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'Go and Settle it at Home": Gender-Based Violence and Criminal Justice System Response in Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria

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Abstract
This study examined the experiences of victims of Gender-based violence within the criminal justice system and the institutional response mechanisms. Exploratory research design was employed and 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with victims of GBV selected through snowball sampling. In addition, 15 key informant interviews were conducted with purposively selected key respondents comprising policemen, lawyers, and NGO/social welfare workers in Ibadan Metropolis. Data collected were content-analysed. Findings indicated that interactions between victims and the criminal justice system had been marked by fear, stigma, mistrust, and bureaucratic red tape, factors that prevented cases from being reported or resulted in the withdrawal of cases. The importance of social and cultural aspects like the presence of patriarchal beliefs, acceptability of domestic violence, and victim blaming was also found to be very significant in terms of reporting the instances of GBV. The presence of institutional mechanisms to respond to gender-based abuse was noted but were hampered by limited resources. The study concludes that the response of the criminal justice system to GBV in Ibadan Metropolis is influenced by the interplay of structural, institutional, and socio-cultural variables. The study suggests improvement in the capacities of law enforcement and judicial institutions, among others.

Keywords*:* Gender-Based Violence, Criminal Justice System, Victimisation, Institutional Response to GBV, Socio-Cultural Norms

Introduction

One of the most recurrent violations of human rights is the phenomenon of gender-based violence (GBV). The United Nations views GBV as any harmful action against an individual based on her/his sex, and such actions usually grounded in unbalanced power relations that are deeply rooted gender roles (Akudolu *et al.*, 2023). Globally, statistics indicate that more than two-thirds of

women have encountered intimate partner violence or other types of physical and sexual abuse during their life (Ikuteyijo, Hilber, & Fatusi, 2024).

Apart from being common, the ramifications of GBV are both far-reaching and diverse. First, GBV has negative consequences on individuals, their dignity, their families, and also brings about numerous socio-economic and psychological repercussions. Studies show that those affected usually suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, social stigma, and low productivity (Mshelia, 2021). In this regard, the criminal justice sector is meant to be very instrumental in tackling GBV because it is designed to guarantee reporting, investigating, prosecuting, and punishing offenders, as well as ensuring the safety of victims. However, scholars have maintained that the efforts of the criminal justice sector in tackling GBV are not enough around the world because of certain limitations including victim-blaming, evidentiary problems, institutional biases, and poor enforcement capabilities (Adelakun, 2024).

Gender-Based Violence continues to be one of the prevalent issues affecting the criminal justice process across the globe, not only because of the impacts of GBV on the victims but also due to the impact that it poses on the institutional and social order. As much as gender-based violence is increasingly recognized at an international level as both a human rights violation and a criminal offense, the issue continues to persist within various societies in both developed and developing countries. The prevalence of GBV has continued to attract concern on the part of academics, policymakers, and human rights activists in Nigeria. Even though several legal and policy frameworks aimed at addressing GBV such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act and other institutions have been put in place, the effectiveness of these interventions has been inconsistent (Izzi & Umunna, 2020; Sheidu, 2025). Studies have indicated that the continuation of GBV in Nigeria can be attributed to deficiencies within the criminal justice process such as inadequate investigations, poor prosecutions, ineffective victim protection, and poor coordination of law enforcement institutions (Lawal, 2025; Archibong *et al.*, 2025).

The problem of underreporting of GBV-related cases has also attracted the interest of scholars. Several studies have noted that women do not make complaints of the crimes committed against them to law enforcement agencies because of various reasons like the shame associated with disclosing such matters, mistrust of the system, and cultural issues discouraging reporting of GBV-related cases (Aborisade, 2024; Balogun, 2021). In situations where women report the cases, it is common for them to face a lot of difficulties in getting their cases investigated due to various bureaucratic hurdles, including insensitive handling of cases by the police and delays in investigations (Lawal, 2025; Sheidu, 2025). Researchers have found that poor training among members of the police force, the absence of specialized investigative divisions, insufficient forensic facilities, and inefficient prosecution mechanisms form some of the significant obstacles towards managing GBV cases effectively (Adelakun, 2024; Archibong *et al.*, 2025). Besides, the influence of external social factors, such as

the presence of traditional leaders in GBV investigations, may cause GBV cases to bypass official justice systems (Adelakun, 2021).

