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"*Life has actually taught us it seems we can't trust anyone anymore!*"
Violence and the Marginalizing Position of Female Sex Workers during COVID-19 in Nigeria

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List of Acronyms

AEPD	Abuja Environment Protection Board
ASWA	African Sex Worker Association
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FCTA	Federal Capital Territory Administration
FSW	Female Sex Work
FSWs	Female Sex Workers
HAI	Heartland Alliance International
HAN	Heartland Alliance Nigeria
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
NCPRP	Nigeria's COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan
NPF	Nigerian Police Force
PTF	The Nigerian Presidential Task Force
NSWA	Nigerian Sex Worker Association
SAP-CLN	Society against Prostitution and Child Labour in Nigeria
S/GBV	Sexual/Gender-Based Violence
SRH	Sexual Reproductive Health
SW	Sex Work
SWs	Sex Workers
UNAIDS	The Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDs
UNDP	Unite Nations Development Program
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UN	United Nations
UN RC/HC	United Nations Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator
VAWG	Violence against Women and Girls
WARDC	Women Advocates Research and Documentation Center

Abstract

Sex workers (SWs), specifically female sex workers (FSWs) represent one of the most vulnerable key populations of women that are disproportionately affected by government-mandated COVID-19 regulations and lockdowns globally. In Nigeria, female sex work is further complicated by the country's entrenched patriarchal value system where sex work is criminalized, and female sex workers experience increased violence specifically increased sexual/gender-based violence (S/GBV) discrimination, stigma, and marginalisation due to the intersection of their profession/livelihood and gender. The available evidence documented so far, proves the existence and high prevalence of the human rights violations and the increase violence against of FSWs under the government's enforcement and implementation for COVID-19 regulations in Nigeria.

Through a thematic analysis of the difficulties, struggles and experiences expressed by both FSWs and social development workers (SDWs) that continue to support, advocate and provide SRHR and S/GBV services for them during COVID-19, the objective of this research is to identify the key dynamics and structures that facilitates and justifies the increase of violence against female sex workers during lockdowns in order to understand how the government's COVID-19 efforts actively deprioritizes FSWs marginalizing them further.

In a time of high health precarity, the government's prioritization of the pandemic response, on the basis to stopping the spread of the virus, and the high levels of gender inequality, the available evidence and literature highlight that with the legal, social and cultural frameworks around SW and the existing poor health and social infrastructures, addressing the increase of violence and human rights abuses against FSW has been actively deprioritized with the justification of the use of direct violence towards FSWs is in the name of curtailing the spread of the novel Coronavirus.

Keywords

Structural Violence, Cultural violence Direct violence, S/GBV, COVID-19 in Nigeria, Female sex Workers

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Chapter 1 Introduction

In a documentary filmed by Alan Atulinda for BBC News (2020) named *Corona Virus: How Sex Workers are Surviving in Uganda and Nigeria*," a Nigerian female sex worker (FSW) named Efe[1] stated that, "during this lockdown, [sex workers (SWs)] were speechless when [they] learnt that [COVID-19] happened. The government delivered some relief materials to some vulnerable Nigerians but none of the we were given anything" (Atulinda, 2020). Another Nigerian FSW interviewed, who remained anonymous, also stated that "even when the Nigerian Sex Workers Association[2] [(NSWA)] went online to tell [SW] to stay away from work because of the fear of spreading the COVID-19 virus, I personally, I could not really stay at home for too long because [I had to feed my aged mother and I had to take care of [her] children" (ibid). Even though NSWA "provided welfare packages to the most vulnerable [SW] across the country in ten states, […] it wasn't enough. Most of them had to go back to sex work and go back to the streets and brothels to work because their families depended on them with no support from the government and society" (Atulinda, 2020). A core observation central to the responses made by Nigeria's FSWs throughout the documentary is that despite the rapid spread and disastrous impact of the novel *Coronavirus* (SARS-CoV-2), sex work continues. In the legal, cultural, and social makeup of Nigeria where gender and economic inequality is high, women who depend on sex work for their livelihoods have experienced not only increased vulnerabilities but increased violence under the efforts enforced and implemented by the Nigerian government to stop the spread of the virus.

As a United Nations (UN) Member State and alongside it's the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for UNDP, Nigeria pledged to ensure that "no one will be left behind […] [and] to endeavor to reach the furthest behind first" (Adebisi et. al, 2020: p. 1780). The pledge on paper may carry a lot on weight and influence, but it is a far cry from the reality of what is occurring on ground in the lives of FSWs during COVID-19. FSWs are thus now "part of the population [that] are left behind in [Nigeria's] COVID response" (Adebisi et. al, 2020: p. 1781).

1.1 The Research Context: COVID-19 and Sex Work in Nigeria

Increased Health Vulnerabilities for Sex Workers

SW, specifically FSW, represent one of the most vulnerable populations disproportionately affected by COVID-19 globally. Within the African context, "sex work […] has always been surrounded by controversies and debates concerning its cultural, legal and social frameworks" (Adebisi et. al., 2020: p. 1780). As the above is also true for Nigeria,

[1] Name was changed to protect anonymity.

[2] An umbrella network of community-based sex works organisations. NWSWA is a non-governmental, not-for-profit organisation focusing on health and social and human rights of sex workers.

the country is the most populated country in Africa, the sixth most populated in the world and has a large and overtly visible sex work industry despite its illegality nationwide and various levels of criminalization that occurs across the country. Howbeit, the Nigerian Government's response to the spread of the virus "plays a significant role in the global response" (Dan-Nwafor et. al, 2020: p. 2) and especially for the vulnerable populations disproportionately impacted by the virus, due to the disruption of the sex work industry, the "exclusion from government safety nets has forced SWs back to sex work admits COVID-19" (Nagarajan, 2020: p. 8).

According to the published news article by The Global Fund titled, *Sex Workers in Africa are More Vulnerable to COVID-19*, "SWs have always been vulnerable to violence and infectious diseases such as HIV, but COVID-19 has increased those risks." Evidence shows that across Africa, "the situation for SWs is desperate as […] the lack condom distribution and outreach prevention programs by peers in homes and streets are leaving SWs more exposed to contracting HIV" (ibid). These increased health vulnerabilities during COVID-19 puts all SW at a health risk and hinders progress made on HIV prevention and treatment over the recent years; especially as access to anti-retroviral drugs have been limited due to movement restrictions (Ochonye et. al, 2021: p. 245).

