

The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP): Legal Provisions, State-Level Adoption, and the Effectiveness of Nigeria's Response to Gender-Based Violence

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1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a long-standing system of oppression that affects people all over the world.¹ It is particularly common in developing countries, with Nigeria ranking among the countries with the highest rates of gender-based violence. The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey of 2013 reported that 28 per cent of women aged 15 to 49 had experienced physical or sexual violence, and 11 per cent had suffered physical violence in the year before the survey.² Five years later, the DHS 2018 survey found that the figure had risen to 31 per cent, and that nearly half of married women in the South-South had suffered domestic abuse.³

Similarly, a national study made by UNICEF found that 24.8 per cent of female respondents between the ages of 18 and 24 had been sexually abused before reaching the legal age of 18, while 10.8 per cent of male respondents had the same experience.⁴ Among the frequently reported types of gender-based violence in Nigeria are harmful customs such as female genital mutilation (FGM); unpleasant widowhood ceremonies, child marriage; forced marriage; physical assault; sexual

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¹ Ojemeiri Karl Airaaje, Aruaye Afeye Obada and Aonover Eric Msughter, 'A Critical Review on Gender Based Violence in Nigeria: Media Dimension' (2023) 3 Middle East Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 9.

² National Population Commission - NPC/Nigeria and ICF International. 2014. Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2013. Abuja, Nigeria: NPC/Nigeria and ICF International, 304.

³ National Population Commission - NPC/Nigeria and ICF. 2019. Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2018. Abuja, Nigeria, and Rockville, Maryland, USA: NPC and ICF.

⁴ National Population Commission of Nigeria, UNICEF Nigeria, and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Violence Against Children in Nigeria: Findings from a National Survey, 2014 (UNICEF 2016) 3.

abuse including rape, harassment, incest, and defilement; trafficking in women and girls for prostitution and/or forced labour; economic violence; and emotional and psychological violence.⁵

A careful examination of the Nigerian Penal Code and Criminal Code Act reveals that the law, as it is, knew nothing of the many ways violence is lived and experienced in the daily realities of the common man.⁶ Marital rape was no offence; assault was reduced to a narrow physical act; rape was restricted to an offence that could only be committed by a man and experienced by a woman; and harmful practices were left untouched by the law's lack of legal protective measures.⁷ The consequence of these legal loopholes was a legal framework that carried the form of law without its substance. It was against this background that the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act of 2015 was enacted.⁸ The Act marked a deliberate shift in recognising and adopting novel approaches to providing an improved legal framework that criminalised what had long been considered normal practice, and outlawed what custom had allowed over the years.⁹

However, it is observed that despite the introduction of the VAPP Act 2015, its promise of reform has proved greater than its performance as the Act remains a federal law of limited reach dependent on state adoption through domestication, and where it has been adopted, enforcement is weak.¹⁰ Hence, the defects of the law as it is (i.e. *lex lata*), which the VAPP Act sought to address were not wholly cured but merely displaced. This essay examines the VAPP Act from three interrelated

⁵ Westminster Foundation for Democracy, *The Impact of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act and Related Laws in Nigeria: Report of a Research Commissioned* (March 2021) 20.

⁶ Cheluchi Onyemelukwe, 'Legislating on Violence against Women: A Critical Analysis of Nigeria's Recent Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015' (2016) 5 *DePaul Journal of Women, Gender and the Law*, 7.

⁷ Adetutu Deborah Aina-Pelemo, Olusola Joshua Olujobi and Ebenezer Tunde Yebisi, 'A Socio-Legal Imperative of Domestic Violence Prohibition in Africa Vis-a-Vis Nigerian Legal Structure for Sexually Abused Women' (2023) 12 *F1000Research*, 8-9.

⁸ Onyemelukwe, *Legislating on Violence against Women*, 4.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ WFD, *Impact of the VAPP Act Report*.

vantage points. The first is its substantive provisions, which represent a deliberate departure from the restrictive framework of earlier criminal laws by codifying a comprehensive catalogue of offences that expanded the definition of violence beyond physical assault to encompass novel forms of gender-based violence such as emotional, psychological, and economic abuse. The second vantage point is the pattern of state-level adoption, which is a process shaped by Nigeria's federal structure and the varying political, cultural, and institutional contexts across its thirty-six states, producing an uneven legal landscape in which the Act's protections remain hampered by territorial jurisdictional limitations. The third vantage point is the effectiveness of Nigeria's broader response to gender-based violence, which is assessed through indicators such as rising levels of public awareness, persistent cultural and social stigma, and significant enforcement gaps that hinder victims' access to justice.