However, in the case of the Southwestern part of Nigeria, specifically urban areas like Ibadan metropolis, there are other issues associated with gender violence and the criminal justice system. Since Ibadan is considered one of the largest metropolises in Nigeria, there are varying socio-cultural settings that could affect not only the prevalence of GBV but also the way criminal justice institutions handle the situation. Studies conducted show that despite the presence of laws against GBV in Nigeria, the actual implementation of these laws is often lacking due to various reasons (Ikuteyijo, Hilber, & Fatusi, 2024). Even though many scholars have been paying increasing attention to gender-based violence in Nigeria, most of the literature available today has concentrated largely on issues like the prevalence and causes of GBV, as well as the social and cultural factors that contribute to gender-based violence. There have been very few empirical investigations into the effectiveness of the criminal justice process in addressing GBV in specific urban locations like Ibadan, making information about how the criminal justice system responds to GBV cases, very scarce. Yes, it is important to analyze the influence of institutional practices and procedural issues on the ways gender-based violence cases are handled as this may provide insights on the ways of implementing policy reforms and ensuring better justice for the victims. Consequently, this study explored gender-based violence and criminal justice response in Ibadan metropolis. Specifically, the study examined victims' experiences and perceptions of the criminal justice system and assessed the procedures and practices used by the criminal justice system in handling gender-based violence cases.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical perspective that guided this study is Michel Foucault's power and social control theories. They provide an excellent basis to understand the effects of institutional actions on social actions and the creation and maintenance of social hierarchies. Foucauldian theory is a critical framework created by the French philosopher Michel Foucault that examines how power, knowledge, and social institutions shape human behaviour and control society. Unlike traditional views that see power as something a government or ruler simply holds and forces onto people, Foucault argued that power is diffuse, relational, and woven into everyday life.

According to Foucault (1977), power is neither centralized nor exercised by particular people; rather, it consists of complicated networks within society that regulate behavior and establish hierarchies in social institutions and practices. Foucault developed a concept of 'disciplinary power', which operates through social institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, and the penal justice system (Foucault, 1977). Through observation and normalization, disciplinary power controls and disciplines behavior. The criminal justice system in Nigeria is consistent with Foucault's theory regarding the nature of power as the system of institutional control. Institutions of law enforcement, courts, and corrections

regulate behaviors considered criminal and dictate penalties. Adopting Foucault's theory enables understanding of how institutions might perpetuate societal bias through patriarchal ideology and thus impact the way the victims of GBV and the perpetrators themselves are treated (Dikwal-Bot, 2025; Rizzotti, 2026). For example, police forces could choose to minimize the significance of an act of domestic violence and even encourage a solution outside the official criminal justice system. Power and knowledge, according to Foucault, are the central concepts to be used in discussing the problem of GBV. Since knowledge, such as what kind of behavior qualifies as violent, who can become a victim, and which behavior should be classified as criminal, is constructed socially and mediated through institutional practices, it can be asserted that the issue of GBV is a product of patriarchal power relations in society. Power, therefore, influences the construction of knowledge and thus determines whether GBV will be challenged or maintained.

Also, according to Foucault, the concept of power goes beyond repression to include productivity in the sense that it brings about standards, conducts, and structures (Foucault, 1977). The interaction between gendered norms in the family, community, and institutions along with law mechanisms in Nigeria creates conditions under which GBV occurs and is combated. Application of Foucault's theoretical framework to the study of GBV in Ibadan provides insights into the relationship between societal norms and criminal justice procedures with respect to GBV cases. From the perspective of this theory, the role played by patriarchal ideology within institutions has an impact on the process of GBV reporting, investigations, and punishment. This theory shows that dealing with GBV cannot be achieved without changing the institutional processes, attitudes, and relations. Graham Treharne and Nairn (2017) had earlier applied Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, to deconstruct practices within schools to show how they create certain gendered ways of being.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a **qualitative design approach**. The research was conducted in Ibadan Metropolis. Ibadan was chosen for the investigation because it provided a wide spectrum of experiences and perspectives, which is valuable for qualitative exploration of GBV and criminal justice responses. Ibadan is also notable for its well established institutional structures, including active police commands, gender desks, court systems, and social welfare agencies. These institutions regularly engage with GBV cases, making them ideal sources of information regarding criminal justice processes, enforcement challenges, and institutional capacities.