Exacerbated Inequalities of Female Sex Workers

Global research on FSWs highlight that woman in sex work and sex work in general cross the "lines of income, class, and culture" (Ojeshina, Ogbonnaya and Maigari-Magaji, 2020: p. 52). As the above description is true for Nigeria as well, women across the country dominate the sex work industry. However, in Nigeria, sex work is illegal and criminalized and most FSWs live under the poverty line. "[T]he conditions that necessitate sex work […] [(such as extreme poverty,)] are prevalent in Nigeria, as survival in the current Nigeria is 'nasty, short and brutish'" (Dieneye, 2016: p. 65). According to Oxfam's (2020) report, *Fighting Inequality in the time of COVID-19: The Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index 2020*[5], Nigeria ranks 157 out of 158 governments surveyed on the Human Development Index (HDI). The above ranking indicates that the Nigerian government "is the least committed to reducing inequality in West Africa" (Oxfam International, 2020). As COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities such as gender, FSWs in Nigeria are among the population hardest hit economically and are more likely to enter precarious work during COVID-19 (Oxfam and Development Finance International, 2020: p. 4). Even though the country has the resources to address the inequalities between the rich and the poor and between women and men[6], corruption, a highly religious and conservative patriarchal value systems maintained by the nation's majority conservative political elite, and limits in addressing and protecting the human rights of all Nigerian citizens represent some of the root cultures that hinders the government's ability to address nationwide inequality. The

[5] "Monitors what governments are doing through their policy commitments to reduce inequality" (Oxfam and Development Finance International, 2020).
[6] Oxfam International (2020). *Nigeria*. [online] Oxfam International. Available at: https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/countries/nigeria.

failure of the government to address the high levels of inequality throughout Nigeria has forced the ordinary citizen, especially the vulnerable, to pay a much higher price and bear the brunt of the COVID-19 crisis.

COVID-19 is not the only a threat to the health, safety, and livelihoods of FSWs. The stigmatized, criminalized, and clandestine nature of their work renders FSWs more vulnerable to violence, especially in a pandemic where "access to healthcare, including anti-retroviral medication for HIV, family planning and condoms have been affected by measures around physical distancing" (Nagarajan, 2020: p. 11). Stetsko, Aguilar and Shadwick (2021) added that across Africa and especially in countries like Nigeria, with little to no social protection services for SW, many "[FSWs] are more afraid of dying of hunger than of COVID-19. Prevention is not a priority for many [SWs] right now."

Increased Violence against Female Sex Workers during Lockdowns

Concluded from a 2010 study on SW across Nigeria, "[sex work] is becoming more dangerous in Nigeria, with the increase in crime rates" (Bagudo and Yusuf, 2019: p. 6).The COVID-19 Violence against women and girls (VAWG) national reports available show that there is a significant spike of violence against FSWs from clients, law enforcement, and community members, to name a few. FSWs who depend on sex work for their livelihoods are forced to enter even more precarious situations to sustain their livelihoods during this period where they are "more exposed to punitive measure to enforce COVID-19 regulations" (Nagarajan, 2020: p. 7). Measures such as lockdowns, increased policing, strict curfews, and the heavy enforcement of movement restrictions has and continues to expose FSWs to more violence, abuse, and harassment (ibid, p.7). Some FSWs are being blamed for spreading the COVID-19 virus and are being labelled as vectors of disease. For example, "clients, aware of the increased vulnerability of sex work, are more likely to refuse payment and engage in physical violence when FSWs insist that they payment agreed be made" (Nagarajan, 2020: p. 11).

With the global enforcement of lockdowns, research has shown that universally, many SW have moved online or conducted their work more covertly (Avwioro et. al., 2021: p. 509). This is true for some FSWs workers across Nigeria as digital technology and the increased access to it has shown to boost the sex work industry in Nigeria (Adebowale, 2020). However, for many FSWs in Nigeria, the ability to protect themselves from COVID-19, gain access to sexual and reproductive (SRH)/health services and deal with the impact of COVID-19 on their lives, families and livelihoods goes beyond just health and is deeply complicated by their position as a FSW. FSW vulnerabilities associated with the nature of their work, gender and their specific sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs have been exacerbated significantly due to COVID-19. The resultant contributes to the worsening of the conditions conducive of the visible and observable occurrences of direct violence against FSW and the gross violations of their human rights. Due to the country's "wooful economic performances of the Nigerian state over time" (Nagarajan, 2020: p. 7), more women and girls are driven into sex work as their only option for survival and since the onset of the pandemic, COVID-19 has called attention to this type of informal work as an industry across Nigeria overtly. The inability to work in brothels due to mandated closures, police raids, and the lack

of available clients, street sex work has increased substantially. During the COVID-19 period, the country is experiencing fast-growing security governance dilemmas "due to the unusual nature of events that necessitate lockdown" (Okolie-Osemene, 2021: p. 261). Statistical evidence available shows that FSWs have experienced an increase in intimate partner violence (IPV), increased physical violence in public spaces and increased levels of sex worker abductions to wrongful arrests and detention (Nagarajan, 2020: p. 7).

1.2 Structure of Research Paper

In the introductory chapter (Chapter 1), I have provided the research context about the pandemic's impact on FSWs. In Chapter 2, *Understanding the Violence Against Women and Female Sex Workers provides* the research background focusing on contextualizing violence, data, statistics about violence against women and girls (VAWG) during COVID-19 and a literature review of the position of FSW in Nigeria. Chapter 3, *The Research*, provides the research objective, research question and sub-questions, the theoretical and analytical framework, methodology, research reflexivity, and research challenges and ethical dilemmas. In the concluding Chapter 4, *Research Findings and Discussion,* I provide an overview of research findings, highlighting key themes, and include a discussion that engages with the theoretical/analytical framework.

Chapter 2 The Research Background: Violence against Women and FSWs

> "Violence and the ever-present threat of violence were understood as the tools with which society controls, polices, coerces, regulates and punishes people to bring compliance and conformity. Thus, individuals and groups who transgress social, gender and sexual norms are more likely to experience violence. These individuals and groups include marginalised people such as refugees, **sex workers**, gay men and other men who have sex with men, and women, including women living with HIV, lesbian women and women with same-sex desire, women seeking an abortion, and drug users amongst others."

- African Sex Worker Alliance (2019)

2.1 Contextualizing Violence

The tree metaphor9 is often used to describe violence against SWs as violence "exists at different levels and different forms […with] roots in social economic and political structures to the institutional level where individuals and groups are excluded to its manifestation in interpersonal interaction (ASWA, 2019: p. 7). In recent years across the African continent, the high rates of HIV/AIDS within the SW community recognized violence as a driving force. As a result, the recognition of violence against SW, particularly on how SW develop strategies and respond to the violence, sparked growth in research, evidence and information on the subject (ASWA, 2019: p. 6). Large studies have been conducted in East and Southern Africa (ibid). However, violence against SWs, regardless of sex, gender, and sexuality, is relatively under researched and extremely limited in West, Central and North Africa (ASWA, 2019: p. 11). According to the African Sex Worker Association's (ASWA) (2019) large-scale study, Every [SW] has got a story to tell about violence": Violence against sex workers in Africa, "no literature on violence against [FSWs] could be found" for Nigeria (ibid, p. 69). With further research, in 2017, the NSWA with support from the ASWA published the Shadow report on the situation of SW, for the submission to the 67th Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Session in Geneva, Switzerland. This report provided the most recently published, yet limited, gender desegregated statistics and data on FSWs and violence against women in Nigeria.