Taken together, these perspectives allow the essay to situate the VAPP Act within the larger struggle against gender-based violence in Nigeria. The essay makes use of case studies, prosecution records, and scholarly analysis to argue that the VAPP Act's potential remains unrealised without systemic reform. The essay therefore contends that bridging the gap between the law's normative promise and the reality of implementation requires harmonised enforcement mechanisms, institutional strengthening, and a commitment to Nigeria's obligations under regional and international human rights law.

2. Legal Provisions of the VAPP Act

The VAPP Act 2015 is a federal law that applies directly in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.¹¹ For the Act to be enforceable in other states, each must domesticate the Act through its House of

¹¹ Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 (Nigeria), section 47.

Assembly.¹² The object of the VAPP Act as outlined in the ‘*explanatory memorandum*’ of the Act is to eliminate violence in both private and public life, prohibit all forms of abuse, provide effective remedies for victims, and punish offenders. Structurally, the Act contains 48 sections divided into six parts covering offences, court jurisdiction, victim support, regulatory authority, consequential amendments, and the interpretation section. The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) is the regulatory institution charged with the responsibility of administering the provisions of the VAPP Act and collaborating with relevant stakeholders, including faith-based organisations.¹³ This institution fulfils this legal duty by investigating cases that fall within the scope of the violence prohibited by the Act, rescuing victims, and maintaining the sexual offenders register.¹⁴

One of the novelties introduced by the VAPP Act in its provisions is its expanded definition of violence beyond the narrow scope provided by the Criminal Code Act and the Penal Code. Rape, for example, previously defined under the Criminal Code as unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman, excluded marital rape, limited penetration to the vagina, and recognised only female victims.¹⁵ The Penal Code had similar restrictions, permitting sexual intercourse with one’s wife once she had attained puberty without consideration to specifying where the line has to be drawn to prevent other forms of GBV.¹⁶ Other forms of sexual assault and male victims were ignored.¹⁷ Consequently, the enactment of the VAPP Act redefined rape to include penetration of the vagina,

¹² Olumide Adebayo, ‘VAPP Act under Review’ (*Placng.org* 10 May 2022) <<https://placng.org/Legist/vapp-act-under-review/>> accessed 30 August 2025.

¹³ VAPP Act 2015, section 44.

¹⁴ National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), ‘Violence against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Department – NAPTIP’ (*National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP)*) <<https://naptip.gov.ng/violence-against-persons-prohibition-department/>> accessed 30 August 2025.

¹⁵ Criminal Code Act, Cap C38, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004, section 357.

¹⁶ Onyemelukwe, *Legislating on Violence against Women*.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

anus, or mouth by any part of the body or object, without consent or where consent is coerced, threatened, obtained by fraud or substances, or through impersonation of a spouse.¹⁸ Marital rape is explicitly recognised.¹⁹ Victims can now be of any gender and perpetrators can be male or female.²⁰

The Act also criminalises spousal battery, stalking, female genital mutilation, harmful widowhood practices, and other emerging forms of abuse.²¹ This broad understanding of violence introduced by the VAPP Act allows the Act to extend protection beyond physical harm; it now recognises psychological, sexual, verbal, economic, and culturally rooted abuses.²² Practices once tolerated under custom, such as female genital mutilation and harmful widowhood rites, are now punishable.²³ Newer forms of abuse, including stalking, spousal battery, and attacks with harmful substances, are also addressed, creating a comprehensive framework for the protection of victims.

The VAPP Act also provides remedies beyond criminal sanctions.²⁴ Courts can issue protection orders to safeguard survivors and grant compensatory awards.²⁵ Referral and rehabilitation mechanisms further support victims.²⁶ This marks a shift from the traditional criminal laws' approach that focused primarily on punishing offenders.

Even so, the scope of the Act remains circumscribed by constitutional realities. As a federal enactment passed through the National Assembly, the VAPP Act applies directly only within the

¹⁸ VAPP Act 2015, section 1.