The target population comprised individuals who were directly involved in or affected by gender-based violence within the study area. These included a) **victims of gender-based violence,** both those who have reported incidents to authorities and those who have not, b) **police officers** handling GBV-related cases, particularly from gender desks and investigative units, to capture institutional practices and challenges in enforcement, c) **legal practitioners,**

including prosecutors and defense lawyers, to understand case handling, evidence management, and legal interpretation of GBV statutes, and d) **NGO and social welfare workers** involved in GBV support, to provide perspectives on victim assistance, advocacy, and coordination with formal institutions.

This varied demographic population ensures that the study considered various views on GBV, given the combination of the experience of victims, the institutional process and the implementation of policy. The involvement of both the victims and the institutions allowed for identification of weaknesses, best practices and the areas that need reforms.

A combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling were employed to select respondents. Purposive sampling targeted participants with specific roles in the criminal justice system or GBV support services, such as police officers, legal practitioners, and judicial officers. Snowball sampling was used primarily for victims of GBV, as identifying survivors can be challenging due to stigma, confidentiality concerns, and underreporting. Initial participants referred other victims who met the study criteria, thereby expanding the sample while maintaining ethical considerations and participant safety.

The study included a total of thirty **participants**, including fifteen victims of gender-based violence (including both those who reported and those who did not), five police officers from gender desks and investigative units, five legal practitioners/prosecutors, and five NGO/social welfare workers.

The study utilized qualitative **sources of data** namely **In-depth interviews (IDIs)** conducted with victims and institutional actors to gather detailed personal narratives and professional perspectives, and **Key informant interviews (KIIs)** held with police personnel, lawyers, and NGOs to explore institutional procedures, challenges, and policy implementation.

Data collected were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Considering the sensitivity of the issue of gender-based violence, strict ethical procedures were employed in conducting the research in order to ensure both the well-being of the participants and validity of the findings.

Results

This section reports the findings of the study.

Victims' Experiences and Perceptions of the Criminal Justice System

Findings from victims, law enforcement officials, legal personnel, and NGO workers suggest that there is a mixture of both positive and negative perceptions about the justice system. While there is recognition among the informants that formal agencies such as the police gender desk, Ministry of Justice, and other NGOs have taken steps in dealing with gender-based violence cases, victims generally express dissatisfaction with the effectiveness, accessibility, and fairness of the system. The information gathered indicates that experiences with the criminal justice system have been characterized by several factors including delay, withdrawal of cases, stigma, poverty, and informal settlements. Consequently, the level of confidence that victims can have on the criminal

justice system is relatively low. These are reported in three main themes, namely (i) Effectiveness and Responsiveness of Criminal Justice System, (ii) Trust, Fear, and Victim Withdrawal, and (iii) Accessibility Barriers.

Perceived Effectiveness and Responsiveness of the Criminal Justice System

Under this theme, findings show that there is ambiguity among the victims as regards the efficacy of the criminal justice system in dealing with GBV cases. While several institutional actors highlighted the constant improvements and collaborations within the system, there is a general feeling among victims that the system operates slowly, inconsistently, and mainly reacts in response to serious physical abuse cases, rather than psychological or sexual abuse cases. The system also takes action only after considerable damage has occurred, and even then, the end result is not necessarily one that involves any form of prosecution.

A participant shared that:

> I reported my husband after he beat me badly, but the police told me to go and settle with my family first. Nothing serious happened after that. *(IDI/Female/32 years/Married Trader/Victim)*

This account depicts the informal nature and hesitancy on the part of some institutions that are involved in the criminal justice process regarding pursuing cases of domestic violence. Through this account, it can be seen that rather than pursuing the matter legally, the individual was encouraged to seek a family compromise, thus diminishing the credibility of her claim. This shows that some institutions may prefer reconciliation over prosecution, especially in cases of domestic violence.

Another participant added that:

> They take GBV cases, but sometimes it depends on who is involved. If the person has influence or money, the case becomes weak. *(IDI/Male/28 years/Social Worker)*

The above narrative indicates how socioeconomic class and its relation to access to justice plays a role here. According to the participant, the outcome of any GBV case may be determined by the social and economic standing of the perpetrator in question.

