Confronting Gender-Based Violence in Nigerian Higher Institutions: Creating Safe and Inclusive Campuses as an Imperative for Educational Transformation

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Abstract
Gender-based violence (GBV) could be describes as a pervasive issue that remains systematically under addressed and under-reported within the Nigerian higher education system. This menace, no doubt, is exacting severe consequences on student wellbeing, academic performance, institutional reputation, and national human capital development. This paper examines the nature, prevalence, drivers, and multi-dimensional implications of GBV across Nigerian tertiary institutions and used Feminist Theory, particularly gender power theory as articulated by Connell (2005)., Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and Communication Theory, particularly Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action, as theoretical frameworks. Drawing on empirical studies, the theoretical frameworks, and existing legal and policy instruments, the paper identifies sexual harassment, peer-based violence, and institutional silence as dominant manifestations of GBV, while locating their persistence in entrenched patriarchal norms, asymmetrical power relations, rapid institutional growth outpacing governance capacity, and chronically weak enforcement mechanisms. Adopting a communication-driven, multi-sectoral analytical orientation, the paper proposes strategic pathways toward safe and inclusive campuses, encompassing strengthened anti-GBV policies, anonymous survivor-centred reporting systems, gender-responsive curricula, technology-enabled advocacy, community partnerships, and transformational leadership commitment. The paper argues that most higher institutions in Nigeria, like Southern Delta University, Ozoro, Delta State, by virtue of their developmental trajectory, are uniquely positioned to institutionalise gender equity from inception, rather than as corrective retrofit. It concludes that creating safe campuses is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic prerequisite for sustainable higher education and national socio-economic development in Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Tertiary institutions globally, occupy a central and aspirational position in any nation's development architecture. Tertiary Institutions, especially, universities, are envisioned as pillars and drivers upon which knowledge, critical inquiry, social mobility and educational transformations are made and produced. But beneath this ideal, a deeply troubling reality in the form of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), could be seen. GBV could be said to have infiltrated and undermined most Nigerian academic environments thus threatening the safety, dignity, and educational growth and development of students and staff alike.

Globally, GBV also seems to be recognised as an issue affecting women and girls. World Health Organization (WHO), emphasises that approximately one in three women experience some form of physical or sexual violence during their lifetime, much of it perpetrated by intimate partners or persons in positions of power or authority (WHO, 2021). Violence against women in both physical and digital spaces continues to undermine women's safety, participation, and opportunities for self-actualisation in society (Nwammuo, 2013). In academic environments, this gender-based violence manifests particularly in troubling dimensions because it is frequently orchestrated and hidden by the hierarchical structures such as academic authority, entrenched cultural norms of silence, and institutional mechanisms that prioritise reputation over redress (Phiri & Abrahams, 2020; Wamue-Ngare et al., 2018). The consequences are far-reaching as survivors suffer psychological trauma, reduced academic engagement, and compromised health outcomes, while institutions risk reputational decay and lack of trust among students, staff, and international partners (Ezeaka, 2025).

Empirical studies confirm that GBV is prevalent within tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Research conducted across Abuja-based institutions some Nigerian Scholars recorded prevalence rates of 61.9% for physical

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violence, 56.4% for psychological abuse, and 25.3% for sexual violence among university students (Ojo et al., 2023). Findings equally suggest that emotional and psychological violence consistently emerge as the most dominant forms, often operating beneath the threshold of formal institutional attention (Udam, 2025). The phenomenon of sex-for-grades could be described as a coercive exchange whereby academic favours are contingent on sexual compliance. This has garnered significant media and policy attention but structural responses for tackling the menace remain inadequate (Owolade et al., 2021; Nwosu & Anierobi, 2022). Consequently, effective communication and empowerment strategies have become essential tools for promoting gender equality, protecting women's rights, and combating the culture of silence that often surrounds gender-based violence (Nwammuo, 2012).

Southern Delta University (SDU), Ozoro, was officially established in 2021. The University got renamed in 2024 as part of Delta State's broader educational transformation agenda. SDU represents an institution full of potentials but at a critical juncture. SDU evolved from a College of Agriculture through a Polytechnic to a full-fledged university status. The University has grown rapidly, expanding from 45 to nearly 90 programmes across multiple faculties (Delta State Government, 2024; DSUST Official Website, 2025). This trajectory of growth, while remarkable, also introduces heightened vulnerabilities, diverse and expanding student demographics, evolving administrative structures, and the risk that institutional policy development may lag behind enrolment expansion. SDU thus offers a particularly instructive case study of how emerging universities in Nigeria can and must embed gender safety from inception to achieve educational transformation.

This paper is structured as follows: it begins by clarifying key conceptual terms including GBV and safe and inclusive campuses; proceeds to examine the nature and dimensions of GBV in Nigerian higher institutions; identifies the principal drivers of GBV with reference to both macro-level socio-cultural factors and micro-level institutional dynamics; interrogates the legal and policy framework governing GBV in Nigeria; analyses the multi-dimensional implications of GBV; and concludes by proposing a comprehensive set of strategic pathways through which Nigerian universities, with SDU as a focal institution, can transform into genuinely safe, equitable, and inclusive learning environments.

2. Clarification of Concepts and Review of Literature

2.1. Gender-Based Violence: A Brief Overview

Gender-based violence is defined by the United Nations as any act of violence directed at an individual on the basis of their gender, encompassing physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm (UN Women, 2020). GBV includes sexual harassment and coercion, intimate partner violence, stalking, emotional manipulation, cyber harassment, and the systemic institutional practices that enable or perpetuate such acts (García-Moreno et al., 2019; Phiri & Abrahams, 2020). Critically, GBV is not simply about individual perpetrators and victims; it is a phenomenon embedded in power structures, cultural norms, and institutional architectures that normalise male dominance and female subordination (Connell, 2005; Jewkes et al., 2015).

