory assumes that patriarchal systems instill unbalances of power to normalise the male dominance and the subordination of women, enforced to systematically oppress women politically, economically, and socially. Under the radical feminist branch, the infliction of violence upon women (in the aspect of domestic abuse, sexual assault, and ritual killings) is perceived as a form of solidifying and sustaining male power (Louverdis, 2022). The theory puts any individual acts of violence into perspective and the larger socio-institutional settings, thus revealing how deep-rooted cultural practices, law, and mechanisms of social and political institutions reinforce the vulnerability of women. However, noted by the theory is that traditional feminist theory in its initial formulations has been critic as universalising women's experiences and in many cases it ignored the dimensions of intersectional oppression based on ethnicity, class, religion and geographical location, which are especially relevant in Nigeria.

When used to analyze the research paper, feminist theory and especially its intersectional version feminist theory developed by Crenshaw (1989), facilitates the discussion of the dialectic of patriarchal values along with the regional cultural notions and dangerous traditional practices to such an extent that the female body becomes a territory of surface and substance violence. This is particularly applicable in Nigeria, where women are ritually killed, which is sometimes justified by cultural or superstitious contexts and whose issue of justice is not always fulfilled by the law and institutional systems. The perspective enhances the analysis because it is important to note that the experiences of violence in the context of Nigerian women cannot be monolithic; rather, it depends on a multifaceted interaction between gender and socio-economic status, religion, ethnic identity, and geographic disparity. Therefore, feminist theory not only identifies the structural causes of ritual killings but also grounds the need for transformative actions, that is, legal reforms, community sensitisation, and policy, which are aimed at addressing the structural patriarchal and cultural logics upholding the practice of ritual killing.

3.0 Impact of Ritual Killings on Gender Security and Societal Stability

The increase in ritual killings in Nigeria has serious and far-reaching effects, greatly undermining gender security and posing a significant threat to overall societal stability (Oyegami & Alabi, 2022;

Ojiezele, 2023). These practices damage societal morals and hinder national development, believing that accumulating wealth is more important, negatively affecting the country's fragile security situation.

Perpetuation of Fear and Psychological Trauma

Ritual killings create a widespread sense of fear and anxiety in the population, transforming daily life into a precarious existence (Ikenyei, 2023). Ritual killings instill fear in citizens, demonstrating the severe threat to safety and security, and creating feelings of dread. The horrific nature of these crimes, often involving mutilation and sexual assault, fosters a deep sense of vulnerability, particularly among women and children, who are frequent targets (Premium Times, 2021). McCaul (2023) reports that hundreds of thousands of children in Africa fall victim to ritual attacks yearly. The specific targeting of intimate body parts, such as breasts and vulva, for ritual use intensifies this fear, as women's bodies become commodities for illicit profit. This explains that ritualists aim for breasts, vulvas, ovaries, and other parts of women and girls for concoctions.

Besides immediate physical harm, the long-term effects of these acts create severe psychological trauma for victims and communities (Ikenyei, 2023). These long-term effects can lead to psychological problems for victims. Survivors and witnesses frequently suffer from emotional breakdown, depression, confusion, disorientation, and aggressive behaviors (McCarthy, Jensen, Wilson & Rivers, 2022). With this, Ikenyei (2023) noted that 85% of participants reported that some traditional rituals predispose victims to aggressive behaviors and lead to confusion and disorientation. The ongoing threat of abduction and murder, along with the frequent finding of mutilated bodies, cultivates a shared sense of dread and distrust within society (Dele, Udefuna, Hassan & Udom, 2025). This highlights the concerning rate at which incomplete bodies are found in urban areas. This widespread psychological distress harms the mental well-being of the population and limits their ability to function effectively.

Reinforcement of Gender Inequalities and Hindrance of Women's Rights

Ritual killings represent a severe form of gender-based violence, mostly directed by men against women (Nwakanma & Abu, 2020). This demonstrates clearly that men are the ones committing ritual-related crimes against women, categorizing it as gender-based violence. Ogbo (2024) found that of 55 perpetrators involved in women's ritual killings, 54 were men, with just one woman acting as an accomplice to her husband. This shows the existence of a clear gender imbalance in who commits these acts. This imbalance highlights the systematic nature of this violence and its roots in deep-seated gender inequalities (Okpokwasili, 2024). This reflects the pronounced judgement that violence against women is a reflection of historically unequal power dynamics.