According ASWA (2019), "SW is not inherently violent […and] neither is violence in [SW] inevitable […but the] violence towards [SWs] is driven and exacerbated by stigmatising beliefs about and attitudes towards SWs, social marginalisation, and criminalisation of their occupation" (p.10) as a woman and as a SW.

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is "any act of violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering of women and girls, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private places" (UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against women). Sexual/gender-based

[9] See appendix 1.

violence (S/GBV) is a form of violence "perpetrated against a person's will and is based on gender norms, and unequal power relations. It includes physical, emotional, physiological, and sexual violence" (UNHCR, 2021). Coupled with the limitation of desegregated data, statistics, and literature regarding the violence against FSWs in Nigeria during COVID-19, all COVID-19 VAWG studies and official reports referenced FSWs but briefly. However, when FSWs are mentioned, it is highlighted that S/GBV cases against FSWs have increased drastically including other forms of direct violence such as abductions and sexual assault and rape as mentioned previously. For this research, an overview of COVID-19 related VAWG statistics is included to understand and provide context to the position and situation of FSWs during COVID-19 admits the increase of violence and S/GBV observed and recorded against women and girls.

2.2 Violence against Women and Girls During COVID-19

VAWG is a major developmental issue[11] prevalent across Nigeria where FSWs are identified as a key vulnerable population and have experienced increased violence. According to Mohsammed Adamu, Nigeria's Inspector General of Police, upon the onset of the pandemic, "a total of 717 rape cases were reported nation-wide between January and May 2020 [alone]" (Partners West Africa Nigeria, 2020: p. 20). Prior to COVID-19, "55% of women who have experienced physical or sexual violence never sought help to stop the violence" […and] only 32% have sought help. (ibid, p. 48). In 2013, that figure was only 31%. Mirroring pre-pandemic conditions, barriers to reporting such as fear of stigma or fear of increased physical and sexual violence from perpetrators further obscures efforts in to addressing VAWG across Nigeria during COVID-19. What does that mean for FSWs? With S/GBV cases on the rise, COVID-19 related VAWG data contend that the actual numbers of S/GBV cases are considerably higher, with the knowledge of those that go unreported (Moskovska, 2021). Limited evidence of the scope and prevalence of violence offers an explanation into why numbers have not change significantly from 2013 even considering survivors that were able to seek help and assistance outside immediate family and friends. With movement restrictions strictly enforced and fear of COVID-19 transmission, another barrier is created in reporting. In response to the observed increase of S/GBV against women and girls during COVID-19 thus far, Dr. Abiola Akiyode-Aldolabi, the Founding Director of Women Advocates Research and Documentation Center (WARDC), stated that the "[…] the Federal Government [needs] to create more institutions that can address the root causes of gender-based violence [and] the impunity that often goes with it. (Usigbe, 2020).

S/GBV coined as a "shadow pandemic" during COVID-19 refers to the idea that the violence experienced by women and girls both physical and sexual, often goes hidden due to pre-existing gender inequalities and poor VAWG social service infrastructures. In Nigeria, this "invisibility [context threatens] the peaceful co-existence and realization of the objectives of equality, development, and peace" (National Bureau of Statistic, 2018: p. 52). Coupled with culturally and socially, defined gender norms and roles in Nigeria, women and girls particularly, are thus more vulnerable to S/GBV (ibid, pp. 52). In the report, *Gender and COVID-19 in Nigeria* (2020), the unprecedented entrance of the COVID-19 pandemic

[11] (UNDPa, 2020) *The Next Frontier: Briefing Note for Countries on the 2020 Human Development Report | Nigeria.*

resulted in a "public outcry and advocacy of women's rights activists" […] [but,] while some promising actions have been taken by relevant [government, ministries, and agencies [(MDAs)], insufficient progress has been made" (p. 2). Blame has been placed on the fact that there is a lack of political will (Oxfam International and Development Finance International, 2020: p. 46). An example and clear illustration of the lack of political will by the Nigerian government to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable and brought to justice, is its exclusion of women in its discission-making arenas pertaining to the provision of essential services and palliatives (Oxfam International and Development Finance International, 2020: p. 46). Data gathered indicates that with the increased burden of care work for women across the country, particularly unpaid, women make up "90% of the [frontline healthcare] workforce, from testing to the treatment and discharge of patients" (UNDPb Nigeria, 2021). The above is meant to showcase that woman play a pivotal role in Nigeria's COVID-19 response in public as well as private arenas.

Where does that leave FSW? FSWs have experienced increased care duties, as many FSWs who are also mothers or primary income generators, are also solely supporting their families and children in most cases (Atulinda, 2020)[12]. Unfortunately, as according to the snapshot study titled, *Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women: A snapshot study to assess the physical, economic, and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in Nigeria,* the Nigerian COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan (NCPRP) "[…] did not consider the provision of sexual and gender-based services by civil society groups, shelters or even their own services such as those of the sexual assault trauma centres (SARCs) as essential services" (p. 48).

2.3 Human Rights Abuses: Law Enforcement and Female Sex Workers during COVID

> "[…] Life has actually taught us that it seems we can't trust anyone anymore." – Josephine Aseme, Female Sex Worker, Activist, and Executive Director and Founder of Greater Women Initiative for Health and Rights

Across Nigeria, the general and prevailing public perceptions and attitudes towards the Nigeria's police force are extremely negative. As an executive arm of the Federal Government of Nigeria, the police are responsible for maintaining law and order but, "Nigerians are increasingly losing hope and confidence in the nation's police force because the unethical conduct of its operatives" (Odisu, 2016: p. 1). According to the journal article, *Law Enforcement in Nigeria by the Police Force and the Travails of Rule,* the Nigerian public's loss of confidence in the police is attributed to the characteristics and behaviours of the operatives such as a "poor attitude to work, unethical conduct and ominous disregard for fundamental rights" (ibid). As agents of the government, the Nigerian government should also be held responsible and accountable for the unethical conduct of its operatives on duty and especially during COVID-19's movement restrictions and lockdowns.

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[12] BBC short documentary by Alan Atulinda (2020) , *Corona Virus: How Sex Workers are Surviving in Uganda and Nigeria*."