¹⁹ Onyemelukwe, *Legislating on Violence against Women*.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ VAPP Act 2015, sections 19, 17, 15 and 20.

²² Lady Adaina Ajayi and others, 'Gendered Violence and Human Rights: An Evaluation of Widowhood Rites in Nigeria' (2019) 6 *Cogent Arts & Humanities*.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Grace Onwuka, 'Domestic Violence in Nigeria: What the Law Really Says and How Victims Can Get Help – Brickmans Law' (*Brickmans-law.com* 19 August 2025) <<https://brickmans-law.com/domestic-violence-in-nigeria-what-the-law-really-says-and-how-victims-can-get-help/>> accessed 30 August 2025.

²⁵ VAPP Act 2015, sections 30 to 35.

²⁶ Onwuka, *Domestic Violence in Nigeria*.

Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. For its provisions to operate in the states, they must be domesticated by the respective state Houses of Assembly.²⁷ This jurisdictional limitation has meant that, in practice, the protections and innovations of the Act are unevenly available across Nigeria's 36 States.²⁸ The significance of this uneven implementation, and its implications for access to justice on Gender-Based Violence cases nationwide will be considered in the next section.

3. The VAPP Act in Practice: How Do Patterns of State Adoption Reflect the Effectiveness of Nigeria's Response to Gender-Based Violence?

The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP Act) of 2015 is a federal law enacted by Nigeria's National Assembly to eliminate all forms of violence against persons in private and public life, prohibit gender-based violence, and provide protections, remedies, and compensation for victims.²⁹ In Nigeria's 36 states, the Act only takes effect if domesticated through state-specific legislation passed by the state House of Assembly and assented to by the governor.³⁰ This domestication is crucial to adapt the federal law to state jurisdictions, ensuring enforceability by state courts, police, and agencies.³¹ Without it, victims of gender-based violence in states that are yet to domesticate the Act will be forced to rely on the narrow existing criminal laws such as the Penal Code or the Criminal Code Act, as the case may be (which applies in the Northern and Southern region of Nigeria respectively), which offer limited protections against modern forms of

²⁷ Olumide Elajuku-wilson, 'Tackling Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria: Assessing the Impact of the VAPP Act across States – Brickmans Law' (*Brickmans-law.com* July 2025) <<https://brickmans-law.com/tackling-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-in-nigeria-assessing-the-impact-of-the-vapp-act-across-states/>> accessed 30 August 2025.

²⁸ Elajuku-Wilson, Impact of the VAPP Act across States.

²⁹ VAPP Act 2015, Explanatory Memorandum.

³⁰ This process applies to various federal legislation, see Alfred Iortyaver, Esq., 'A Call for Domestication of the Climate Change Act 2021 in the 36 States of the Federal Republic of Nigeria - LawPavilion Blog' (*LawPavilion Blog - No1 legaltech resource in Africa* 28 September 2023) <<https://lawpavilion.com/blog/a-call-for-domestication-of-the-climate-change-act-2021-in-the-36-states-of-the-federal-republic-of-nigeria/>> accessed 30 August 2025.

³¹ *ibid.*

violence including marital rape and economic abuse.³² As of today, the alterations made by states in the domestication process of the VAPP Act highlight tensions between federal standards and state autonomy. While the federal law provides a model, states exercise discretion in adoption, affecting the availability of a better criminal legal framework that can afford victims of Gender-Based Violence quality protection.

As of 2025, 35 out of Nigeria's 36 states have domesticated the VAPP Act or equivalent laws, with the FCT applying the federal version directly.³³ The domestication process has accelerated in recent years, driven by advocacy from civil society, international organisations, and the federal government.³⁴ However, a survey by the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) in May 2025 revealed that while progress is evident, awareness remains low, with half of Nigerians unaware of the VAPP Act, thereby highlighting the need for continued orientation efforts to increase the awareness of Nigerians across the 36 states on their legal rights and how to protect and enforce it.³⁵ The only state lagging is Kano, where the Act has yet to be passed, primarily due to cultural, religious, and political resistance.³⁶

By July 2025, thirty-five out of the thirty-six states of the Federation had domesticated the VAPP Act or its equivalent, leaving Kano alone in default. Katsina had enacted the Act on 24 December

³² Toyin Ojora Saraki, 'Action against Gender-Based Violence: Full Domestication of VAPP Act by All States in Nigeria' (*Toyin Ojora Saraki*) <<https://toyinsaraki.org/blog/action-against-gender-based-violence-full-domestication-of-vapp-act-by-all-states-in-nigeria/>> accessed 30 August 2025.