The criminal justice system also often considers domestic violence to be a private affair, rather than an actual crime that should receive some kind of attention. This is reflected in the experience of a participant thus:

> I went to report my neighbour who beats his wife almost every night, but they told me I should not interfere in family matters. I was surprised because I thought the police were supposed to act. *(IDI/Male/36 years/ Social Worker)*

Another participant shared that:

> When I reported, they wrote my statement but nothing happened for months. They kept saying the investigation is ongoing, but I never heard anything again. *(IDI/Female/26 years/ Secretary/Victim)*

These narratives raise questions relating to delays and absence of feedback in the criminal justice system. According to the individual who shared this experience, it seems that his case has remained inactive as no further feedback or action was taken against the offender.

Another participant also shared her experience:

> In most cases we see, police intervention depends on how serious the injury is. If it is not severe, they tell victims to go home and settle it. *(KII/Female/42 years/NGO)*

This approach highlights that the response to GBV incidents is largely dependent on the degree of physical proof presented. Lesser physical injuries may be dealt with informally rather than strictly, hence leading to inconsistent responses in addressing GBV cases.

Trust, Fear, and Victim Withdrawal from Formal Processes

This theme discusses the psychological and sociological factors hindering victim participation in the criminal justice process. This is characterized by a victim's fear of being stigmatized, retaliated against, and not being believed. For this reason, the majority of the victims end up withdrawing their cases after making a report to the authorities. Some also have doubts regarding the confidentiality of institutions, especially in cases of sexual and domestic assault.

A participant shared thus:

> I reported the rape case, but later my family told me to withdraw it because people were already talking. *(IDI/Female/22 years/Victim)*

The view above highlights how social stigmatization and pressure from the family can sometimes take precedence over formal systems of justice. While the victim pursued formal justice mechanisms at first, social pressures led to the case being withdrawn. Fear of social gossip and reputation is seen as often more powerful than justice.

The dynamics of fear and intimidation also work to prevent further legal processes. Victims often face the threat of harm after reporting the crime to the relevant authorities. In the narrative of a victim reported below, the reaction from the authorities suggesting caution rather than protection only serves to create an environment of insecurity for the victim.

According to the participant:

> I was afraid to continue the case because the man threatened me after I reported him. The police said I should be careful. *(IDI/Female/29 years/Tailor/ Victim)*

Another participant noted that:

> After I reported him, people in my compound started treating me differently. Some even said I was trying to destroy my marriage. I just decided to stop going to the police station. *(IDI/Female/28 years/Hairdresser/ Victim)*

This account shows the impact of society's judgment and perception in determining whether or not a person is going to go through the process of formal legal channels.

Findings further reveal the significant impact of family on the victim's choice to withdraw from the criminal justice procedures, emphasizing the preservation of honour and maintaining the good name of the family within the community. Hence, victims may give up on pursuing justice despite their initial intentions.

This is captured in the account of this respondent thus:

> My family told me to withdraw the case so that it will not bring shame to us. They said we should handle it privately instead. (*IDI/Female/24 years/Victim)*

Accessibility Barriers and Institutional Constraints

This theme focuses on the structural or procedural barriers that prevent victims from receiving justice. Financial difficulties, lack of legal representation, bureaucratic delays, and ignorance of avenues for reporting cases have been cited as barriers by the participants in this study. NGO workers and legal experts

noted that there are many people who do not even know how to go about reporting cases to the relevant authorities. This notion is corroborated in the account of a victim thus:

> I didn't know where to go after the incident. I just stayed at home because I don't have money for lawyer or transport. *(IDI/Female/30 years/Unemployed/Victim)*

Another participant shared that:

> Many people don't even know where to report GBV cases. Some think you must go straight to court, others think it is only the police that handle it. *(KII/Female/35 years/Counsellor/NGO Worker)*

Another participant further noted:

> In most cases, victims come once or twice, but when they see delays or money issues, they stop coming. *(KII/Female/38 years/NGO Officer/GBV Response Organization)*

Such accounts indicate problems within the institution such as procedural delay and cost that prevent continuous engagement with the process of seeking justice. The inefficiency of the justice system can indirectly cause the victim's withdrawal from the case management process.

Financial burden makes the continuity of participation in the criminal justice process impossible. The financial burden that victims or their families have to shoulder, moving around and visiting the police station makes it hard for them to pursue their cases.