In Nigeria's tertiary institutions, GBV manifests across a spectrum of behaviours: from overt sexual assault and the sex-for-grades phenomenon, to subtler forms of emotional coercion, exclusion, and the institutional marginalisation of survivors who report abuse. Understanding GBV as a spectrum, rather than a discrete category of extreme acts, is critical for developing comprehensive institutional responses (Nwosu & Anierobi, 2022; OpenAccess Research, 2025).

2.2. Safe and Inclusive Campuses

A safe and inclusive campus is one in which all members, regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, feel physically, emotionally, and psychologically secure, and are empowered to participate fully in academic and institutional life (Espelage et al., 2018; Palmary et al., 2021). Inclusion does not mean total absence of violence. It encompasses the active presence of equitable structures, gender-responsive pedagogies, and institutional cultures that affirm the dignity of every member. Gender-sensitive approaches to communication and institutional policies are therefore imperative for creating inclusive and safe educational environments that recognise and address the unique vulnerabilities of women and other marginalised groups (Nwammuo & Salawu, 2018).

This explanation aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education, and SDG 5, which mandates gender equality and the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls (United Nations, 2015). For SDU and comparable Nigerian institutions, creating a safe and inclusive campus is therefore simultaneously a human rights obligation, a development imperative, and a precondition for academic excellence.

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2.3. Literature Review: Empirical Context

Gender-based violence (GBV) in Nigerian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is well documented empirically, though findings vary considerably by these factors such as region, institution type, and methodology. Early foundational work by Iliyasu et al. (2011), established the scale of the problem in a study of 300 female university students in Kano, Northern Nigeria. Findings indicate an overall GBV prevalence of 58.8%, with physical, sexual, and emotional violence affecting 22.8%, 22.2%, and 50.8% of respondents respectively. The study also revealed that religious affiliation, ethnicity, indigeneship, marital status, campus residence, and faculty affiliation were significant predictors of victimisation. Subsequent regional studies have reported comparably high but variable rates. For instance, sexual violence prevalence in South-South Nigerian universities has ranged between roughly 18% and 52%, while Northern Nigerian universities have reported figures closer to 14–22% (as cited in the Northern Nigeria literature synthesis reviewed above). A more recent multi-zone study surveying 960 students, faculty, and staff across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones found psychological and emotional violence to be the most pervasive form, affecting well over half of student, faculty, and staff respondents, with sexual violence disproportionately affecting students relative to faculty and staff (International Journal of Professional Business Review, 2025). A 2025 University of Calabar study similarly found that GBV affects both male and female undergraduates, complicating narratives that frame it purely as a "women's issue" and reinforcing the value of a structural, gender-relational lens such as Connell's rather than a narrowly victim-category-based one (Udam et al., 2025).

Workplace-focused research reinforces that GBV in Nigerian HEIs is not confined to student populations. A cross-sectional study of 339 female university staff in Enugu, South-East Nigeria, found high rates of workplace incivility, bullying, and sexual harassment, with women on temporary or casual contracts significantly more likely to report bullying than those in permanent posts. This finding is directly consistent with Connell's structure of labour, in which precarious employment status maps onto heightened vulnerability to gendered mistreatment (Nwafor et al., as cited in the Enugu workplace GBV study).

A parallel body of research addresses institutional response rather than prevalence alone, and is directly relevant to this study's use of institutional theory. The 2019 BBC documentary "Sex for Grades: Undercover in West African Universities" functioned as an external shock that triggered coercive and normative isomorphic pressure across the Nigerian university sector, prompting policy reform efforts at institutions such as the University of Lagos and renewed legislative attention to the long-stalled Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Educational Institutions Prohibition Bill. An evaluation of the Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation's Gender Justice Project at the American University of Nigeria found that although the intervention produced policy innovation and increased stakeholder engagement, post-project awareness and confidence in safeguarding mechanisms subsequently declined, revealing persistent gaps in implementation, access, and cultural ownership of the policy. This pattern is consistent with the institutional-theoretic concept of decoupling between formal policy adoption and substantive practice. Complementary evidence from Obafemi Awolowo University found that even where anti-sexual-harassment policies exist, significant gaps remain in staff and student awareness and understanding of those policies, again suggesting that formal adoption has outpaced genuine institutionalisation.

Research on institutional silence and communicative barriers further substantiates the relevance of Habermas's framework. A mixed-methods study of first-generation universities in Southwestern Nigeria highlighted that institutional climate remains the strongest predictor of whether sexual harassment occurs and is reported and identified macro-level barriers to disclosure including weak institutional accountability structures and poorly resourced response systems. Research on sexual minority students in a Nigerian tertiary institution similarly documented institutional neglect, with policymaker and support-provider accounts exposing disconnects between formal institutional commitments and the lived, and often silenced, experiences of vulnerable students — an empirical illustration of what Habermas terms systematically distorted communication, in which structural power asymmetries foreclose authentic dialogue between marginalised groups and institutional authority.

Taken together, this body of literature establishes three things that justify the tripartite theoretical framework adopted in this study: first, that GBV in Nigerian HEIs is prevalent, multidimensional, and structurally patterned along lines of gender, employment status, and institutional hierarchy (supporting a Connellian structural analysis); second, that formal institutional policy responses frequently exist without translating into substantive protection, awareness, or trust (supporting an institutional-isomorphism/decoupling analysis); and third, that survivor and stakeholder voice is frequently constrained or absent from institutional processes, particularly for the most marginalised groups (supporting a Habermasian communicative analysis).