³³ 'Malala Fund Urges the Nigerian Government to Protect the VAPP Act - Nigeria' (*ReliefWeb* 11 September 2024) <<https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/malala-fund-urges-nigerian-government-protect-vapp-act>> accessed 30 August 2025.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ News Agency of Nigeria, 'Survey: Half of Nigerians Don't Know VAPP Act - News Agency of Nigeria' (*News Agency of Nigeria* 27 May 2025) <<https://nannews.ng/2025/05/27/survey-half-of-nigerians-dont-know-vapp-act/>> accessed 30 August 2025.

³⁶ Hafsat Bello, 'Kano Ministry of Women Affairs Vows to Implement VAPP Law' (*Daily Post Nigeria* 7 January 2025) <<https://dailypost.ng/2025/01/07/kano-ministry-of-women-affairs-vows-to-implement-vapp-law/>> accessed 30 August 2025.

2023, but by March 2025, the measure had not been gazetted, and the process of domestication remained incomplete until then.³⁷ Malala Fund reported in September 2024 that 35 states have adopted the Act, urging amendments and proper implementation to build on this progress.³⁸ For instance, an evaluation by the Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies (IPSS) in 2024 indicated that 25 states have fully domesticated the Act, while Ekiti and Lagos have related laws, and six states are in various stages of the process.³⁹

While domestication of the VAPP Act is a critical first step, effective enforcement remains a significant challenge. Surveys, such as one conducted by Invictus Africa and cited by the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) in May 2025, have revealed low levels of public awareness about the VAPP Act, hindering its impact.⁴⁰ A lack of comprehensive data further obscures the true picture of enforcement, as specific prosecution figures are difficult to obtain. Hajiya Binta Bello, the Director-General of NAPTIP, was reported to have said that the agency had secured 36 convictions in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), including two life sentences, from over 3,000 gender-based violence reports received, highlighting the existing gaps in the system.⁴¹ The Partners West Africa Nigeria VAPP Tracker offers valuable information on the domestication status and dates for various states. For example, Abia State assented to the Act in 2020, Adamawa State in 2021, and

³⁷ Emmanuel Egobiambu, 'Katsina Domesticates Violence against Persons Prohibition, Child Protection Laws' (*Channels Television* 23 December 2023) <<https://www.channelstv.com/2023/12/24/katsina-domesticates-violence-against-persons-prohibition-child-protection-laws/>> accessed 1 September 2025.

³⁸ Nankwat Dakum Mbi, 'Malala Fund Urges the Nigerian Government to Protect the VAPP Act' (*Malala.org* 10 September 2024) <<https://malala.org/news-and-voices/malala-fund-urges-the-nigerian-government-to-protect-the-vapp-act>> accessed 1 September 2025.

³⁹ Ipas Nigeria Health Foundation, 'An Evaluation of the Implementation of the Violence against Persons Prohibition Act/Law in Nigeria' <<https://ipasnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/An-Evaluation-of-the-Implementation-of-the-VAPP-Law-in-Nigeria-compressed.pdf>> accessed 30 August 2025.

⁴⁰ NAN, Half of Nigerians Don't Know VAPP Act (*News Agency of Nigeria* 27 May 2025) <<https://nannews.ng/2025/05/27/survey-half-of-nigerians-dont-know-vapp-act/>> accessed 30 August 2025.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

Gombe State in 2022, according to the tracker.⁴² These disparities in enforcement and awareness underscore the ongoing need for sustained efforts in advocacy, public education, and resource allocation to ensure the VAPP Act's full and equitable implementation throughout Nigeria.