Women are more likely to be victims due to perceptions of their physical weakness and the exploitation of trust, as male perpetrators often use romantic gestures or marriage promises to deceive them (Alsawalqa & Alrawashdeh, 2022). This connotes that women tend to be victims because they are not as strong as men and may trust their male partners too easily. This exploitation reinforces the patriarchal view that women are inferior to men and can be exploited for male advancement (Ade, 2021). This implies that socio-cultural beliefs and patriarchal positions women as lesser than men and as next in line after slaves for ritual purposes. The low status given to women, where their reproductive parts are viewed as valuable for rituals, further objectifies them and strips

away their humanity and agency (Paige & Paige, 2021). This low regard for women has made people see their reproductive parts as powerful for get rich fast rituals, contributing to them being targeted. This systematic violence significantly obstructs women's basic human rights, including their right to life, safety, and control over their bodies (Shahid & Rane, 2022). The increasing raid on women shows a disregard for their fundamental rights. This violence limits their ability to explore their potential, achieve financial independence, and participate in social and political matters (Eriksson & Ulmestig, 2021). This highlights that violence against women limits their understanding of their societal roles and subjects millions to oppression. The constant fear and insecurity created by ritual killings restrict women's mobility and opportunities, effectively trapping many Nigerian women in a life of oppression and exploitation (Iyobhebhe & Fowosere, 2025). This emphasizes that violence against women is deeply entrenched, subjecting millions to oppression. The systemic nature of gender inequality, including disparities in education, employment, economic rights, and the freedom to marry or divorce, strongly predicts higher violence levels against women.

Societal Instability and Undermining National Development

The pursuit of financial security and social acceptance through fraudulent activities and ritual killings harms societal morals and undermines national development. Dakuku (2021) argued that these practices threaten social values and hinder national progress. This underlines the severe consequences of ritual killings, which lead to socio-cultural decline. These activities contribute to a breakdown in moral values, creating an environment that glorifies illicit wealth (Ibrahim, 2017; Ojiezele, 2023). The skyrocketing ritual acts illustrate how society celebrates individuals without clear income sources, which encourages blood money rituals. The fact that youth and teenagers participate in these acts is particularly concerning, reflecting a decline in morals and a troubling future for those involved. These nefarious activities and abuse imply that the youth's involvement in ritual killings has attracted significant media attention, thus portraying a negative image of the society.

Ritual killings worsen Nigeria's already fragile security situation and add to a broader sense of insecurity alongside crimes like banditry and terrorism. Oyegami and Alabi (2022) stated that the belief in wealth accumulation at all costs has negatively affected the country’s security. When captured witch doctors and ritualists accuse politicians, officials, and wealthy individuals of being their backers, it indicates deep corruption that erodes public trust and undermines governance (Adolfsson, Banik & Dulani, 2024). It is common knowledge that some elites participate in ritual killings and name politicians as sponsors. This is especially evident in the rise of mysterious disappearances and ritual killings noted during pre-election and post-election periods (Dakuku, 2021). This demonstrates that increased cases of mysterious disappearances during these times are not surprising. The decline of traditional values, alongside weak law enforcement and inadequate punishments, allows these crimes to spread, creating a society filled with fear, distrust, and weakened moral integrity (Nigeria Watch, 2022).

4.0 Assessment of Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act (2015)

Nigeria has made progress in laws addressing gender-based violence. Yet serious challenges remain in implementing and enforcing these laws, particularly concerning ritual killings. Oluwole and Akinwale (2019) mentioned that even with laws like the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act, enforcement struggles due to cultural resistance and inefficiencies in institutions.

The Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act, introduced in May 2015, marked an important step in Nigeria's efforts to address various types of violence. Anyaogu and Okpalaobi (2017) explained that the Act responded to calls for protection against ongoing violence. The goal of the Act is to eliminate violence in both public and private life. The VAPP Act bans all types of violence, which include physical, sexual, psychological, domestic abuse, and harmful traditional practices (Shajobi-Ibikunle & Kassim, 2023). This legislation has strengthened advocacy against issues like rape, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), partner violence, stalking, and harmful widowhood customs. The Act significantly enhances advocacy for these matters. A key advancement over previous laws is the comprehensive definition of rape. It includes oral and anal sex, the use of objects, and other body parts other than the penis, as well as vaginal penetration (Ihunna, 2025). The Act also outlines appropriate punishments for offenders, including those who incite, assist, or promote such acts, detailing the responsibilities of courts, police, civil organizations, and healthcare professionals when handling cases of violence (Anyaogu & Okpalaobi, 2017).

Despite its progressive elements, the VAPP Act faces major challenges in implementation and enforcement, resulting in inconsistent effects across the nation (Invictus Africa, 2024; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019), attributing weak enforcement due to cultural resistance and institutional inefficiencies. A significant barrier is the Act's limited geographical application. As of 2024, only 33 of Nigeria’s 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) have adopted the Act (Invictus Africa, 2024), this failure creating legal disparities. For example, states like Kano and Katsina have not adopted it due to religious and cultural opposition. Certain provisions, such as recognizing marital rape or banning early marriage, are viewed as conflicting with Sharia law (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019). This refusal, based on religious and cultural reasons, results in legal gaps that leave women in non-domiciled states without the necessary legal protection. Furthermore, Invictus Africa (2024) indicated that 50.7% of Nigeria's population lacks awareness of the VAPP Act, and only 29% of those aware understand its provisions well. This shows a significant lack of public knowledge. The poor awareness limits the Act's potential impact, especially among vulnerable groups like rural residents, of whom only 42.9% are aware, and those with less education, who are less likely to know about the law (Invictus Africa, 2024). This demonstrates that loopholes in the VAP Act, with the current awareness efforts not effectively reaching the most vulnerable populations.

Systemic issues within the criminal justice system also obstruct proper enforcement. Oluwole and Akinwale (2019) highlighted problems like delays in prosecution and bribery among law enforcement officials. Other issues include inadequate police response, poor evidence collection, limited forensic capabilities, and lengthy judicial processes. Oluwole and Akinwale (2019) pointed out that underfunding, understaffing, and corruption complicate matters within the criminal justice system. Low conviction rates reflect these problems; for instance, Lagos State recorded over 11,000 domestic violence cases between 2019 and 2022, but fewer than 5% resulted in convictions (WARDC, 2022). Many survivors abandon their cases due to fear of retaliation, societal stigma, or lack of financial and emotional support during extended legal battles (Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019; Nigeria Watch, 2022; Invictus Africa, 2024). The lack of comprehensive data on Protection Orders in 19 states points to critical gaps in monitoring and accountability.

Prosecuting ritual killing cases in Nigeria is particularly complicated. Nigeria Watch (2022) noted that ritual killings present complex legal challenges. While ritual murder is a legal category inherited from British law, there is no specific federal law that clearly defines or criminalizes the acts associated with ritual murder (Owusu, 2024). Instead, these crimes are charged under general

criminal laws for murder, homicide, kidnapping, and assault (Usman, 2017; Anyaogu & Okpalaobi, 2017). The fact that ritual killings fall under broader criminal codes further exemplifies the ineffectiveness of the act. This reliance on inferred statutes rather than explicit laws complicates prosecution. Therefore, the absence of specific legislation enables offenders to avoid punishment.
The criminal justice system also suffers from severe underfunding, a lack of personnel, and widespread corruption, which together hinder effective investigation and prosecution (Chukwuma, Chris & Friday, 2022). For instance, the Nigerian Police Force faces severe funding shortages and lacks personnel to curb this criminality. This environment cultivates a sense of impunity among offenders, particularly when prominent individuals are involved (Dakuku, 2021). The legal proceedings are frequently prolonged and the existence allegations of suspects being released through corrupt practices. Cases involving politicians and their associates often drag on or collapse without convictions (Oni, 2022). These cases on these politicians often die natural deaths.

A unique challenge in Nigeria is the perceived spiritual dimension of ritual killings, making it hard for traditional legal systems to investigate and prove these cases in court (Nwakanma & Abu, 2020). The intricacies of preventing ritual killings stem from a lack of understanding of hotspots and likely offenders. For example, demonstrating that someone was incapacitated by a charm or that a mobile corpse had ties to a ritualist involves significant evidentiary obstacles (Makinde et al, 2020). This complexity, along with inadequate forensic expertise in law enforcement, significantly hinders the ability to achieve convictions (Usman, 2017; Nigeria Watch, 2022).