2.4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical perspectives upon which this study is anchored upon are the Feminist Gender and Power Theory (Connell, 2005), Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and Habermas's (1984) Theory of

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Communicative Action. They together provide a multi-layered lens for understanding gender-based violence in Nigerian higher institutions and for theorising the conditions necessary for transformation. Connell's Gender and Power Theory supplies the structural foundation for understanding GBV as rooted in patriarchal power arrangements rather than individual pathology. Institutional Theory illuminates how universities, as organisations embedded in broader social fields, reproduce and legitimise gendered hierarchies through their policies, cultures, and formal structures. Habermas's theory of communicative action underscores the central role of open, transparent, and participatory communication in challenging institutional silences and building cultures of accountability (Asemah, Nwammuo, & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2017). Together, these frameworks enable a comprehensive analysis that links individual experiences of GBV to structural determinants and communication-driven solutions. The theories are discussed as follows:

2.5. Feminist Theory: Connell's Gender and Power Theory

Connell's (2005) Gender and Power Theory provides the structural foundation for this study by locating GBV not as a series of isolated, individual transgressions but as a predictable outcome of an entrenched gender order operating within institutions. Connell theorises that gender relations in any social institution are organised around three interlocking structures: the structure of labour, which governs the gendered division of roles, tasks, and resources; the structure of power, which governs authority, decision-making, and control over institutional processes; and the structure of cathexis, which governs the emotional and sexual dimensions of relationships within the institution.

Applied to the Nigerian university context, this framework illuminates how GBV is sustained by the disproportionate concentration of men in senior administrative, professorial, and decision-making positions (structure of power), while women remain overrepresented in junior, non-tenured, or casually contracted roles, a pattern empirically linked to elevated GBV risk in the Enugu workplace GBV study (Agbaje et al., 2021) (structure of labour). These asymmetries create the conditions under which coercive and exploitative sexual relations between staff and students, or between senior and junior colleagues, become normalised rather than exceptional (structure of cathexis), consistent with the high sexual-violence prevalence rates documented across multiple Nigerian university studies (Iliyasu et al., 2011; Udam et al., 2025).

Central to this analysis is Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity which refers to the culturally idealised and institutionally rewarded form of masculinity that legitimises male dominance and subordinates alternative expressions of gender identity. Hegemonic masculinity helps explain why certain behaviours, such as the informal “settlement” of sexual harassment complaints, victim-blaming, or the trivialisation of coercive lecturer–student relationships (popularly termed “sex for grades” in Nigerian public discourse), persist as tacitly sanctioned campus norms rather than being treated as institutional failures. By foregrounding Connell's theory, this study positions GBV in Nigerian higher institutions as a structural and cultural phenomenon rooted in unequal gender relations, thereby justifying the need for transformation at the level of institutional structure and culture, rather than through disciplinary responses to individual perpetrators alone.

2.6. Institutional Theory: DiMaggio and Powell's Isomorphism

While Connell's framework explains the structural roots of GBV, it does not, on its own, account for the frequent disjuncture between institutional policy and institutional practice. This disjuncture is consistently observed in Nigerian universities, where anti-GBV policies, gender desks, and reporting mechanisms often exist on paper without translating into effective protection or redress for survivors. Institutional Theory, particularly DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of institutional isomorphism, provides an explanatory framework for this gap.

DiMaggio and Powell argue that organisations within the same institutional field tend to become structurally similar over time, not necessarily because such structures improve organisational effectiveness, but because organisations seek legitimacy within their institutional environment. Three isomorphic mechanisms are relevant here. Coercive isomorphism arises from external pressures, such as regulatory mandates from the National Universities Commission (NUC), donor requirements, or reputational risk. The wave of Nigerian university policy reform that followed the 2019 BBC “Sex for Grades” exposé is a clear empirical instance of coercive isomorphism, in which external media and legislative scrutiny, rather than internally generated institutional conviction, drove policy adoption. Mimetic isomorphism occurs when institutions, faced with uncertainty about how to effectively address GBV, imitate the policies and structures of peer or international institutions, sometimes adopting frameworks poorly adapted to local socio-cultural realities. Normative isomorphism stems from professionalisation processes, including accreditation standards and academic networks, that create pressure to establish visible structures such as gender committees or GBV policies as markers of institutional legitimacy and professionalism, regardless of their functional effectiveness.

This theoretical lens is particularly valuable for interrogating what institutional theorists describe as decoupling, which means the gap between formal policy and actual organisational practice. Empirical support for this pattern is direct: the evaluation of the Gender Justice Project's safeguarding policy at the American

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University of Nigeria found that stakeholder awareness and confidence in safeguarding mechanisms actually declined after initial policy reform, revealing persistent gaps in implementation, access, and cultural ownership (Adelakun et al., 2025). Similarly, an assessment of the anti-sexual-harassment policy at Obafemi Awolowo University identified continuing gaps in staff and student awareness and understanding of an already-adopted policy (Fasanmi & Seyama, 2024). These findings allow this study to move beyond simply documenting the existence (or absence) of GBV policies at Southern Delta University and similar institutions, toward a critical analysis of why such policies frequently fail to produce substantive protection for survivors: because they are often adopted for external legitimacy rather than embedded through genuine institutional transformation. This positions the study's argument for "educational transformation" as requiring more than policy adoption. It requires the internalisation of GBV prevention as a core institutional value rather than a symbolic or compliance-driven gesture.

