



POLICY BRIEF

DECONSTRUCTING RAPE CULTURE IN NIGERIA'S POLITICAL CLIMATE



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Executive Summary

On International Women's Day, a day reserved for celebrating the achievements and rights of women, Nigeria was revelling in systemic oppression, which has been a constant plague to its political institutions. In light of a recent issue, the suspension of Senator Natasha for six months following her allegation of sexual harassment against Senate President Akpabio has sparked national and feminist outrage. The push back reveals how cooked and bad the system is for women who dare to speak out.

Participants from the Naija Feminist Media (NFM) webinar, which convened women across sectors, highlighted that what happened to Senator Natasha is not just a case of Natasha.

It is the case for every woman out there. The Nigerian government, i.e the Senate, responded by stripping her of pay, security, and entitlements. This action of the Senate exposes the belief and mindset that it does not commit to gender equality.

In a situation where they are supposed to stand with survivors or victims, the Senate decides to victimise Senator Natasha further, especially when she chose to challenge such impunity.

The Senate rule itself is not even inclusive, showing no laws protecting women in the Senate. If a woman in power is suspended, then a woman without power will be subjected to unimaginable consequences.

Another thing to be emphasised is the mental and physical toll of public victim-blaming and institutional gaslighting placed on Senator Natasha. Survivors are prone to depression, extreme anxiety, and somatic symptoms, yet the survival-centred approach in this country is so poor. Even when survivors seek help, they often face backlash instead of care.

Compounding this is the role of the media in amplifying toxicity, where bloggers, TV stations, and even educated people have launched smear campaigns against Natasha.

This mirrors earlier cases like Oluremi Tinubu's harassment by Dino Melaye, showing how history keeps repeating itself. In these patterns, the media is often used to smear, destroy, and make the survivor almost unbelievable.

The Nigerian media space is toxic, amplifying rape culture while dismissing feminist voices unless they are loud, persistent, and organised.

Experts expressed concern about the public's lack of solidarity, particularly among women and presumed allies. Instead of supporting the survivor, many individuals, including women, contributed to the Senator's vilification.

This response illustrates a broad challenge in addressing gender-based violence: the limited societal support for survivors, even within communities where solidarity would be expected. As noted during the discussion, a small minority consistently advocates for justice, making meaningful cultural and institutional change difficult to achieve.

The absence of gender-sensitive safeguarding policies and accountable institutions is part of the problem. Government agencies lack independent regulatory bodies, and when survivors report incidents, they report to their abusers.

The Nigerian system lacks whistleblower protection, leaving survivors like Senator Natasha vulnerable to retaliation. The few existing laws, like the VAPP Act, are often under-enforced or not stringent enough.

Finally, Halima, a public health professional, called for grassroots education, especially around comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) that teaches consent, reproductive rights, and gender-based violence. CSE has to be rebranded as Comprehensive Life Skills and Health Education (CLHE) just to counter backlash from schools and government institutions.

Education and community engagement were cited as overlooked but vital strategies, especially through radio, social media, and youth-led movements.

This policy brief compiles the voices of feminist journalists, advocates, health professionals, students, and organisers who argue that rape culture in Nigeria's political institutions must be deconstructed not only for Senator Natasha, but for every woman who has been silenced, blamed, and erased.

Context and Importance of the Problem

Description of the Senator Natasha-Akpabio Case
On International Women's Day, Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan stood before the Nigerian Senate to raise an allegation of sexual harassment against Senate President Godswill Akpabio.

In response, the Senate moved not to investigate the allegation or protect the whistleblower, but to punish the accuser. Senator Natasha was suspended for six months, and her entitlements, security detail, and pay were immediately stripped.

Rather than upholding due process or protecting a survivor of gender-based violence, the Senate's actions sent a clear message that even a powerful woman in government is not safe when she dares to speak out.

Historical and Cultural Normalisation of Sexual Harassment and Rape Culture in Nigerian Politics

This is not the first time such an event has occurred in Nigeria's political arena. Some years back, our former First Lady, Oluremi Tinubu, accused Dino Melaye of sexual harassment, and to date, it was not been charged.