While most states domesticate the VAPP Act with minimal changes, some amend provisions to align with local politics, culture, or religious norms, leading to significant variations in scope and protections. Among state-level laws, the Lagos State Prohibition against Domestic Violence Law of 2007 is widely regarded as advanced and predates the federal VAPP Act.⁴³ It criminalises domestic abuse, provides civil procedures to handle domestic violence events, and protects all victims, whether women, men, or children.⁴⁴ It applies to both married and unmarried families and clarifies that domestic violence may be committed by any household member.⁴⁵ This law has been a model for other states, offering comprehensive remedies like protection orders and compensation.⁴⁶

In contrast, the Ekiti State Gender-Based Violence (Prohibition) Law builds on the Lagos State law and the VAPP Act.⁴⁷ It addresses violence against all genders and defines gender-based violence broadly, covering physical, mental, and sexual harm, threats, coercion, deprivation of liberty, and acts that inhibit human rights.⁴⁸ Ekiti has supplemented this with the Domestic Violence Protection Order, and the 2020 Sexual Violence against Children Compulsory Treatment

⁴² 'VAPP TRACKER' (*Partners West Africa Nigeria*) <<https://www.partnersnigeria.org/vapp-tracker/>> accessed 30 August 2025.

⁴³ EI Nwogugu, *Family Law in Nigeria. Third Edition.* (Hebn Publishers 2014).

⁴⁴ Aina-Pelemo, Olujobi & Yebisi, Domestic Violence Prohibition in Africa.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Aina-Pelemo, Olujobi & Yebisi, Domestic Violence Prohibition in Africa.

⁴⁷ David Iyanuoluwa Anifowose, 'The Role of the Government and Citizens in the Fight against Gender Based Violence in Ekiti State' (*ResearchGate* 10 November 2020)

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345682262 THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT AND CITIZENS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN EKITI STATE](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345682262_THE_ROLE_OF_THE_GOVERNMENT_AND_CITIZENS_IN_THE_FIGHT_AGAINST_GENDER_BASED_VIOLENCE_IN_EKITI_STATE)> accessed 30 August 2025.

⁴⁸ Aina-Pelemo, Olujobi & Yebisi, Domestic Violence Prohibition in Africa.

and Action Care Law. These laws provide penalties for injury, coercion, and forced ejection from homes, making it one of the more robust implementations.⁴⁹

However, Cross River and Ebonyi States illustrate narrower approaches.⁵⁰ Cross River's law, enacted before full VAPP domestication in 2021, applies only to women and limits domestic violence to physical force within the home, excluding broader forms like economic or psychological abuse.⁵¹ Ebonyi focuses on familial or marital relationships and excludes male victims, reflecting a gender-specific lens that limits inclusivity.⁵² Enforcement mechanisms also differ; Ekiti provides a victim fund and specialised courts, but such features are absent in Cross River and Ebonyi, leading to implementation gaps.⁵³

The question now is: where does this leave us? The uneven adoption of the VAPP Act across Nigerian states casts doubt on Nigeria's true commitment to addressing gender-based violence. Some states use the Act as a basis to expand remedies and broaden protections. Others, however, limit the Act by narrowing definitions of GBV-related offences and excluding vulnerable groups. As a result, the legal framework becomes fractured, with the promise/aim of the VAPP Act only partly fulfilled. This occurs because the adoption of the Act through domestication varies among states, leaving victims of GBV dependent on territorial jurisdictional limits. Furthermore, the law's effectiveness relies less on its original intent and more on whether individual states are willing to implement its provisions.

⁴⁹ Anifowose, GBV in Ekiti State

⁵⁰ Aina-Pelemo, Olujobi & Yebisi, Domestic Violence Prohibition in Africa.

⁵¹ *ibid* 11-12.

⁵² *ibid*.

⁵³ *ibid*.

3.1 State-Level Implementation: Comparisons, Successes, and Challenges

The existence and proper operation of long-lasting organisations and institutions in charge of law enforcement are necessary for the laws to be executed as intended; as is the case with many Nigerian laws, their enactment and assent do not guarantee that they accomplish their goals. A comparative evaluation of state implementations of the VAPP Act shows stark contrasts. According to state data gathered and analysed by Ipas Nigeria Health Foundation in its report, 926 cases had been documented in 9 states and the FCT as of December 2022.⁵⁴ Of the 926 cases, 560 are still being prosecuted, 169 have resulted in convictions, and 252 are still being investigated.⁵⁵

In the Northeast geopolitical zone, Bauchi was the first state to domesticate the VAPP Act.⁵⁶ On April 30, 2021, UN Women, the UK Government, and the Bauchi State Government jointly unveiled the Costed Model Action Plan (CMAP) and established a technical and advisory committee to implement the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Law in Bauchi State.⁵⁷ Lagos exemplifies robust adoption, with inclusive laws, civil remedies, and effective enforcement. Lagos's 2007 law protects diverse victims and handled over 1,000 cases annually by 2023.⁵⁸