2.7. Communication Theory: Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action

The third theoretical strand addresses the process dimension of institutional response. It explains how GBV is discussed, reported, silenced, or addressed within campus communicative structures. Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action distinguishes between the system, (which is the domain of institutional and bureaucratic logic governed by instrumental rationality, power, and self-interest), and the lifeworld (which is the domain of shared meaning, everyday interaction, and mutual understanding among students, staff, and the broader campus community).

Habermas's concept of systematically distorted communication is particularly instructive for understanding survivor silence in Nigerian higher institutions. Where power asymmetries exist between students and lecturers, or between junior and senior staff, genuine communication about GBV is structurally constrained meaning that survivors may be unable to report violations freely due to fear of retaliation, loss of academic standing, or institutional indifference. Empirical research identifying institutional climate as the strongest predictor of sexual harassment occurrence and reporting (Mapayi, Oloniniyi, Oginni, & Harrison, 2023), and documented institutional neglect of sexual-minority survivors whose experiences reach institutional authorities only indirectly, if at all (Mapayi et al., 2026), both illustrate this dynamic concretely. Silence, within this framework, should therefore not be read as absence of grievance but as evidence of communicative distortion produced by unequal power relations.

Habermas's normative construct of the ideal speech situation which is a communicative context free of coercion, in which all parties possess equal opportunity to speak, question, and be heard, offers a benchmark against which existing GBV reporting mechanisms in Nigerian universities can be critically evaluated. Additionally, Habermas's concept of the colonisation of the lifeworld, whereby bureaucratic and administrative logics override authentic dialogue, is useful for explaining institutional tendencies to prioritise reputational management and avoidance of scandal over genuine engagement with survivor experiences, a dynamic visible in the reactive, externally triggered nature of much Nigerian university GBV policy reform documented above.

This theoretical strand is especially significant given the study's methodological commitment to a collaborative, voice-centred approach to data generation. Habermas's framework provides the normative justification for centring authentic participant voice, rather than institutionally mediated or researcher-imposed narratives, as both a methodological and ethical imperative, consistent with the communicative ideal of undistorted, non-coercive dialogue.

2.8. Integration of the Three Frameworks

These three theories operate at complementary levels of analysis and, taken together, provide a comprehensive theoretical architecture for the study, one that is also borne out empirically in the literature reviewed above. Connell's (2005) Gender and Power Theory explains the structural and cultural roots of GBV, situating it within entrenched gender hierarchies of labour, power, and cathexis, hierarchies documented in Nigerian prevalence and workplace-victimisation studies (Agbaje et al., 2021; Iliyasu et al., 2011; Udam et al., 2025). DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) institutional theory explains institutional response and non-response, accounting for the persistent gap between formal anti-GBV policy and substantive protective practice through the lens of isomorphism and decoupling, a gap directly evidenced in Nigerian policy-evaluation studies (Adelakun et al., 2025; Fasanmi & Seyama, 2024). Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action explains the communicative conditions necessary for transformation, identifying the distorted power dynamics that silence survivors (Mapayi, Oloniniyi, Oginni, & Harrison, 2023; Mapayi et al., 2026) and articulating the normative conditions, an ideal speech situation under which authentic institutional change becomes possible.

Read together, this triangulated framework moves the analysis from diagnosis (why GBV persists) to institutional critique (why policy responses often fail) to a normative pathway for transformation (what genuine reform would require). This progression directly supports the article's central argument: that confronting GBV

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and creating safe, inclusive campuses in Nigerian higher institutions is not a matter of symbolic policy compliance, but an imperative requiring structural, institutional, and communicative transformation.

3. Nature, Prevalence and Dimension of GBV in Nigerian Higher Institutions

3.1. Prevalence and Patterns

The prevalence of GBV within Nigerian tertiary institutions has been documented with increasing empirical rigour over the past decade. A landmark study by Ojo et al. (2023) involving students across multiple tertiary institutions in Abuja recorded prevalence rates of 61.9% for physical violence, 56.4% for psychological abuse, and 25.3% for sexual violence, suggesting that GBV is not a marginal concern but a widespread, structurally embedded phenomenon. Udam (2025) similarly found that emotional and psychological violence were the most prevalent forms reported by university students across Nigeria, often occurring in the context of intimate relationships and staff-student interactions.

Research by OpenAccess Research (2025) on GBV patterns in Nigerian higher education institutions further confirmed that female students bear a disproportionate burden, with harassment from lecturers and senior male students identified as the most frequently cited forms of violence. These findings resonate with broader continental patterns: a systematic review by Wandera et al. (2017) across Sub-Saharan African universities found that between 10% and 45% of female students reported experiencing sexual harassment by staff or students. The differential impact on women, however, should not obscure the reality that male students, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students are also subjected to gender-based and related forms of violence within Nigerian campuses (Nwosu & Anierobi, 2022).

3.2. Manifestations of GBV in Nigerian Universities

GBV in Nigerian higher education manifests in three principal forms:

3.2.1. Sexual Harassment and the Sex-for-Grades Phenomenon.

The coercive exchange of sexual favours for academic grades, known colloquially as 'sex-for-grades' or 'academic sexual exploitation,' represents one of the most documented and widely condemned forms of GBV in Nigerian universities. This phenomenon exploits the fundamental power asymmetry between academic staff and students, wherein the former control access to grades, recommendations, and academic progress (Owolade et al., 2021). The BBC Africa Eye documentary of 2019, which exposed sex-for-grades practices at the University of Lagos and the University of Ghana, brought unprecedented public and regulatory attention to this issue, leading to policy reviews by the National Universities Commission (NUC) and several individual institutions. However, implementation of punitive and preventive measures remains inconsistent and inadequate (Ezeaka, 2025).