Among the various regulations mandated by the federal government, the most noticeable impact on FSWs was the movement restrictions and the lockdowns (Partners West Africa Nigeria, 2020: p. 7). According to *Nigeria's public health response to the COVID-19* pandemic from January to May 2020, the lockdowns as a structural response to the pandemic, "was a drastic and temporary measure implemented with two objectives: first, to slow down the spread of the virus across the country, and second, to by time for the health systems to increase its preparedness" (p. 5). Therefore, the responsibility of implementing the lockdowns and other structural restrictions falls in the hands of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF.), "the lead law enforcement agency in the country (Gholami and Salihu, 2008 in Salihu and Fawole, 2021: p. 43). The NPF is thus "entrusted with the power and responsibility to make arrests, detain, process and charge criminal suspect(s) to the court" (Salihu and Fawole, 2021: p. 43). the NPF is also characterized by "unethical misconducts, human rights abuses and violence against SWs, clients and, anyone arrested" (Aborisade, 2018 in Salihu and Fawole, 2021: p. 43). Reports include physical assault, battery, sexual abuse, and extortion to name a few. The resultant is the significant increase of police-SW violence where women and FSWs are heavily targeted. During raids of brothels, hotels and clubs and arrests of FSW and other women who "dressed provocatively," it has been observed and documented that the "police have extorted money from individual [SW], including during raids in which they engage in verbal assaults, beatings and other forms of physical violence."(Nagarajan, 2020: p.11). Additionally, during the COVID-19 period, women selling sex on the streets and women who have sex for survival are more "alert to police presence and hide when officers came into the area to avoid arrest and having to pay for their release (ibid, p. 12).

Before the Lockdowns...

Before the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent lockdowns, conversations about defending the human rights of SWs or people labelled as SWs were dominating; with aims consisting of giving SW some degree of legitimacy to the random abductions and gross violations of women under the moral guise of eradicating prostitution in Nigeria. In a 2019 Twitter post, Abayomi Shogunle, the Assistant Commissioner of Police, reflected the same views of an "unapologetically chauvinist society [declaring that],

> […] those making noise on the clampdown on prostitutes in Abuja. Prostitution is a crime under the law. [Prostitution is a sin under the 2 main religions of FCT residents. Medicine says [prostitution] is spreading HIV & STD. [Prostitution] is lifeline of violent criminals. [Prostitutes] don't pay tax. Nigeria culture frowns [prostitution]" (Okani, 2019).

These kinds of sentiments towards SWs, particularly FSWs are dominant within the Nigerian government and is highlighted that those sentiments are justifying the violence and human rights abuses against FSWs. It is therefore not surprising to see Nigeria's political elites reflecting such views publicly and confidently. Prior to COVID-19, discussions and debates about SW rights and the human rights of FSWs were also capitalized by high profile S/GBV cases that highlighted the violations and abuses perpetrated by law enforcement against women and FSWs. Some of the country's most noticeable and high-profile cases are collectively known as the 'Abuja Raids.'

The Abuja raids was a series of repetitive unfortunate events when "law-abiding women [were rounded up by law enforcement] under the guise of arresting [SW]s"

(Chiedozie, 2021). A key documented indication the led to the unlawful arrests of women were the fact they were "dressing provocatively[15]" so they must be engaging in sex work. According to the following court cases, the raids were "allegedly commissioned by the acting Secretary Social Development Secretariate (SDS)" (ibid) […and] organized by the [Abuja Environment Protection Board] AEPB with the support from the Society against Prostitution and Child Labour in Nigeria (SAP-CLN), and other law enforcement agencies such as the NPF. According to the news coverage on the Abuja Raids, the raids highlighted that "the women, who were targeted because of their gender, suffered sexual violations, physical and mental torture while in detention at Utako Police station" (Chiedozie, 2021). These raids heavily magnified the gender inequality in the country through the consequence of being falsely arrested and labelled as a SW. Whether or not the women arrested were SWs or not, the conditions the necessitated these arrests were shrouded by aims of moral policing merely based on *if* she looks like a sex worker or is *appearing* to engage in sex work. In 2019, the FCT Federal High Court ruled that "sex work is not a crime" (Durojaiye, 2019). The targeting of women perceived as SW highlights that the problem is not just with sex work but with the women in sex work. According to unofficial preliminary discussions via WhatsApp with Dorothy Njemanze[16], she motioned that, shortly after the ruling, COVID-19 hit and stalled the quest for justice and legal precedence to protect and advocate for the rights and safety of SWs.

2.4 The Position of Female Sex Work in Nigeria

Not unique to Nigeria, SWs of all genders and sexualities globally, experience high levels of violence and multiple violations to their human rights. Particularly within context of COVID-19, violence against SWs has significantly increased at various levels due to the nature of their work and the high contagiousness and virulency of SARS-CoV-2, resulting in the high levels of death and the over-capacitation of many hospitals and healthcare systems in general (Kumar et. al., 2020). Therefore, it is evident that globally, violence embuses the lives of many SWs and is overtly clear before and during the pandemic. In Nigeria, the case is no different. As previously stated, violence is not inherent to SW but it is not inevitable (ASWA, 2019: p. 10) The human rights abuses and violence against of SW "occur across all policy regimes, but most profoundly where sex work is criminalized through punitive law (Decker et. al, 2015 in ASWA, 2019: p. 10).

In a time of high health precarity, the government's prioritization of the pandemic response, on the basis to stopping the spread of the virus, and the high levels of gender inequality, the available evidence and literature highlight that with the legal, social and cultural frameworks

[15] Alonge, S. (2019). *Women dressed "provocatively" are being arrested in Nigeria. The law's still failing us | Sede Alonge.* [online] The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/06/women-dressed-provocatively-arrested-prostitutes-nigeria-abuja.

[16] The Executive Director and Founder of the Dorothy Njemanze Foundation, was one of the many women arrested and assaulted twice during the Abuja Raids between in 2012 and 2014 by law enforcement officers

around SW and the existing poor health and social infrastructures, addressing the increase of violence and human rights abuses against FSW has been deprioritized. This research paper will later highlight that the Nigerian government COVID-19 response and management justifies the use of direct violence and indirect violence towards FSWs is in the name of curtailing the spread of the novel Coronavirus.

A Historical Perspective and the Moral Policing of Female Sex Work in Nigeria

Historical evidence shows that "state policies and social views about prostitution in the colonial era have strongly influenced postcolonial policies on prostitution" deeming the FSW as the "female other" (Ekpootu, 2017: p. 310). The legal approach held tightly by the Nigerian government considering sex work is that it is illegal to sell sex, purchase sex and to organise commercial sex in any place. The criminalisation of sex works is dependent on "laws such as public disorder, vagrancy, loitering and state recognised religious provisions are used to prosecute women who sell sex" (Interactions, 2014). With an estimated population of 176,400 FSWs currently in Nigeria according to the National Agency for the Control of AIDs-NACA (2014) (NSWA, 2017: p.7), the criminalisation of FSW and FSWs occurs everywhere but to varying degrees. In the northern states of Nigeria, for example, "the policing of sex work[21] is so punitive in some cases that call for the stoning of women caught doing sex work" (NSWP, 2018). In, "section 225B (4) of the Criminal Code states that every female who is proved to have, for purpose of gain, exercised control, influenced, aided, abetted, or compelled her prostitution with any person shall be liable to imprisonment for 2 years" (Laws of the federation of Nigeria, 1990a in Salihu and Fawole, 2021: p. 43). FSWs, even in the absence of a legal basis for the criminalization of operational aspects of sex work, are harassed and punished by law enforcement agencies that apply administrative offences" (NSWA, 2017: p 14).