A participant noted that:

> I did not continue the case because I don't have money for transport to keep going to the station. Each time they call me, I have to borrow money to go. (*IDI/Female/30 years/Apprentice Tailor/April 2026)*

Findings generally showed that victims lack adequate knowledge of the reporting procedures with respect to GBV, leading to reluctance to report GBV cases whenever they occur. Findings also revealed that there are certain shortcomings and challenges in the criminal justice system including inconsistency in dealing with GBV cases as well as the uncooperative attitude of some law enforcement officers.

Assessment of the Procedures and Practices Used by Police and Courts in Handling Gender-Based Violence Cases

Findings revealed that despite the presence of a procedural framework for GBV cases, the process is hindered by various challenges such as evidentiary problems, congestion, withdrawal of the victims and informal dispute resolutions. Findings are discussed under three main themes namely Reporting and Case Intake Procedure, Investigation and Evidence Collection Practices, and Prosecution Procedures and Dynamics.

Reporting and Case Intake Procedures

The results showed although there are formal structures put in place to facilitate reporting, victims report encountering inflexibility, documentation requirements, and lack of guidance during the reporting stage. The officers usually need written evidence, medical examinations, and witnesses before registering a case.

A police officer explained:

> Most gender-based violence cases are first reported at the station before being transferred to the gender desk. At the point of reporting, we are required to take written statements from the complainant and advise them to obtain medical reports where physical injury is involved. But many of our victims often arrive emotionally charged and not in a position to give us all the details at once. In such situations, we usually ask them to come back with witnesses or evidence to facilitate the opening of a case. But this may result in the victim's frustration because of the difficulty in following the process. *(KII/Male/41 years/Police Officer)*

This response demonstrates the formal approach adopted in GBV cases by the police, which places greater importance on document production and preparation of evidence during the initial stages of filing a report. Although the need for such processes is important for procedural accuracy and adherence to law, it usually does not correspond with the emotional and psychological state of victims during the period of filing of their report. The demand that they should come up with a prepared statement, a medical report or witness at the very onset of the process can serve as a barrier to further pursuit of the judicial process.

A participant noted that:

> I went to report a case of assault after my partner hit me during an argument. At the station, I was asked to write

> a statement and explain everything in detail. I was also asked whether I wanted the case to be treated as "family matter" or a criminal case. The officer told me that if it is a family issue, it might be easier to settle it without going to court. I felt confused because I had gone there for protection, but it sounded like I was being encouraged to settle. Eventually, I left without continuing the case. *(IDI/Female/30 years/Married Trader/Victim)*

The narrative brings to light the fact that, during early police contact, subtle means of channelling victims away from formal mechanisms towards informal ways are possible even as they desire formal mechanisms of redress. The labelling of GBV as a 'family issue' raises some doubts that can be used against victims as they report. Rather than proper procedures, victims are given choices which suggest compromise.

Another participant noted that:

> I accompanied my sister to report domestic violence. At the station, the officers told her to "go and settle at home first" and come back only if it continues. They did not open any formal file that day. They said cases like that are common and usually resolve themselves after family intervention. We left feeling like nothing serious would be done unless the situation escalates further. *(KII/Male/45 years/ Social Worker)*

Such reactions demonstrate how domestic violence gets normalized during reporting due to the tendency for policemen to downplay all cases of domestic violence to seem like common marital disputes. Failure to open a case on grounds that it is a domestic dispute implies that the concept of thresholds is applied during reporting of GBV cases.

Investigation and Evidence Management Practices

Findings indicate that there are some challenges, which include inadequate resources, poor witness cooperation, and negotiation processes within the domestic setting.

A legal practitioner observed:

> The next stage involves reporting the case, followed by investigations to collect evidence and interview the parties involved in compiling the case file. However, in reality, investigations are delayed due to insufficient

> forensics assistance, reluctant witnesses, and lack of victim's documentation. In cases of domestic abuse, some families intervene and demand a settlement of the matter without waiting for completion of the investigation process. When this happens, the case may not proceed to court unless the offence is considered very severe or publicly exposed. *(KII/Female/50 years/Prosecutor/Ministry of Justice)*

The response above shows how the process of investigation may be influenced by the limits imposed by the institutions themselves, as well as socio-cultural intrusion. The lack of a proper forensic and investigation framework is an obstacle for law enforcement agencies in establishing the necessary evidence to file a case in court. Also, when families get involved in negotiating settlements informally, it reflects on how GBV cases such as domestic violence are not considered offenses, but personal matters requiring negotiation.