In 2021, Oyo State established a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) in accordance with the VAPP Act.⁵⁹ Following the Act's approval and more awareness, the number of reported cases grew from 132 in 2019 to 768 in 2020 alone.⁶⁰ In addition, Oyo state established a multi-sectoral SGBV

⁵⁴ Ipas Nigeria Health Foundation, 'An Evaluation of the Implementation of the Violence against Persons Prohibition Act/Law in Nigeria' <<https://ipasnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/An-Evaluation-of-the-Implementation-of-the-VAPP-Law-in-Nigeria-compressed.pdf>> accessed 30 August 2025.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ UN Women, 'Bauchi State in Nigeria Commits to Implementation of the VAPP Law' (*UN Women – Africa* 7 May 2021) <<https://africa.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2021/05/vapp-law-passed-in-nigeria>> accessed 30 August 2025.

⁵⁷ UN Women, Bauchi State Commits to VAPP Law

⁵⁸ Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency, *Annual Report 2023* (Lagos DSVSA, 2023) <https://lagosdsva.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ANNUAL-REPORT-2023.pdf> accessed 30 August 2025.

⁵⁹ Elajuku-Wilson, Impact of the VAPP Act across States.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

Response Team to plan programs.⁶¹ The result was that greater awareness and improved services for GBV victims helped to build confidence in leveraging the legal route provided through the various institutional and legal mechanisms to seek protection and prevent further violation of GBV victims' rights.

Also, Imo domesticated the VAPP Act in 2020 through civil society initiatives spearheaded by Alliances for Africa and the UN Spotlight Initiative.⁶² The State Committee on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls was established with assistance from the program.⁶³ The final assessment revealed improved survivor support delivery and a decrease in reported GBV-related cases. This illustrates how grassroots involvement and global support may hasten systemic transformation on GBV. Now, the important question that arises is what these varied modes of implementation by states across Nigeria reveal about Nigeria's overall response to gender-based violence cases.

It is observed that some states benefit from champions and civil society partnerships, supporting well-funded SARCs, whereas some other states suffer from political compromises and poor operational planning. These differences highlight how state-specific adaptations can either strengthen or undermine the VAPP Act's intent, producing uneven access to justice for GBV victims across Nigeria. States that successfully domesticated the VAPP Act often shared common strategies that facilitated adoption and partial effectiveness.⁶⁴ Key successes included having champions such as first ladies or NGOs to drive the process, meaningful engagement with stakeholders like religious leaders and traditional rulers, and collaboration with the media,

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² Elajuku-Wilson, *Impact of the VAPP Act across States.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Ipas Nigeria, *Evaluation of the VAPP Law.*

including the use of local languages, to educate the public.⁶⁵ Evidence-based advocacy, using GBV incidence reports, was crucial, alongside work plans and dedicated budgets, which helped smooth implementation despite processes often taking up to a year.⁶⁶ Abia's 2020 domestication, for example, was propelled by media campaigns and stakeholder workshops, leading to over 300 reported cases in 2022.⁶⁷ A 2022 Westminster Foundation for Democracy report on twelve states highlighted these strategies as critical in overcoming initial resistance in both Southern and some Northern states.⁶⁸

Challenges remain significant. Funding constraints hinder implementation, with many states lacking budgets for victim support or sexual assault response centres.⁶⁹ Misunderstandings of the law led some to view it as conflicting with religion, culture, or traditional gender roles, particularly in Northern states where Sharia interpretations clash with provisions on marital rape or FGM.⁷⁰ Political motivations sometimes resulted in compromised legislative procedures, such as in Oyo, where laws were passed as election promises without operational plans. Limited engagement from relevant agencies, including police and judiciary, slowed enforcement, particularly where laws were not adapted to state policies. Cultural resistance in Ebonyi and Cross River delayed full

⁶⁵ Ipas Nigeria, Evaluation of the VAPP Law.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 'POLICY BRIEF Overcoming the Limitations to the Implementation of the Abia State Violence Against Persons Prohibition Law' (February 2022), 11-12

<https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/policy_briefs_abia.pdf> accessed 31 August 2025

⁶⁸ Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 'POLICY BRIEF Overcoming the Challenges to the Effective Implementation of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act in the Federal Capital territory (FCT)' (February 2022) <https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/policy_briefs_abuja.pdf> accessed 31 August 2025.