3.2.2. Peer-Based and Intimate Partner Violence.

Violence among peers, including dating violence, emotional manipulation, sexual coercion, and cyber harassment, constitutes an equally significant dimension of campus GBV that is frequently overlooked by institutional responses focused primarily on staff-student dynamics. Nwosu and Anierobi (2022) found that female students at Nigerian universities reported high rates of intimate partner violence, including coercive control and threats of academic sabotage by male partners. The proliferation of social media and digital communication platforms has introduced new vectors for harassment, including non-consensual sharing of intimate images, online stalking, and public shaming campaigns directed at female students (Bamgbose, 2020).

3.2.3. Institutional Violence and Structural Complicity.

Perhaps the most insidious form of GBV in academic settings is what scholars have termed 'institutional violence'. This refers to the systematic failure of university governance structures to respond adequately to reported cases of abuse, thereby creating an environment of impunity (Palmary et al., 2021). This includes victim-blaming attitudes among faculty and administrators, inadequate or non-existent formal reporting mechanisms, the absence of independent investigation panels, and the imposition of informal silencing pressures on survivors. Institutional violence is compounded by what Phiri and Abrahams (2020) describe as 'structural complicity,' whereby universities actively protect institutional reputation at the expense of survivor welfare.

4. Drivers of Gender-based Violence in Nigerian Higher Institutions

A nuanced understanding of the drivers of GBV is essential for developing targeted and effective responses. The persistence of GBV in Nigerian universities reflects the interaction of macro-level socio-cultural factors, meso-level institutional dynamics, and micro-level individual behaviours.

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4.1. Patriarchal Social Norms and Cultural Permissiveness

Nigeria's social fabric is deeply shaped by patriarchal norms that subordinate and subjugate women. Cultural systems and structures normalise male entitlement, and construct women's bodies as sites of social control (Jewkes et al., 2015; Ezeaka, 2025). These norms permeate the academic environment, shaping expectations about gender roles, acceptable behaviour, and the appropriate responses to reports of violence. Cultural constructions of female sexuality as a commodity, and male sexuality as inherently predatory and uncontrollable, provide cultural cover for perpetrators and discourage survivors from reporting abuse (Wamue-Ngare et al., 2018). Religious and traditional authority figures, whose influence remains significant in Nigerian public life, have at times reinforced these norms by framing violence against women as a consequence of female immodesty or disobedience, further entrenching victim-blaming attitudes within campus communities (Bamgbose, 2020).

4.2. Asymmetrical Power Relations

The hierarchical structure of academic institutions creates conditions in which power differentials are pronounced and potentially exploitable. The authority vested in academic staff over academic matters like grades, academic progression, recommendations, and scholarship opportunities, places students, particularly female students, in positions of considerable vulnerability (Connell, 2005; Owolade et al., 2021). Similarly, within peer relationships, gender and socio-economic inequalities can translate into coercive dynamics. The intersection of gender with other axes of marginalization, including ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic status, can intensify vulnerability to GBV for specific sub-populations of students (Palmary et al., 2021).

4.3. Rapid Institutional Growth and Governance Gaps

The rapid expansion of Nigerian universities and of SDU in particular, which has grown from fewer than 10 to nearly 90 academic programmes within a short institutional lifespan, creates conditions in which institutional capacity may lag significantly behind growth (Delta State Government, 2024; DSUST Official Website, 2025). The expansion of student populations, the establishment of multiple campuses, and the recruitment of large numbers of new staff create governance challenges that can leave GBV prevention policies underdeveloped, under-resourced, and poorly enforced. Ojo et al. (2023) found that institutional transitions and governance gaps are significantly correlated with increased GBV prevalence, as survivors lack recourse to established and trusted institutional mechanisms.

4.4. Underreporting, Stigma and Fear of Retaliation

The vast majority of GBV incidents in Nigerian universities go unreported, reflecting a complex interplay of social stigma, fear of retaliation, distrust in institutional processes, and lack of awareness about available support mechanisms. Gender-Based Violence in Nigerian Higher Education Study (2024) found that fewer than 20% of students who experienced GBV reported it formally, with the most commonly cited barriers being fear of victimisation, shame, concern about academic repercussions, and a conviction that institutional processes would not yield justice. This culture of silence is actively reproduced when universities fail to protect or support survivors who do come forward, thereby demonstrating to the broader campus community that reporting is futile and potentially dangerous (Phiri & Abrahams, 2020; Udam, 2025).

4.5. Weak Institutional Sanctions and Impunity

The deterrent function of institutional sanctions against GBV is severely undermined when perpetrators face minimal or no formal consequences. Research across Nigerian universities has repeatedly documented a pattern in which accused staff members are transferred to different departments, quietly retired, or subjected to informal cautions, rather than facing formal disciplinary proceedings (Nwosu & Anierobi, 2022; Ezeaka, 2025). This culture of impunity sends a powerful institutional signal that GBV is tolerated, effectively incentivising perpetration and discouraging reporting. It also reflects structural biases within disciplinary committees that may be composed predominantly of individuals who share professional loyalties or cultural assumptions sympathetic to accused colleagues.