The limited effectiveness of the VAPP Act and the challenges in prosecuting ritual killings show that legal frameworks alone cannot solve deeply rooted social norms and systemic issues. Oluwole & Akinwale (2019) concluded that effective communication strategies are essential for preventing gender-based violence and supporting survivors. Without tackling the underlying societal resistance, insufficient resources, and corruption, even well-intentioned laws will struggle to secure justice and ensure the safety of women. Invictus Africa (2024) stresses the need to bridge the gap between legal provisions and the realities faced by Nigerians.

The following table provides a detailed overview of the VAPP Act's domestication and implementation status across various Nigerian states, highlighting key strengths and persistent challenges:

Table 1: VAPP Act Domestication and Implementation Status Across Nigerian States (as of 2024)

State/Region	VAPP Act Domestication Status	Noted Implementation Strength / Challenges	Key Issues/Comments
National	Enacted 2015 (Anyaogu & Okpalaobi, 2017; EVA Nigeria, 2015; Oyewole, 2016)	Uneven, inconsistent (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	50.7% Nigerians unfamiliar with VAPP Act (Invictus Africa, 2024).
Total States	33 out of 36 states + FCT (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Varying political will, financial resources, institutional mechanisms (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Low conviction rates (e.g., Lagos <5%) (Nigeria Watch, 2022; WARDC, 2022).
Kano	Not domesticated (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Lack of effective legal redress for survivors (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Religious/cultural opposition (marital rape, early marriage conflict with Sharia) (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019).
Katsina	Not domesticated (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Legal gap exploited by perpetrators (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Religious/cultural opposition (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019).

Lagos	Domesticated (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Relatively stronger institutions, dedicated agencies (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Over 11,000 domestic violence cases (2019-2022), but <5% convictions (Nigeria Watch, 2022; WARDC, 2022).
Ekiti	Domesticated (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Relatively stronger institutions, dedicated agencies (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Cited as leading example in implementation (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019).
FCT	Domesticated (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Relatively stronger institutions, dedicated agencies (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Cited as leading example in implementation (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019).
Kaduna	Domesticated 2018 (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Improved reporting, structured survivor support (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Stigma still deters victims from seeking justice (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019).
Oyo	Domesticated (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Launched Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019)	Reported cases jumped (132 in 2019 to 768 in 2020) after Act passage and sensitisation (Nigeria Watch, 2022; Oluwole & Akinwale, 2019).
Rural Areas	Varies by state	Low awareness (42.9% aware) (Invictus Africa, 2024)	Current awareness strategies failing to reach most vulnerable (Invictus Africa, 2024).
Sex Offenders' Registers	Established in 23 states (Invictus Africa, 2024)	18 integrated into GBV tracking systems (Invictus Africa, 2024)	Limited effectiveness in preventing repeat offenses (Invictus Africa, 2024).
Protection Orders	Lack of comprehensive data in 19 states (Invictus Africa, 2024)	Critical monitoring and accountability gaps (Invictus Africa, 2024)	Hinders judicial system effectiveness (Invictus Africa, 2024).
Mandatory Reporting	30 states have clauses (Invictus Africa, 2024)	15 lack penalties for non-compliance (Invictus Africa, 2024)	Reduces deterrent effect, inconsistency in prosecution rates (Invictus Africa, 2024).