This is history repeating itself. This repetition of unaddressed abuse exposes how rape culture is embedded in the structure of Nigerian governance. The culture of normalising abuse and punishing survivors has created a political landscape where women are intimidated, silenced, and driven out of power.

Even the language of the Senate rules reveals this bias. Their word usage illustrates linguistic erasure reflecting a deeper structural exclusion of women from legislative protection and participation.

The Silencing and Victim-Blaming of Women in Positions of Power

Senator Natasha's experience is a painful reflection of how women in leadership are treated when they challenge male dominance.

Rather than receive institutional support, Senator Natasha was subjected to public shaming, media smear campaigns, and even attacks from fellow women in politics. Experts noted how the media played a key role in this process. They have used bloggers and TV stations to amplify the toxicity.

Even well-educated women participated in the vilification. This lack of solidarity leads to internalised misogyny and a system where survivors are more often condemned than believed.

Broader Implications for Women's Participation in Governance and Public Life

The consequences of Senator Natasha's treatment extend far beyond her individual case. When a woman with power, education, and public support is suspended and discredited for naming her abuser, it reinforces the idea that no woman is safe in public life.

Even as more women strive to break into politics and governance, they face a hostile environment where they must do twice the job to earn half the respect and risk professional destruction when they demand justice.

This culture of silencing women erases democracy, undermines justice, and deters the next generation of women leaders from stepping forward. It reinforces the “status quo of male dominance and impunity” in governance and signals to all Nigerian women that truth-telling comes at an unbearable cost.

Scope and Impact

Mental, Physical, and Professional Impacts on Survivors

The treatment of Senator Natasha has far-reaching implications not only politically, but also for her mental, physical, and emotional well-being, as well as for other survivors watching the public unravelling of her story.

In Nigeria, survivors of sexual harassment and assault face not just trauma from the violation, but a second wave of trauma from society's reaction. The lack of survivor-centred care enlarges this sense of despair. Physical symptoms of trauma are also frequently dismissed, despite being real and debilitating. These combined effects of emotional distress, isolation, depression, and psychosomatic illness are the hidden cost of speaking out.

Effect on Gender Equality and Democratic Participation

The impact extends to Nigeria's broader democratic integrity.

When allegations are met with suspension, public ridicule, and political punishment, the message to women is clear: Power offers no protection when patriarchy is challenged. The result is discouragement, withdrawal, and silence.

Public Perception and Media-Driven Backlash

It is important to note the media's role in shaping people's perspectives and how it has contributed to the toxic fallout of the Natasha case. The media platforms have become tools for smear campaigns against Senator Natasha, making her almost unbelievable. Instead of investigating the accused, media outlets turned their attention to the victim, scrutinising her private life and discrediting her narrative.

This trend is dangerous and pervasive. Nigeria's media environment is "toxic," and Nigeria amplifies toxicity in our media space. Public opinion, influenced by bloggers, politicians, and TV pundits, often frames survivors as liars or attention-seekers.

The consequences are real. Senator Natasha's credibility has been undermined by her peers and a national media ecosystem that privileges power over truth.

Consequences for Marginalised Women and Communities

While Senator Natasha is a powerful, educated woman, many others are not. A lot of women, 99% of women, have this story in different forms and sizes, but the same story.

Many women do not speak out because of economic vulnerability: They are ready to fend for their families and fear their jobs might be affected. This intersection of gender, class, and power creates layers of risk for marginalised women. When public figures are silenced, everyday women are even more afraid to name their abusers, demand justice, or pursue leadership roles.

Institutional Erosion and Normalisation of Injustice

The Nigerian public, already sceptical of political integrity, sees a reinforcement of impunity and selective justice in this case. Even the VAPP Act and existing laws are insufficient without enforcement. Senator Natasha's suspension fits into this pattern of state complicity, where power protects perpetrators and punishes whistleblowers.