4.6. Limited Gender Awareness and Inadequate Education

Gender awareness remains insufficiently embedded in the curricula, orientation programmes, and professional development activities of most Nigerian universities. Many students enter tertiary institutions without having received formal education on consent, gender equity, healthy relationships, or the legal definitions of sexual harassment and assault. Staff equally frequently lack training on recognising and responding to GBV disclosures, identifying early warning signs, and upholding survivor confidentiality (Wandera et al., 2017; Open Access Research, 2025). This educational gap creates conditions in which GBV can be systematically misrecognised, minimised, or attributed to personal failings rather than structural determinants.

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5. Legal and Policy Framework Governing GBV in Nigeria

Nigeria has developed a relatively comprehensive legal and policy architecture for addressing GBV, though significant implementation gaps persist between legislative intent and institutional practice.

5.1. Legislative Instruments

The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) of 2015 represents the most significant federal legislative advance in addressing GBV in Nigeria. The VAPP criminalises a range of acts including rape, sexual assault, female genital mutilation, forced eviction, depriving persons of their liberty, and harmful traditional practices, and provides for protection orders, mandatory reporting obligations, and rehabilitation services for survivors (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015). However, the VAPP has been domesticated by only a minority of Nigerian states, and its enforcement within tertiary institutions remains inconsistent (Ezeaka, 2025). Furthermore, the act's provisions are rarely proactively communicated to university communities, limiting awareness of legal rights and recourse.

At the state level, Delta State, home to SDU, has enacted the Delta State Sexual Offences Law, which criminalises sexual harassment in workplaces and educational settings. However, awareness of this legislation within academic communities, and enforcement capacity within state-level institutions, remains limited (Delta State Government, 2024).

5.2. Institutional and Regulatory Frameworks

The National Universities Commission (NUC) has issued guidelines on sexual harassment in Nigerian universities, mandating the establishment of institutional sexual harassment policies and response mechanisms. These guidelines require universities to establish complaint committees, provide counselling services, and ensure that perpetrators face formal disciplinary action (NUC, 2021). Similarly, the National Gender Policy (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2021) provides a broad framework for promoting gender equality across all sectors, including education.

Notwithstanding these frameworks, a systematic review of GBV responses in Nigerian universities by Nwosu and Anierobi (2022) found that fewer than 40% of surveyed institutions had operationalised sexual harassment policies, and that institutional awareness of NUC guidelines was low among both staff and students. For SDU, as an institution still constructing its administrative architecture, the imperative to domesticate, operationalise, and widely disseminate these frameworks is both urgent and strategically significant.

5.3. International and Regional Frameworks

Nigeria is a signatory to several international instruments that provide an overarching normative framework for addressing GBV, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), and the Beijing Platform for Action. These instruments impose obligations on state parties to eliminate GBV, ensure access to justice for survivors, and integrate gender perspectives across all institutions, including universities (UN Women, 2020; African Union, 2003). Nigeria's obligations under these instruments provide an additional layer of accountability for institutional action on campus GBV.

6. Implications of Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education

6.1. Academic and Intellectual Consequences

The academic consequences of GBV are severe and well-documented. Survivors frequently experience significant disruptions to their concentration, motivation and academic performance, resulting in reduced grade point averages, increased absenteeism, and elevated dropout rates (Espelage et al., 2018; Ojo et al., 2023). In an environment characterised by the sex-for-grades phenomenon, academic integrity itself is compromised, as grades cease to reflect genuine scholastic achievement and instead reflect coercive compliance or its refusal. The broader intellectual environment of the university is impoverished when talented students, particularly women, are driven out of or deterred from academic engagement by the fear of or experience of GBV (Wandera et al., 2017). These negative outcomes also hinder the development of employability competencies and job readiness expected of university graduates, ultimately affecting their future productivity and career prospects (Onyiorah, 2025; Onyiorah, 2026).

6.2. Psychological and Health Consequences

The psychological consequences of GBV are profound and enduring. Survivors frequently experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety disorders, disordered eating, and sleep disturbances (WHO, 2021; García-Moreno et al., 2019). The social isolation that frequently accompanies GBV, whether imposed by perpetrators seeking to limit survivors' support networks or self-imposed by survivors seeking to conceal their experiences, exacerbates these psychological consequences and limits access to support. In

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contexts where mental health services are inadequate or stigmatized, as is often the case in Nigerian universities, survivors may suffer for extended periods without professional support (Udam, 2025). Physical health consequences, including sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, and injuries, represent additional dimensions of harm.

6.3. Institutional and Reputational Consequences

For universities, the consequences of GBV extend beyond individual harm to institutional viability. Institutions with documented GBV problems, or that are perceived to have responded inadequately to reports of abuse, face reputational damage that can deter prospective students, reduce staff recruitment quality, undermine research partnerships, and limit international collaboration opportunities (Phiri & Abrahams, 2020). In the current era of social media, a single high-profile GBV incident that is mishandled by institutional authorities can generate sustained reputational damage that takes years to repair. For SDU, as an institution seeking to establish its reputation and attract students and partners, proactive commitment to campus safety is not merely an ethical consideration but a strategic institutional investment.

6.4. National Development Consequences

At the macro level, GBV in higher education represents a significant drag on Nigeria's human capital development. By limiting women's access to and success in tertiary education, GBV reproduces and entrenches the gender inequalities that constrain economic growth, democratic participation, and social development. Research consistently demonstrates that investment in women's higher education yields substantial development dividends, including improvements in public health outcomes, child nutrition and education, and economic productivity (United Nations, 2015; WHO, 2021). Every talented student driven out of higher education by GBV, or denied full engagement by the threat of it, represents a loss to Nigeria's collective intellectual and developmental potential.