⁶⁹ International IDEA 'Funding and Oversight for VAPP Implementation: A Parliamentary Response to Gender-Based Violence' <<https://www.idea.int/events/funding-and-oversight-vapp-implementation-parliamentary-response-gender-based-violence>> accessed 31 August 2025.

⁷⁰ Ipas Nigeria, Evaluation of the VAPP Law.

implementation, while a 2024 bill to repeal and reenact the federal VAPP Act raised concerns about potential weakening of protections.⁷¹

3.2 Impact and Lessons from State Domestication

The uneven domestication of the VAPP Act creates significant disparities in protections and remedies for victims, particularly women and girls. In states with robust implementation capacity of the VAPP Act's provisions, such as Lagos and Ekiti, victims benefit from comprehensive laws, higher conviction rates, and support services, including shelters and counselling. Contrarily, in lagging states like Kano or those with narrow laws, such as Cross River and Ebonyi, GBV victims face limited access to legal protection. Outdated legal frameworks leave offences such as psychological abuse or male victimisation unaddressed, perpetuating impunity and silencing GBV survivors.

This uneven adoption of the Act by states exacerbates health, economic, and psychological harms, as Brickmans Law's 2025 assessment notes, with survivors in non-adopting states experiencing delayed justice or case abandonment due to underfunded systems.⁷² In Cross River, a female-only focus excludes male victims, while Ebonyi's marital emphasis ignores broader GBV, reinforcing unequal opportunities and power imbalances highlighted by the Rising Child Foundation non-governmental organisation.⁷³ Nationwide, low awareness, half of Nigerians unaware per NAN

⁷¹ Olumide Adebayo, 'PLAC Publication: Bill Analysis of the VAPP Act Repeal and Enactment Bill, 2024' (Placng.org 3 October 2024) <<https://placng.org/Legist/plac-publication-bill-analysis-of-the-vapp-act-repeal-and-enactment-bill-2024/>> accessed 31 August 2025.

⁷² Elajuku-Wilson, Impact of the VAPP Act across States

⁷³ Hamza, 'JUSTICE for LAWAL HAFSOH YETUNDE: URGENT CALL to COMBAT TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (TFGBV) - Rising Child Foundation' (Rising Child Foundation - A NGO that focuses on using education as a tool to promote the local communities 11 June 2025) <<https://therisingchildfoundation.org.ng/2025/06/11/justice-for-lawal-hafsoh-yetunde-urgent-call-to-combat-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-tfgbv/>> accessed 31 August 2025.

2025, limits meaningful prosecutions to just 21 states.⁷⁴ This geographic disparity hinders coordinated responses, reliable data collection, and undermines Nigeria's responsiveness to gender-based violence cases.

Experiences from the domestication of the VAPP Act offer vital lessons for enhancing nationwide adoption and enforcement. Successful states like Ekiti and Lagos demonstrate that champions and inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement, including consultation with religious leaders, help address cultural resistance.⁷⁵ Dedicated funding and clear work plans are essential, with federal incentives such as grants linked to domestication timelines proposed to address budget gaps.⁷⁶ Media and data-driven campaigns in local languages have raised awareness and reporting, highlighting the need for scaled-up national programmes.⁷⁷ Harmonising legislation through federal guidelines on minimum standards could reduce disparities, thereby ensuring equitable protections.

Thus, the uneven domestication of the VAPP Act reveals a critical fault line in Nigeria's federalism. Legal protections against violence are no longer uniform but vary by geography, leaving victims' rights contingent on the state in which they reside. In progressive states, survivors access courts, shelters, and support services, while in resistant states, critical forms of abuse, including marital rape, psychological abuse, stalking, female genital mutilation, among others, remain unaddressed. This disparity undermines the federal objectives of the VAPP Act, perpetuates impunity, and exposes the limitations of relying solely on national legislation without coordinated state enforcement. Harmonisation through federal guidance and incentives is essential to ensure

⁷⁴ News Agency of Nigeria, Survey: Half of Nigerians Don't Know VAPP Act
<<https://nannews.ng/2025/05/27/survey-half-of-nigerians-dont-know-vapp-act/>> accessed 30 August 2025.