Prevailing cultural and religious attitudes and beliefs across Nigeria speak publicly and loudly against sex work, but another irony is that there is a large open presence of commercial sex work and to many, it is considered rampant. Due to colonization during the first half of the 19th century, Nigeria saw the implementation of commercial sex work for the first time. This was due to "[…] the proliferation of brothels and hotels for SWs in most urban centres but also in the creasing number of prostitution rings[22] in the continent" (Bagudo and Yusuf, 2019: p.1). As the town economies were booming where goods were continuously being brought and sold, it was easier to sell and buy sex.

With the introduction of western religion, i.e. Christianity, the policing of "illicit" sexuality was a top priority of Nigeria's British colonisers and Nigerian elites. To do so, interjections were made "into female sexual spaces [that] were narratively produced as a state concern for public health and morality by eliminating the sources of such moral decay and physical disease (Ekpootu, 2017: p. 310). The gender disparities evident in Nigerian society and culture are explained by "the combination of economic, social and political realities [that] continually force the Nigerian "women" into sexualised roles and servicing (domestic/sexual)

[22] Locally referred to as"*Ashawo* Business." *Ashawo* means "prostitute" in local Nigerian parlance.

of men to sustain herself" (Dienye, 2016: p. 66). The legal, cultural, and social context surrounding FSW across Nigeria has often justified the high degree of violence against women especially women in the sex industry.

Chapter 3 The Research

3.1 Research Objective

FSWs across Nigeria experience gross violations to their rights as humans, women, workers, and Nigerian citizens. The available evidence documented so far, proves the existence and high prevalence of the human rights violations and the increase violence against of FSWs under the government's enforcement and implementation for COVID-19 regulations in Nigeria. Howbeit, SDWs, INGOs such as Heartland Alliance Nigeria (HAN)[23], community-based organizations, SRH and health service providers and community activists and advocates are now "scrambling to provide some frontline services" (Stetsko, Aguilar and Shadwick, 2021) and have experience various and increased struggles and difficulties in doing so.

Through a thematic analysis of the difficulties, struggles and experiences expressed by both FSWs and SDWs that continue to support, advocate and provide SRHR and S/GBV services for them during COVID-19, the objective of this research is to identify the key dynamics and structures that facilitates and justifies the increase of violence against FSWs during lockdowns in order to understand how the government's COVID-19 efforts actively deprioritizes FSWs marginalizing them further.

3.2 Research Question and Sub-Questions

Research Question:

From the lived experiences and perspectives of female sex workers and the social development workers that continue to support, advocate, and provide necessary services for them, how is the Nigerian government's COVID-19 response and management justifying the increase of violence against FSWs in the name of curtailing the spread of the virus? And in what ways?

Sub-Questions:

1. What are the opinions and perspectives of how well the Nigerian government responded and managed the pandemic?

[23] HAI is an international NGO that "promotes progressive, innovative approaches to human rights protection and gender equity [and their] mission is to secure the rights and well-being of marginalized peoples and communities" (Heartland Alliance International, 2021). The NGO began its work in Nigeria in 2009 "with a large-scale effort to bring high quality and respectful HIV prevention services to some of the country's most stigmatized groups" (ibid) including FSWs and has "grown to become one of the largest USAID-funded HIV programs for key populations – including members of the LGBTQI+ community, sex workers, and people who inject drugs – in Sub-Saharan Africa" (ibid). Currently, HAI Nigeria has expended its efforts and programming to focus on marginalized groups of women and girls who are hard to reach.

2. What are the experiences, key dynamics, and trends of the increase of violence and human rights abuses/violations against FSWs?
3. What are the struggles and difficulties of social development workers and intervention actors in addressing the violence, health needs, struggles and difficulties experienced female sex workers during COVID-19 and to what extent has the government constrained their work?

3.3 Theoretical and Analytical Framework: Structural Violence as a Violation to the Human Rights

> "Human rights violations are not accidents; they are not random in distribution or effect. Rights violations are, rather, symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm" (Ho, 2007: p. 9).

With the unprecedented entrance of the novel Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), "a stable and effective government is at the heart of managing through [the] crisis" (Paydos, 2020) efficiently and impactfully. However, provided that a government is characterized by its instability, ineffectiveness, and corruption, to name a few, vulnerable populations such as FSWSs are at great risk to be left behind in its COVID-19 response and thus disproportionately impacted by its negative outcomes. As a political institution/structure with a majority religious and conservative political elite, that is inundated by high levels of corruption and characterized by its instability and ineffectiveness, the way the Nigerian government enforced and implemented COVID-19 regulations and restrictions through its agencies indicated that the government attains the power to justify the use of violence against FSWs sustaining the gross violations of their rights as humans, women, workers and Nigerian citizens marginalizing their position as FSWs further[28] [29] [30].

Johan Galtung's theories of violence are engaged with to identify, analyse and ultimately prove how the Nigerian government's COVID-19 response and management is justifying the increase of direct violence against FSWs in the name of curtailing the spread of the virus. Galtung's "theory of structural violence [helps] illuminate how structural inequalities that systematically deny some people their basic human need [is constituted] as astructural violation of human rights" (Ho, 2007: p. 1). Violence here is described as a process "[… to understand] the complexities and contestations behind violence as a practice and to envision possibilities of change" (Confortini, 2006: p. 341).

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[28] Adebisi, Y.A., Alaran, A.J., Akinokun, R.T., Micheal, A.I., Ilesanmi, E.B. and Lucero-Prisno, D.E. (2020). Sex Workers Should not Be Forgotten in Africa's COVID-19 Response. *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, 103(5), pp.1780–1782.

[29] The Government Nigeria recently launched its implementation plan for 2020-2030 with the support of UNDP where it plagues to "ensure that no Nigerian is left behind" (UNDPa Nigeria, 2021) admis COVID-19 pandemic.

[30] Ever since 2000 the Nigerian government and its federal state government "intensified their efforts eradicate prostitutes" (Chi and Smith, 2011: p. 1190).