7. Strategic Pathways for Creating Safe and Inclusive Campuses

Effective and sustainable GBV prevention and response in Nigerian higher education requires a comprehensive, multi-sectoral, and communication-driven institutional strategy. The following strategic pathways, informed by international best practice and contextualised for the Nigerian academic environment, offer a roadmap for transformation.

7.1. Strengthening Institutional Policy and Governance

A foundational precondition for campus safety is the establishment of clear, comprehensive, and widely disseminated institutional anti-GBV policies. Such policies must define prohibited conduct with precision, articulate formal reporting and investigation procedures, specify sanctions for substantiated cases, and provide explicit protections for survivors and witnesses from retaliation (Nwosu & Anierobi, 2022; NUC, 2021). For SDU, as an institution in the early stages of policy development, this represents an opportunity to adopt best-practice frameworks from the outset rather than seeking to reform entrenched practices.

Beyond policy formulation, institutional governance structures must be created to operationalise these policies. The establishment of Sexual Harassment Response Units (SHRUs), comprising trained counsellors, legal officers, student representatives, and independent investigators, is widely recommended as a best-practice institutional mechanism (Phiri & Abrahams, 2020; Palmary et al., 2021). These units should be structurally independent from the reporting lines that govern academic staff, ensuring that investigators are not subject to influence from accused parties. The Vice-Chancellor and Governing Council must demonstrate unequivocal zero-tolerance commitment, including through the consistent application of sanctions regardless of the seniority or academic reputation of accused individuals.

7.2. Transforming Reporting and Accountability Systems

The chronic underreporting of GBV in Nigerian universities demands radical transformation of reporting mechanisms to make them accessible, confidential, and trusted. This requires the implementation of multiple complementary reporting channels: a formal institutional complaint process with guaranteed procedural protections; anonymous reporting mechanisms that allow survivors to document incidents without immediate formal engagement; peer support reporting networks in which trained student advocates facilitate disclosures; and external reporting channels that provide recourse when institutional processes are distrusted (Gender-Based Violence in Nigerian Higher Education Study, 2024; Espelage et al., 2018).

Accountability for institutional responses is equally critical. Independent review panels, with external membership that reduces the risk of institutional bias, should oversee the handling of GBV complaints and conduct periodic institutional audits of GBV policies and practices. Publication of anonymised data on reported incidents, investigation outcomes, and sanctions can demonstrate institutional accountability and signal to potential perpetrators that impunity is no longer guaranteed (Wandera et al., 2017).

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7.3. Gender Education, Sensitisation, and Curriculum Integration

Education is among the most powerful and sustainable tools for preventing GBV by transforming the norms, attitudes, and behaviours that sustain it. Mandatory orientation programmes for all incoming students and new staff should address the definitions and legal implications of GBV, consent and respectful relationships, available institutional support mechanisms, and bystander intervention strategies (Wamue-Ngare et al., 2018; OpenAccess Research, 2025). These programmes should be designed using evidence-based behaviour change communication principles, rather than relying solely on information provision, to ensure attitudinal change.

The integration of gender studies, women's rights, and GBV content into general university curricula across disciplines, not only in social sciences and humanities but also in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programmes, ensures that all graduates develop gender literacy as a core competency (Palmary et al., 2021). For SDU's Department of Mass Communication, in particular, there is a significant opportunity to leverage communication expertise in designing and implementing campus-wide sensitisation campaigns that reach students across all faculties.

7.4. Survivor-Centred Support Services

Effective GBV response demands robust, accessible, and survivor-centred support services that address the full spectrum of survivors' needs. These include immediate psychosocial and counselling support provided by trained professionals; medical care, including sexual assault forensic examination by trained healthcare providers; legal advice and representation; academic accommodation to enable survivors to continue their studies without disadvantage; and safe spaces where survivors can access support without encountering perpetrators (García-Moreno et al., 2019; Ojo et al., 2023). The concept of the 'one-stop centre,' widely adopted in South Africa and other African countries, wherein survivors can access all necessary services at a single location, represents a model worthy of adoption by Nigerian universities (Abrahams et al., 2021).

Critically, support services must be designed around the principle of survivor agency: survivors must be empowered to make informed decisions about their own responses to GBV, including whether and how to engage with formal institutional or legal processes. Services that override survivor agency — however well-intentioned — risk causing additional harm and discouraging future engagement with institutional support systems (Palmary et al., 2021).

7.5. Leveraging Technology for Prevention, Reporting, and Advocacy

The increasing penetration of digital technology and social media within Nigerian university communities creates significant opportunities for technology-enabled GBV prevention and response. Anonymous digital reporting platforms, accessible via mobile applications or web portals, can substantially lower the barriers to reporting by removing the discomfort of face-to-face disclosure and ensuring confidentiality (Bamgbose, 2020; OpenAccess Research, 2025). Data analytics tools can be applied to anonymised reporting data to identify patterns, high-risk locations and times, and institutional hot-spots that require targeted preventive attention.

Social media platforms, simultaneously sites of GBV perpetration (through cyber harassment) and of resistance (through survivor advocacy movements such as #MeToo and the Nigerian equivalent #ArewaMeToo), can be leveraged for large-scale gender awareness campaigns. SDU's Department of Mass Communication is well-positioned to design and implement digital advocacy campaigns that engage students on gender equality and GBV prevention in the vernacular and cultural registers most resonant with the university's student population (Ezeaka, 2025).