A participant had this to say:

> After I reported a case of physical assault, the police asked me to go for a medical report immediately. I went to the hospital, but I had to pay for the examination before I was attended to. When I returned to the station with the report, they said the case file would be opened only after they had contacted the suspect. I later found out that the suspect had already been warned, and the case became difficult to pursue because he had "settled" with some officers informally. I eventually stopped following up because I felt the process was not transparent. *(IDI/Female/28 years/Civil Servant/ Victim)*

This response reveals loopholes in evidence management and investigation process. While medical records play an important part in proving GBV cases, the financial requirement associated with such a record can act as a burden, and thus discourage the victim. Similarly, the usual informal settlement procedure affects the investigation process negatively.

Another participant responded thus:

> During the investigation of a rape case I reported, the police collected statements from both parties but did not preserve some key evidence I mentioned, such as the clothes I was wearing during the incident. I was later told that because the items were not submitted immediately, they could no longer be used. I felt like

> the investigation depended more on what was easily available rather than what actually happened. The case eventually slowed down and I stopped receiving updates. *(IDI/Female/21 years/Victim)*

This account is indicative of lack of forensic knowledge and the proper preservation of evidence. Inadequate handling of physical evidence in the first phase of the investigation weakens the case of GBV. In addition, it portrays how technicalities in procedures can be used against victims, especially those ignorant of the need for evidence.

Another participant responded thus:

> I have seen cases where police officers rely heavily on verbal statements without conducting thorough investigations. In some cases, they do not visit the scene of the incident or interview independent witnesses. Instead, they encourage both parties to "settle" if the matter is considered domestic. This makes many people lose confidence in reporting cases because they feel nothing serious will be done. *(KII/Male/52 years/NGO worker)*

As stated above, there is little depth with respect to field investigation in certain GBV cases. The tendency to decide cases only on verbal evidence rather than investigating the evidence makes the cases much less credible. Furthermore, preferring to settle in informal settings further encourages the belief that GBV is a private issue.

Another participant noted that:

> I worked with a victim whose case involved repeated physical abuse. The police initially documented the case properly, but there was no follow-up investigation for weeks. Witnesses were not contacted, and the suspect was not arrested. By the time action was taken, the victim had already withdrawn due to pressure from family members. The delay in the investigation clearly affected the outcome of the case. *(KII/Female/38 years/NGO Case Worker)*

Findings generally indicate that delay in investigations can have an impact on the progress of cases of GBV. Delays usually result in the weakening of the case, and withdrawal of cases by victims.

Prosecution Processes and Case Resolution Dynamics

This section explores the process through which GBV cases are managed within the judicial process up to completion. There is enough evidence to show that many of these cases never make it into a full trial stage because of withdrawals by the victim or out-of-court settlements.

This assertion is corroborated by an NGO worker thus:

> In many of the cases we follow up, once matters move from the police to the court level, victims sometimes change their minds due to pressure from family members or the perpetrator. Some also withdraw because they feel the process is too long, expensive, or emotionally draining. Even when prosecutors are ready to proceed, they may be constrained by the quality of evidence in the case file. As a result, several cases end in out-of-court settlements or are struck out for lack of diligent prosecution. *(KII/Female/38 years/NGO Worker)*

This narrative shows how vulnerable the outcomes of GBV cases can be in view of the fact that the availability of institutions alone may not guarantee justice. Since most of the victims drop their cases because of external social and psychological pressure, the prosecution process becomes increasingly difficult. Issues concerning evidence add to the complications faced by the courts in handling such cases. In this case, the prosecution stage becomes highly significant in GBV cases that are bound to fail.

Another participant noted that:

> I accompanied a client during a prosecution procedure, but nothing seemed to work out after many months. The court used to adjourn the case either due to lack of witnesses or complainants. Finally, the case was withdrawn after the victim stopped showing up in court. This was because the victim had lost her patience with the entire situation. *(KII/Female/36 years/NGO Case Officer)*

This account also shows that long trials are one of the main reasons for case fatigue amongst the victims. The delay of cases and involvement of the victim to maintain the continuity of the case are also loopholes in prosecuting GBV cases.