Together, these impacts reflect not just a crisis of individual injustice but a national crisis of institutional failure, social conditioning, and gender-based political repression. Until these issues are addressed, rape culture will continue to thrive not only in homes and streets, but at the very heart of Nigeria's government.

Policy Failures and Gaps

The case of Senator Natasha reveals the many layers of systemic failure within Nigeria's political and legal framework when it comes to gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and institutional accountability. Experts emphasised that while laws may exist on paper, the lack of enforcement, political will, and institutional safeguards renders them ineffective.

Inadequate Legal Frameworks and Enforcement Mechanisms

Laws alone are not enough, especially when they are not enforced. Furthermore, when survivors report, they often face institutions that are incapable or unwilling to act. Even the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act, which exists to protect survivors, is often inaccessible, poorly implemented, or not stringent enough.

Institutional Complicity and Lack of Independent Oversight

Another key failure is the absence of independent regulatory bodies that can fairly investigate allegations of sexual misconduct in government. Experts recommend that every working institution have a safeguarding policy.

This is because, without independent oversight bodies, the institution shields perpetrators, especially powerful men, while punishing or discrediting women who come forward.

No Whistleblower Protection or Survivor-Centred Safeguards

One of the most glaring gaps is the lack of whistleblower protection for survivors of sexual violence. Without protective mechanisms, survivors like Senator Natasha face retaliation in the form of suspension, isolation, and character assassination. This has a chilling effect on future survivors who might consider coming forward.

Moreover, even when survivors seek support, the systems meant to serve them are disjointed and discriminatory.

Media and Cultural Institutions Reinforcing Harmful Norms

Policy gaps are not only found in formal government structures but also in regulating harmful narratives perpetuated by the media. Public opinion is often shaped by unethical reporting, misinformation, and coordinated character attacks. Kosi described it plainly:

Despite the media's power to challenge rape culture, it is often weaponised against survivors particularly women in power.

Structural Exclusion of Women in Law and Policy Design

The very language of Nigeria's Senate rules exemplifies systemic exclusion. This outdated and patriarchal structure not only erases women linguistically but also institutionally blocks their participation and protection.

It reflects a deeper issue: the political system was not built with women in mind and is not adapting to include them.

Even when policies exist, they are not supported by institutional frameworks or awareness campaigns to educate women on their rights.

These failures collectively represent a broken system favouring silence over justice and impunity over accountability. They demonstrate that without reform, enforcement, and education, gender-sensitive policies will continue to fail Nigerian women from the streets to the Senate.

Policy Options and Analysis

The suspension of Senator Natasha has brought to the surface the urgent need for systemic reform in Nigeria's political institutions and public structures. Experts emphasised that gender-sensitive laws are not enough without enforcement, and that cultural, institutional, and media reforms must work in tandem with legal mechanisms to dismantle rape culture.

Key developmental policies

A. Legal and Judicial Reform

Stronger laws should be demanded, and faster legal processes for handling cases of sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Law enforcement and the judicial system should be held accountable. There should be courts that just handle these cases of gender-based violence because that way, these cases can scale through faster.

B. Institutional Mechanisms and Safeguarding Policies

Another critical intervention involves creating and enforcing safeguarding policies within political institutions and public offices.

There must be a safeguarding policy in every working institution, school, and workplace.

Independent bodies, not internal departments, must enforce these policies

There should be regulatory bodies in government establishments to ensure survivors feel safe to report. There must also be strong whistleblower protections.

C. Education and Grassroots Sensitisation

The importance of education as prevention, starting from schools to community-level outreach, can't be overemphasised. Experts advocated for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and its adapted version. Grassroots sensitisation, particularly outside digital spaces, is also paramount.

D. Media Accountability and Public Narrative Change

The media's influence in shaping public opinion and reinforcing or challenging rape culture was a recurring theme. Experts' proposed solution includes a more informed, feminist-led media strategy, including:

- Supporting gender-sensitive journalism.
- Holding media platforms accountable for misinformation.
- Creating and promoting feminist media content that educates, not misleads.