Understanding Violence in the Context of Avoidability

> "Recognizing that structural causes are responsible for constrained agency is pivotal in making the transition from structural violence to structural violations of human rights" (Ho, 2007: p.1)

Defining violence can be challenging as understandings differ depending on its context for which it manifests. Galtung expands the description of violence as the "avoidable impairment of fundamental rights [or in general terms,] the impairment of human life, which lowers the actual degree to which someone is able to meet their needs below that which would otherwise be possible" (Ho, 2007: p. 3). According to Landman (2006), "individual actors are not completely free agents capable of determining particular outcomes. Rather, individuals are embedded in relational structures that shape their identities, interests, and interactions" (Landman, 2006 in Ho, 2007: p. 2). When agency is constrained, it mirrors an unequal distribution of power leading to systematic disadvantages for those who ultimately do not have as much power if not, any. Therefore, violence is present or *unavoidable* when a person's current and actual reality is less then it's higher potential. Galtung's definition notes that the gap between a person's reality and its higher potential under the arena of avoidability, embodies a myriad of major societal issues that can be influenced by intersectional factors such as poverty, gender, religion, type of work, and large health threats, endemics, and pandemics etc. The threat of violence and latent violence[31] are other forms of violence that "a person can be influenced (therefore 'violated') through the positive exercise of violence (reward given for obedience to the oppressor's dictates), or through the negative exercise of violence (punishment given for disobedience)" (Confortini, 2006: p. 337). The all-encompassing creates social environments that are conducive of and produces many kinds of violence and human rights violations.

To better understand what Galtung constitutes as violence, Galtung constructed three categories[32] of violence in order to illustrate that "all types of violence breed each other in many ways and that violence reproduces itself across all dimensions" (Confortini, 2006 p. 339). Here, Galtung focuses on the type of harm produced by the violence and the human needs the violence limits (ibid).

Typologies of Violence: Structural, Direct and Cultural Violence

The three categories constructed by Galtung[35] are structural violence, direct violence, and cultural violence. Regarding the stigmatized, marginalized, and deprioritized position of FSWs in Nigeria, criminalization through efforts, actions and laws that are discriminatory for example, are seen and expressed in all forms of violence. Structural, direct, and cultural violence interact with each other and operate as a triangle.

Structural violence[36] is "the unequal distribution of resources, and the unequal distribution of the 'power to decide over the distribution of resources' (Galtung, 1969: p. 171

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[31] "Violence that 'might easily come about'" (Confortini, 2006 p. 337)
[32] *Typologies of Violence* (1981) Galtung
[35] ibid.
[36] Also referred to as institutional and indirect violence.

in Confortini, 2006: p. 336). Structural violence is often hard to prove because it is a hybrid concept and indirect. Structural violence is the foundation of any systems of domination that deny mutual respect and equality. According to Ho (2007), "there may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The violence is built into the structures and shows up as unequal power and consequently unequal life chances" (p.4). It is express by institutions and through systems that produce societal inequalities such as gender, racial, and economic inequality. Therefore, structural violence produces social conditions. As structures such as law enforcement, institutionalizes structural violence through its expression in direct violence, "these social structures therein render that violence invisible [and justifiable] (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois in Ho, 2007: p. 9).

While structural violence does identify victims, there is no individual agent of violence like that in direct violence. When the death or demise of an individual is caused by an institution or a group and is repetitive over time to the demographic that the individual belongs to, this becomes a problem of structural violence. "Structural violence yields a complex picture of inequality as it considers economic, political, and social factors" (Ho, 2007: p. 2). To determine "how [an] individual's agency is constrained and how that makes an individual [and entire demographics of people], vulnerable to human rights violations" (Ho, 2007: p. 9), social location is the crucial determining factor. An example of structural violence is patriarchy as violence can be found within gendered relationships of power and can be found in crucial and impactful decision-making arenas[37]. In Galtung's book *Peace by Peaceful Means* (1996**),** patriarchy is "a vertical structure with men on top and women on the bottom, expressing itself in many other forms of violence against women legitimized by cultural justifications (Confortini, 2006: p. 340).

> "With the violent structure institutionalized and the violent culture internalized, direct. Violence also tends to become institutionalized, repetitive, ritualistic, like a vendetta."- Johan Galtung in Cultural Violence (1990: p. 302)

Structural violence is better understood though understanding what direct and cultural violence is, what constitutes as direct and cultural violence and the forces that influence them. As previously stated, direct violence[38] is easier to prove and identify because it is perceived physically like assault, verbal abuse, or murder for example. In direct violence, there is a clear victim created by a clear agent of violence. Direct violence thus strengthens and justifies structural violence and vice versa. In contexts with high social inequalities, Galtung's third definition of cultural violence provides an explanation on how structural violence is legitimized and how direct violence is justified rendering both forms of violence as acceptable within a given society. According to Galtung (1990), cultural violence is "[…] aspects of culture, the *symbolic sphere of our existence,* - exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and form mal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" (p. 291). Galtung (1990) further clarifies that "entire cultures can hardly be classified as violent; this is one reason for preferring the expression 'Aspect A of culture C is an example of cultural violence' to cultural stereotypes like 'culture C is violent' (p. 291). The symbolic systems that legitimize and justify the use of

[37] Governments are referred here as "crucial and impactful decision-making arenas."
[38] Also referred to as interpersonal violence.

violence "can be contained in all areas of social life […] and can be either intended or unintended (Confortini, 2006: p. 339). The above shows how structural, direct, and cultural violence form a violence triangle wherein a form of violence cannot exist without the two other forms.

Intersectionality: Gender and the Social Construction of Violence

FSWs embody an intersectional identity where gender is central among other factors such as sexuality and socio-economic standing. According to Kimberley Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, intersectionality highlights the interlocking system of oppression that helps expose the complexities of multiple identities and structures of oppression and privilege. It is key to note here that gender is not a synonym for women. Gender as according to Scott (1986), is "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and […] a primary way of signifying relations of power" (Scott, 1986: 42).

As a social construct, gender organizes social life. It is an analytical category and tool of analysis and the crucial way of understanding and accounting for the struggles of women that go beyond biological function. The social construction of violence can thus be understood as gendered. Confortini (2006) confirms this by stating that "[…] violence is deeply implicated in the construction and reproduction of gender relations, and in particular in the construction and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity" (p. 336). However, within Galtung's theories on violence, he does not explore the role gender has in the social construction of violence specifically in his suggestions of a nonviolent methods for address attitudes and perceptions that accept and normalize violence on the basis of gender. By highlighting the powerful analytical role gender plays in the social construction of violence, it becomes clearly to locate the grounds and driving forces that justify violence against women and the violence against FSWs within the context of COVID-19 in Nigeria (Confortini p. 335).

3.4 Methodology

For this research, I employed a thematic analysis as a method of data analysis "to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences" (Braun and Clarke, 2012: p. 15). According to Braun and Clare (2012), thematic analysis of data analysis is flexible enough to "focus on analysing meaning across the entire data sets" (p. 58) (i.e. semi-structured interview transcripts), and/or to "examine one particular aspect of a phenomenon in depth" (p. 58).