Results also show that GBV cases are often affected by weak evidence, judicial discretion, and family pressures. The practice of settling out of court is

a reflection of the reality that there are challenges in making a conviction in GBV cases because of inadequate evidence and other pressures on the judicial process.

This is shared by a participant thus:

> In light of the cases that I have handled in the courtroom, most GBV cases never make it through to the trial process. There are those cases that end up being reconciled without going into trial, particularly if family members intervene to seek for reconciliation. There are also cases where the evidence is not substantial enough to lead to conviction. *(KII/Male/48 years/Legal Practitioner)*

Furthermore, the failure of the criminal justice system to protect victims in the prosecution process becomes a hindrance in their process of getting their case solved. Failure to implement the proper security procedures such as keeping the victim away from the accused was also reported to lead to a truncation of many GBV cases.

According to a participant:

> I tracked the development of a rape case from prosecution until the suspect got bail and the proceedings dragged on for a long time. The victim felt unsafe to attend court proceedings as the suspect had been around her in the same environment most of the time. She stopped going to court regularly and the proceedings slowed down greatly. *(KII/Female/24 years/NGO Worker)*

Discussion

The findings suggest that victims believe the criminal justice system to be inherently biased, inefficient, and socio-economically skewed against poorer individuals. Rich offenders can escape the accountability process in some cases, whereas poorer victims suffer from delays, lack of faith or pressure to withdraw their cases. These findings conform to those of Umeobika and Ejimofor (2024) and Emeka and Anushiem (2023), who observe that survivors of crime generally in Nigeria often lose their faith in the justice system because of delays, corruption, and non-survivor-centric mechanisms in place. In addition, Aladesanmi, Abraham and Kintum (2025) highlight how justice and legal services in Nigeria are highly stratified along class lines and economic clout. Following the perspective offered by Foucault, it could be argued that the justice system works as a mechanism for producing 'truth' through the means of power/knowledge relations. As pointed out by Foucault (1980), institutions

control what constitutes the legitimate truth by defining mechanisms, procedures and evidential standards. As such, victims who cannot fulfill the institutional criteria are rendered invisible in the process.

GBV incidents were found to progress from reporting at the police station, followed by investigation, mediation, and finally, referral to court processes. On the other hand, the process is characterized by informal settlements, as well as withdrawals based on family coercion, evidence demands, and bureaucratic inefficiency. This aligns with the findings of Faidah (2022), which indicate the obstacles faced in punishing perpetrators of domestic violence to include the legal factor itself, the factor of law enforcement officers and the factor of facilities. Additionally, poor investigative processes and lack of measures to protect victims lead to lower chances of successful prosecutions. Within Foucault framework, police and court systems serve as disciplinary tools for surveillance, but they also become gatekeepers of legitimacy. As Foucault (1977) notes, disciplinary institutions determine the credibility of victims and the truthfulness of the narratives. Therefore, the failure of survivors to present evidence beyond their abilities leads to exclusion from the process of defining truths.

Conclusion

It is clear from the findings that to understand GBV and the response of the criminal justice system, it is important to consider a broader perspective of society beyond the victims themselves and analyze the role played by social institutions in generating power dynamics among individuals. The accounts of victims make it clear that reporting violence is largely influenced by fears of stigma and economic pressures.

Although the criminal justice system is structured to manage GBV cases, it functions in such a way that it tends to create barriers to justice seekers. Slow investigation processes, stringent evidence demands, and alternative dispute resolution techniques all contribute to the erosion of the victim's confidence in the criminal justice system. Furthermore, socio-cultural institutions also play a vital role in the determination of both victimization and silence. Male dominance, discouragement of complaints related to domestic issues from being reported outside the domestic environment, and the stigma associated with being a survivor are some of the cultural aspects that have been noted to contribute towards under-reporting. The issue of economic insecurity also compounds the problem since it makes it difficult for victims to leave their abusive environments.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made: First**,** the Nigeria Police Force should enhance their Gender Desk Unit. In addition, there must be streamlined ways of handling victimized people such that they don’t experience secondary victimization when reporting to authorities. Second, there should be constant training of prosecutors in managing evidence in GBV cases, especially if no physical evidence is available. Third, participation of traditional rulers, community leaders, and religion must be promoted.

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