7.6. Engaging Men and Boys as Allies

Sustainable GBV prevention requires the active engagement of men and boys, not merely as potential perpetrators to be restrained, but as essential allies in the transformation of masculine norms and the creation of gender-equitable campus cultures. Programme models such as the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) model, adapted for the African context, engage male students as peer educators and bystander intervenors, empowering them to challenge misogynistic attitudes and behaviours among their peers (Katz, 2018; Wandera et al., 2017). Research demonstrates that programmes targeting masculine identity and promoting 'gender-equitable manhood' as an alternative to dominant patriarchal masculinity are significantly more effective than programmes focused narrowly on prohibiting specific behaviours (Jewkes et al., 2015).

7.7. Community Engagement and Partnership

University campuses do not exist in isolation from their surrounding communities, and effective GBV responses must extend beyond institutional boundaries. Partnerships with civil society organisations specialising in gender-based violence, including women's rights NGOs, legal aid organisations, and health services, can significantly augment institutional capacity and credibility (Phiri & Abrahams, 2020). Engagement with traditional and religious leaders in host communities, whose authority commands significant respect in the Niger Delta region, can help to mobilise community-level norms that support rather than undermine campus

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GBV prevention efforts (Bamgbose, 2020). SDU's location in Ozoro, within a complex socio-cultural landscape shaped by diverse ethnic and community traditions, makes such community partnerships particularly strategic. Furthermore, educational interventions that empower young people and promote social responsibility have been found to contribute significantly to community development and positive behavioural change among youths (Ikegbusi & Iheanacho, 2016). Positive school climate and active community involvement are critical determinants of students' well-being and educational outcomes, underscoring the need for universities to build strong partnerships with families and communities in addressing gender-based violence and promoting inclusive campuses (Ikegbusi et al., 2023). This underscores the importance of collaborative and community-based approaches in addressing gender-based violence and fostering safe and inclusive university environments.

7.8. Leadership Commitment and Institutional Culture Change

Ultimately, the transformation of campus cultures with respect to GBV depends on sustained, visible, and credible leadership commitment. The Vice-Chancellor, Deans, Heads of Department and other institutional leaders must not only endorse anti-GBV policies in principle but must be seen to apply them consistently, including when perpetrators are senior academic staff. Research on institutional culture change consistently finds that the visible behaviour of institutional leaders is the most powerful signal of genuine normative commitment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Phiri & Abrahams, 2020). Leaders who respond to GBV incidents with institutional protection and victim-silencing, however implicitly, undermine years of formal policy development in a single act. Studies have also demonstrated that leadership style significantly influences administrative effectiveness and organisational outcomes in educational institutions (Ikegbusi, Manafa, & Edor, 2025). Consequently, university leaders who exhibit transformational, participatory, and gender-responsive leadership behaviours are more likely to foster institutional cultures that condemn gender-based violence and promote safety, inclusion, and accountability.

Gender-responsive institutional leadership also includes ensuring that women occupy leadership positions across all levels of university governance, from departmental committees to the Governing Council, and that gender considerations are systematically integrated into institutional planning, budgeting, and evaluation processes (Palmary et al., 2021; UN Women, 2020).

8. Positioning Southern Delta University as a Model for Gender-Safe Higher Education

SDU's status as an emerging institution, still in the early stages of defining its institutional culture, policies, and physical infrastructure, represents a distinctive and time-sensitive opportunity. Unlike older, more established Nigerian universities that must contend with decades of entrenched practices, SDU can embed gender safety, equity, and inclusion as foundational institutional values from the outset (Delta State Government, 2024; Emmason, 2025). This window of institutional formability, during which norms, systems, and cultures are still being actively constructed, is precisely when transformative intervention is most feasible and most consequential.

By committing to the full implementation of the strategic pathways outlined above, SDU can position itself as a national exemplar of gender-safe higher education, a distinction that would enhance its reputation, attract gender-conscious students, staff, and research partners, and contribute to the broader transformation of higher education culture in Nigeria and the Niger Delta region. The university's Directorate for Gender Studies, situated within this expanding institution, can serve as a hub for research, policy advocacy, and best-practice dissemination on GBV prevention in Nigerian universities.

SDU's commitment to gender safety can also be leveraged in engagement with international development partners, donor agencies, and global university networks, for whom demonstrated institutional commitment to SDG 4 and SDG 5 is increasingly a prerequisite for collaboration and funding. In this sense, investing in campus GBV prevention is simultaneously an ethical commitment and a strategic institutional positioning decision (Delta Uhuru, 2026).

9. Conclusion

Gender-based violence in Nigerian higher institutions is not a peripheral concern or an unfortunate exception; it is a systemic challenge that undermines the foundational purposes of tertiary education, the creation, transmission, and application of knowledge in the service of human flourishing. This paper has demonstrated that GBV in Nigerian universities is widespread, structurally rooted, and multi-dimensional in its forms and consequences, and that existing legal and policy frameworks, while relatively comprehensive in their legislative intent, remain critically under-implemented at the institutional level.

For institutions such as Southern Delta University, the challenge is simultaneously formidable and uniquely tractable. As an institution still building its norms, systems, and culture, SDU has the opportunity to

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make gender safety a foundational institutional commitment rather than a reactive repair. This requires sustained political will from university leadership, material investment in policy, personnel, and infrastructure, genuine engagement with the student community as active participants in creating safe campus cultures, and robust accountability mechanisms that ensure policies translate into practice.

The creation of safe and inclusive campuses is not a luxury or an aspirational ideal for future implementation. It is a fundamental precondition for educational justice, human dignity, and the realisation of each student's intellectual potential. Every student, irrespective of gender, has the right to learn, grow, and contribute to Nigeria's national development free from fear, coercion, or violence. Meeting that obligation is the most important institutional responsibility Nigerian universities can fulfil.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/ or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declaration on AI Use

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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