Semi-Structured Interviews and Secondary Data Collection

This research followed the qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews as the method of collecting primary data. With open-ended questions to guide the interviews conducted, semi-structured interviews were conducted to embrace storytelling. The rationale is premised on the idea that stories of lived experiences can provide rich data that is deeply

contextualised from specific positionalities" (Kendell and Kendell, 2012: p. 162). The conversations with the interview respondents were grounded on terms of respect, honesty, and comfortability. Interviews were conducted online[43] from The Hague, The Netherlands between October 10th 2021 – October 17th 2021 and on November 2nd 2021. All interviews were conducted late in the data collection period resulting from the difficulties associated in acquiring and confirming interviews. An information/consent form was developed and shared to explain the organisation and procedure of the online interviews and to provide a brief description of the aim of the research. Transcripts were developed and coded thematically by hand and selected quotations from respondents were incorporated in this paper to support research findings.

Secondary data in the form of media articles, official briefs, reports, and large and small-scale research studies (country-level, regionally, and continentally) helped contextualize my research problem, provide background, develop the guiding interviews, and to assist in the thematic analysis of the interviews conducted.

The Selection of Interview Respondents and the Interview Process

I was able to schedule a total of 4 interviews with Nigerian SDWrkers that all work at NGOs, have their own community-led organization or are a part of gender/health development projects in Nigeria. Two of my interview respondents are FSWs One FSW respondent has her own SW-led community-based organizations and the other FSW works on various HAN projects. I engaged both of their perspectives as FSWs and as SDWrker. The other two respondents are SDWsrkers that work with HAN and other global HAI Projects. Interviews were confirmed via WhatsApp messages and e-mails. The process of acquiring potential interviews was extremely difficult as the initial response rate from my professional networks of contacts was very slow. Fortunately, with the support and connections facilitated by Edward Kallon, the United Nations Nigeria Regional and Humanitarian Coordinator (UN RC/HC), and Hadiza Aminu, the UN Nigeria Spotlight Coordinator, I was able to confirm four interviews. All four interview respondents agreed to be acknowledged and mentioned by name in this paper[45].

3.5 Reflexivity: Positionality and Locating Confidence in the Research Process

Firstly, as empirical challenges began to unfold and surface quite quickly, I learned the importance of locating my confidence in my research contributions and decision-making especially during the data collecting period[47]. At certain moments throughout the research process, I became overly cautious about if I was approaching this research with the skills and analytical capacity to conduct the research and produce a quality research paper in an organized and clear way. In hindsight, my over-cautiousness, causing fluctuating levels of

[43] Zoom.
[45] See Annex I for names and descriptions of research respondents.
[47] The summer months: June, July, and August.

intense uncertainty, became disruptive during the research process. I speculated that the stressors of COVID-19, living abroad and being a master's student did in fact, impact my confidence in my research contributions as this paper is for partial fulfilment of obtaining a master's degree in development studies.

Secondly, my hesitance to capitalize on my family's influence[48] in the development sector was due to the fear judgement based on the cultural stigma of capitalizing on family ties. I observed that in introductory conversations with potential interview respondents, I was frequently addressed to as "the daughter of the RC/HC in Nigeria." My lack of comfortability with the statement above was based on the feel of wanting to independently conduct my research irrespective of my familial ties. I however needed to accept and understand this as part of my researcher positionality in order locate and confirm interviews. I made the needed research choices to ignore my pervious anxieties about the overlapping of personal professional and academic connections. I realized that regardless of the presumed implications, it can still produce positive results when desperately needed during data collection process based on the ability to take advantage of the options and sources of support available around me. However, this is not a perspective shared by all, but I sought comfort with this choice due to the full support and encouragement my farther has for me and my academic and research pursuits.

3.6 Research Challenges

Two of the most notably identified challenges consisted of anchoring, contextualizing, and justifying the research problem clearly and the search for interview respondents. Both challenges produced to significant time constraints leading to significant delays in data analysis. Firstly, I anticipated that these two challenges may arise, but I did not anticipate the gravity of both and that they would manifested simultaneously and to multiple degrees throughout the process. I came to discover that as the violence experienced by FSWs is widely searched and documented across different contexts, data specific to the violence by FSWs during COVID-19 in Nigeria is limited specifically, statistical data and literature. I was conducting secondary research extensively and intensively to a point that the information and data gathered was overwhelming in size which led to a complicated engagement with the data with too many possible angles for analysis. As a result, contextualizing the research problem with a clear anchor was missing and manifested it to a significant empirical challenge. With the tremendous support and advice of my research supervisors, I was able to address this problem.

With the support I received that helped address empirical challenges, the reality of the time constraints led to the possibility of only four interviews. Concerns of the generalizability of the experiences discussed thus became key concerns because all experiences are the not the same, even significant commonalities. Each interview respondent are experts of their field as experts of their own experiences. Therefore, the decision was made to analyse the data collected through the interviews thematically and to use the

[48] Edward Kallon is my father.

responses as evidence coupled with the plethora of data garnered through secondary research to address the research objective.

With the chosen research method of semi-structured interviews conducted in a storytelling manner, my anticipated ethical dilemmas of discussing FSWs in the context of Nigeria were very small. Based on the expertise, personal and work experiences, perspectives, and mutual interests in social and gender development issues between the interview respondents and myself, an atmosphere of openness, respect and honesty was immediately established though the informal communication style applied and sustained throughout the interviews and post-interview conversations.

Chapter 4 **The Research Findings**

> "[…] Life has actually taught us that it seems we can't trust anyone anymore" – Josephine Aseme, Female Sex Worker, Activist, and Executive Director and Founder of Greater Women Initiative for Health and Right

Foundational to my analysis of my interviews respondents' responses to the questions asked is the understanding that, the SDWsrkers interviewed who professionally and personally advocate, empower, and provide care for FSWs are experts in their work with key vulnerable populations of Nigerians, especially FSWs. According to Kontinen (2004), the focus on the experiences of intervention actors[51] aims to "uphold the belief in the possibility of knowledge and to continue to development [the] multiple methods of acquiring it" (p.15) from different positions and perspectives As much as the Nigerian non-state actors interviewed are experts in their field and, FSWs are experts of their lives, livelihoods, experiences, struggles and difficulties as well. The FSWs interviewed are also social developed workers as well. Therefore, both perspectives and opinions are combined and engaged to attempt to adhere to the feminist pro-sex worker camp. The feminist pro-sex worker camp for which this research is grounded on, "[…] recognizes [SW] as a legitimate profession […and] that [SWs] have the capacity to exist as rational actors […] control their lives" and empower themselves" (Chi and Smith, 2011: p. 1186-1193). In this section, I will not directly mention my respondents by name but mention the perspective for which some of their response come from, i.e., SDWsrkers who are not FSWs, their professional titles or SDWsrkers who are FSWs.