5.0 Policy Recommendations and Intervention Strategies

Addressing the complex issue of gender-based violence in the form of ritual killings in Nigeria necessitates a comprehensive, multi-faceted, and coordinated approach. Oluwole & Akinwale (2019) emphasize that a multi-sectoral approach integrating media, government, civil society, and community efforts is needed. Interventions must target legal, social, economic, and cultural dimensions simultaneously to foster sustainable change and enhance women's security. The following table summarises the proposed policy recommendations and their expected outcomes, providing a clear roadmap for intervention:

Table 2: Proposed Policy Recommendations and Expected Outcomes

Recommendation Category	Specific Policy/Strategy	Expected Outcome(s)
Legal & Judicial Reforms	**1. Explicit Criminalisation of Ritual Killings:** Enact specific federal legislation defining and criminalising "money ritual murders" with harsher penalties and enhanced victim protection	Clearer legal framework, stronger deterrence, improved prosecution focus.
	2. Uniform VAPP Act Domestication & Enforcement: Intensive advocacy for all states to adopt and effectively implement the VAPP Act, addressing religious/cultural resistance	Consistent legal protection nationwide, reduced legal disparities.
	3. Strengthen Criminal Justice Capacity: Increase funding, training for police on ritual killing investigations, and forensic expertise.	Improved evidence gathering, higher investigation and prosecution rates.
	4. Enhance Judicial Efficiency & Accountability: Measures to expedite cases, combat corruption, and ensure accountability for influential perpetrators.	Reduced impunity, increased public trust in the justice system.
Awareness Campaigns	**1. Debunking Myths & Superstitions:** Public education campaigns to systematically challenge beliefs in "money ritual" efficacy, promoting rational thinking.	Erosion of harmful beliefs, reduced demand for ritual killings.
	2. Promote Ethical Values & Hard Work: Campaigns to counter "get rich quick" syndrome, glorification of unmerited wealth, and foster moral regeneration.	Shift in societal values, reduced motivation for illicit wealth.

	3. Strategic Media & Digital Engagement: Utilise diverse media and digital platforms for wide reach, mobilising public opinion, and encouraging reporting.	Increased awareness, empowered citizens, reduced stigma for survivors.
	4. Targeted Outreach: Design campaigns to reach vulnerable groups (rural, uneducated) with culturally sensitive messages.	Increased awareness and protection among high-risk populations.
Community-Led Initiatives	**1. Engage Traditional & Religious Leaders:** Actively involve influential leaders to integrate anti-ritual killing messages and promote human dignity.	Normative change from within communities, increased community buy-in.
	2. Community Sensitisation & Reporting Mechanisms: Support grassroots initiatives for awareness and confidential reporting (e.g., USSD apps).	Increased reporting, improved community vigilance and safety.
	3. Foster Social Cohesion: Strengthen community bonds and collective responsibility to deter and report suspicious activities.	Enhanced local security, stronger community resilience against crime.
Economic Empowerment	**1. Financial Inclusion & Access to Capital:** Prioritise policies for women's financial independence, including soft loans, microfinance, and Women Affinity Groups (WAGs).	Increased economic agency for women, reduced vulnerability to exploitation.
	2. Education & Skill Development: Invest in quality education and market-responsive skill acquisition for women and girls.	Improved employment prospects, enhanced economic security.
	3. Address Unemployment: Create formal employment opportunities and improve conditions in the informal sector for women.	Reduced economic desperation, fewer drivers for illicit wealth.
Multi-Sectoral Approach	**1. Coordinated Response Framework:** Establish and strengthen inter-agency coordination across government, CSOs, media, and communities.	Synergistic interventions, comprehensive addressing of complex issues.
	2. Engage Men as Allies: Promote initiatives that involve men in challenging gender stereotypes and fostering equitable gender norms.	Reduced patriarchal backlash, greater societal support for women's empowerment.
	3. Integrated Communication: Develop unified communication strategies that combine advocacy, community engagement, and policy messaging.	Consistent, impactful messaging, fostering collective action.

6.0 Conclusion

The troubling persistence of ritual killings in Nigeria is a serious form of gender-based violence. It stems from deep-rooted patriarchal norms, cultural myths, economic hardship, and failures in governance. This paper has highlighted how women become the main victims, treated as objects for illegal gain in a context of widespread poverty and unemployment. This situation reinforces gender inequalities and violates their basic rights. Although the VAPP Act represents an important legal advancement, its effectiveness is limited by poor implementation, lack of public knowledge, and challenges in enforcement, especially in a justice system affected by corruption and the belief in the spiritual nature of these crimes. Tackling this issue requires a clear strategy that includes legal changes to criminalize ritual killings, culturally relevant public education, cooperation with traditional and religious leaders, and economic support for women. This should be part of a coordinated effort across different sectors to protect women and uphold the value of every human life.

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