E. Inclusive Political Participation and Representation

Stakeholders emphasised that political representation is not just symbolic; it is a tool for reform. We need more women to know that we need them. Women who are empowered with leadership skills not just on Twitter but in public places.

To shift this dynamic, they called for:

- Increased female representation in decision-making spaces.
- Quotas and incentives for female political participation.
- Political support systems and mentorship for women.

These options are not standalone solutions; they must work across sectors, combining legal, institutional, educational, cultural, and political strategies to produce lasting change.

Recommendations

Expert made it clear that dismantling rape culture in Nigeria's political institutions requires more than statements of solidarity or surface-level policies. It demands tangible actions, institutional accountability, and survivor-centred reforms that prioritise women's dignity, justice, and safety.

The following recommendations synthesise the urgent solutions proposed by advocates, activists, and experts in the space:

1. Reinstate Senator Natasha and Ensure a Transparent Investigation

The immediate reversal of Senator Natasha's suspension is necessary to demonstrate that raising an allegation of sexual harassment is not a punishable offence.

Her reinstatement must follow an independent, transparent, and survivor-centred investigation of her claims against Senate President Akpabio.

2. Establish Independent Regulatory Bodies in Government Institutions

To prevent future cases of institutional complicity, safeguarding policies must be enforced by bodies that are not embedded within the same institutions they regulate.

3. Enforce Whistleblower Protections for Survivors
Survivors of male violence must be protected through enforceable whistleblower frameworks. This includes safe and confidential reporting channels, protections from retaliation, and legal aid for survivors seeking justice in high-profile cases.

4. Review and Strengthen the VAPP Act and Judicial Processes

An overhaul of judicial delays and legal loopholes that enable impunity was called for. There must be:

- Dedicated courts for gender-based violence.
- Fast-tracking of GBV cases.
- Annual reviews and strengthening of the VAPP Act to ensure accountability and justice.

5. Institutionalise Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE/CLHE)

The inclusion of Comprehensive Life Skills and Health Education (CLHE) in school curricula is essential for building a culture of consent, bodily autonomy, and respect.

She further explained that resistance to CSE is rooted in misconceptions and shame culture, but it remains “vital” in dismantling harmful gender norms early.

6. Launch Mass Sensitisation and Community Engagement Campaigns

Awareness must go beyond elite circles and social media. Speakers urged for grassroots education, especially in rural and urban poor communities.

7. Promote Media Accountability and Feminist Public Education

As the media plays a central role in shaping public opinion, feminist advocates emphasised the need for counter-narratives and media literacy.

8. Increase Political Representation of Women

Representation is a structural solution to a structural problem. More women must be supported and encouraged to enter leadership and governance spaces. Quotas, leadership programmes, and protection frameworks must be implemented to ensure women are elected, protected, and empowered.

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9. Strengthen Survivor-Centred Services Across Sectors

All sectors of healthcare, legal, and social services must work together in a survivor-centred, non-discriminatory, and trauma-informed manner.

This includes:

- Annual GBV training for healthcare workers and police.
- Funding for mental health and legal aid programs.
- Rapid response systems in high-risk political institutions.

Conclusion

The case of Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan is not an isolated incident—it is a reflection of the deep, systemic rot that enables rape culture to thrive in Nigeria's political climate. Her suspension, following her brave decision to speak out against sexual harassment by Senate President Akpabio, has illuminated the hostility, complicity, and institutional failures that confront women in leadership.

The consequences of her treatment, media attacks, loss of livelihood, political ostracisation, and public shaming send a dangerous message to survivors across the country: that silence is safer than truth, and power protects perpetrators, not the vulnerable.

This policy brief has shown that the problems are structural, from gender-erasing Senate rules to toxic public discourse, from the absence of whistleblower protection to the erasure of safeguarding policies in institutions meant to protect all citizens.

To dismantle rape culture in Nigeria's governance spaces, we must move beyond performative gender equality rhetoric and commit to concrete, enforceable, and survivor-centered reforms. This is a call to action—not just for policymakers, but for every Nigerian who believes in justice, equity, and the right to speak truth to power. The time to act is now.

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