⁷⁵ Ipas Nigeria, Evaluation of the VAPP Law

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

equitable protections and consistent application across the federation. This sets the stage to interrogate the real-world impact of the VAPP Act, assessing how implementation gaps, enforcement disparities, and contextual adaptations shape the lived experiences of victims and the prospects for uniform nationwide justice.

4. Bridging Promise and Practice: Concluding Insights on Nigeria's Response to Gender-Based Violence

The provisions of the VAPP Act were never intended as abstractions but as tools of practical governance. Their uneven adoption across the federation reveals not only the persistent problem of state resistance to federal initiatives but also the absence of a coherent national strategy for gender justice in Nigeria. Nevertheless, a closer look at existing state practices shows that Nigeria is not starting from a vacuum. What exists on the implementation strategies of the VAPP Act, adopted by states such as Lagos and Ekiti, must be consolidated, strengthened, and spread if the promise/object of the Act is to be fulfilled.

To begin with, it must be observed that the domestication of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act by Lagos and Ekiti States, together with the establishment of institutions for its enforcement within their jurisdictions, affords clear proof that state-level action is indeed feasible within the structural limits imposed by our federal arrangement. What this experience reveals is that federalism does not, of necessity, constitute an insurmountable barrier to the realisation of national objectives in the protection of the individual against violence. The true challenge, therefore, lies not in possibility but in universality: how to ensure that what has been accomplished in two states is replicated across the federation. The imperative is to construct a framework of incentives, fortified by the subtle but effective instrument of intergovernmental pressure, by which

the domestication of the Act may be transformed from a rare exception into the established norm binding upon all constituent units.

Following from the foregoing, the establishment of Gender Desks within the police and the creation of specialised courts in certain states provide clear evidence that institutional innovation is not beyond the competence of our legal system. Their existence demonstrates a recognition, however modest, of the peculiar needs which the problem of gender-based violence imposes upon law enforcement and the judiciary. However, the inadequacy is to be found not in conception but in execution: these bodies suffer the twin afflictions of underfunding and a jurisdictional reach too narrow to meet the enormity of the challenge, as has already been adverted to in the preceding section of this paper. What is required is no half-hearted tinkering but the establishment of a national scheme of capacity-building, supported by federal allocations tied specifically and inviolably to the enforcement of laws on gender-based violence. It is only through such a deliberate and centrally coordinated effort that these bodies can be rescued from the fate of being mere ornaments of reform and made instead into functional instruments capable of fulfilling the true object and purpose of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act.

Additionally, the establishment of shelters and referral centres in Lagos and Ekiti, though isolated in their occurrence, provides incontestable proof that victim support mechanisms are not alien to the Nigerian context and can, in fact, function effectively within it. The difficulty, therefore, does not lie in the realm of feasibility, for feasibility has already been demonstrated; the real challenge lies in the extension and replication of these structures across the federation. What is required is a deliberate federal policy mandating every state to establish at least one shelter that is properly resourced, and where resources are thin, to encourage cooperation among neighbouring states in the provision of such facilities. Only through such a measure would the support for victims cease

to be a fortuitous privilege conferred by a few states and become a legally assured right available to all victims of gender-based violence throughout the country.

Finally, the intermittent campaigns mounted by non-governmental organisations and international partners illustrate, beyond dispute, the potency of public enlightenment in reshaping entrenched cultural attitudes. Yet what is glaringly absent is the consistency that only state ownership can secure. Sporadic interventions, however well-intentioned, fade with time, leaving the old habits to reassert themselves. A coherent and continuous programme, conceived and driven by government, is therefore indispensable. Such a programme ought to be anchored upon the schools that shape young minds, the traditional institutions that command social legitimacy, and the media outlets that give voice to the nation. Only by weaving these structures into a sustained framework of education, orientation and sensitisation can the transient impact of episodic campaigns against GBV be transmuted into a lasting social transformation.

What is revealed from this exposition and assessment is not a lack of models to address GBV-related cases in Nigeria but a failure of scale. The answer to Nigeria's uneven response to GBV lies less in creating new laws and more in extending the reach of existing ones, to ensure that what has worked in one state does not remain confined there. This is because the VAPP Act is effective only to the extent that it becomes part of a truly national architecture of justice.

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