4.1 The Pre-COVID-19: The Violation of Female Sex Worker Human Rights

As indicated previously in the research background, literature about the violence experienced by Nigerian FSWs in the country that lead to the violation of their rights is limited. As part of this research's contribution, I asked the SDWs and FSWs to paint a picture of the pre-COVID-19 condition and situation for FSWs as the COVID-19 period significantly exacerbated those pre-existing issues and challenges that were present.

According to the respondents, they all made explicitly clear that the violence experienced by FSWs across Nigeria is perpetrated by three main groups of people: intimate partners or as one respondent labelled, *special boyfriends*, clients, and law enforcement. What this indicates is that violence occurs at the personal level with intimate partners or *special boyfriends,* at the community level with their clients that FSWs provide services to, and at the structural level from law informants as agents of the government. These groups of identified perpetrators are not unique to Nigeria however, as one FSW respondent made clear from her experience within the Nigerian context that:

[51] Here, [SDW]s are labelled as intervention actors.

"While I was still much into sex work, you get to see a lot of [SWs] in Nigeria being treated unfairly just because people perceive to be *cost beings*, because *they* don't really have that understanding that one can sell sex for money and not just pleasure."

She made it very clear that "if people don't patronize SWs, SWs would not exist." This also provides insight in the fact that the bodily autonomy for FSWs across Nigeria is not recognized. The Key Population Advisor HAN points this exact fact out by stating:

"[…T]here is this belief of, *oh! you are a [SW] than you cannot be raped* or *who are you as a [SW] to even choose the kind of man you want to have sex with*. That bodily autonomy is not recognized for [FSWs]. […I]t is assumed that they are [SWs] so everything should go. And there is also this assumption that [SWs] are only people that go to brothels. Whereas you have a diversity of [SWs]. In the course of my work, I have seen doctors who are into sex work. I've seen lawyers who are into sex work. I've seen professionals go into sex work and their experiences are quite different from others."

However, at the same time, if it is clear that, people are buy sex from FSWS," how can FSWS be considered , perceived and, labelled as *cost beings?* As contradictory as it presents itself, it is highlighted evidently through the evidence of the violence experienced by FSWs and the violation to their rights that occurs, that the stigma and discrimination of FSWs is incredibly high. Cultural and religious justifications is an explanation for the high levels of stigma and discrimination This statement above is particularly important because a FSW respondent goes on to substantiate it by stating:

"The truth is that in Nigeria, or should I say, possibly or especially, [SWs] that work at the brothel basis, there is no day that passes by where one [SWs] from a brothel is not being violated one way or the other. Not just physical violation but emotional violation as well; when *they*[52] get to touch them with verbal abuse, say what they don't want to say to them or say what is not *expected* to be said to a human being […] should I say, most times, they are confined to a situation where they feel what *these people* say about *me* is *kind of true.*

In many instances, as another respondent below will detail, is that the Nigerian law enforcement should be held accountable for apply on the *cost being* label directly, negatively impacting FSWs. As agents of the government, the label provides evidential proof of structural violence and how it manifests directly in the lives of FSWs because it highlights the impairment of human life. The is stigmatizing perspective of sex work and specifically, women in sex work, the Nigerian Law enforcement is also heavily influenced by pervasive and stigmatizing cultural and religious ideology that morally polices women. Therefore, it is also evidence of how cultural relativism produces human rights violations showing that supposedly, "there are no universal human rights and that rights are culture-specific and culturally determine" (Ho, 2007: p 9). In that case then, the human rights violation and violence against FSWs would not exist as violence or even considered as violence. In reality it is the complete opposite. The respondent stated that:

[52] Perpetrators of violence.

> "[FSWs] are victims of extortion […] by law enforcement, violations of rights to movement, association and illegal arrest especially at nights. Invasion of privacy and so on. […HAN has] had to intervene in cases where [SWs] were raped by police officers in Abuja. Heartland Alliance has had situations where brothels were raided and demolished by state actors, causing bodily harm to the [SWs] who were trying to flee the sights for safety. A sex worker was electrocuted inside rain when she was running away from police arrest. This case was taken up by HAN working with the National Human Rights Commission to get justice for her. We have had to support medical treatment for [SWs] who have been victims of police brutality."

A FSW respondent also stated:

> "[…P]rior to COVID-19, a lot of conversation was going on how to see if SWs can actually work with law enforcement agencies because we felt that they are our issue. We felt that they were not properly orientated on the policy, or should I say, the constitution of the country, or should I say, that maybe they know it, but they don't want to implement it the way it's been written. So, prior to COVID-19, there was a lot of conversations [about this] because we have had situations where [SWs] are being raided and not just being raided, but in the process of raiding them, they are being raped. In the process of raiding them, they are being brutalized. But I know for sure that we understand the law that says, *one can only be punished for when you are found guilty of something that is wrong*. You have not taken them to court to judge them, but you keep violating their rights."

As much as there is evidence showing there is diversity into the kinds of sex work FSWs do in Nigeria. Another respondent made it clear from his experience working with the FSW communities, that for women who have sex work for survival:

> "Their vulnerability levels are higher because they are only thinking about how to feed. So, their negotiation skills are lower if not, not in existence like in most cases because they just needed to go and get their coin! So, no matter how much you tell them about, *this is when you wear condoms, this is how you protect themselves,* the thing that most [FSWs] will always say that, let me use the pidgin like creole, they would say *is it not when you have food in your belly, you can also argue with somebody*. So, it is more like if I am hungry as a sex worker, and I see a costumer or a client standing in front of me, you can't expect me to scare that costumer away. Because what I am thinking is, *oh I need this money to feed!* Or *I need this money to pay for my house rent or health by tomorrow morning or I will be sleeping under the bridge. So, if I tell the man, or the client, as the case may be, you say that oh, please use condom. And if he says no, I'd rather take that risk!* Compared to a lot of them that face the issue of gender-based violence and this gender-based violence in some instances were clients deliberately take of condoms while having sex with them. Then we have had instances, in some cases, were some have been murdered, some have been killed! A lot of time they are subject to police brutality and there is also *rape for bail* too when they are taken advantage of."

4.2 The Onset of the Pandemic: Anticipated Fears that Materialized

During the interview process, I asked all my respondents what their anticipated fears were with the entrance of the Coronavirus and the associated lockdowns regarding FSWs. Four key overarching areas of concern arose. One, there is a fear that the sustainability of

SW intervention programming will reduce due to the lack or reduction of donor funding. Two, there is a fear, heightened that during COVID-19, that the recognition of FSWs as citizens will significantly drop. Highlighted primarily were the areas of government-funded COVID-19 provisions and policy. Three, there is the fear that treatment failure will occur for FSWs regarding HIV/AIDS and STI treatment. Fourth, there was the fear of the increased social isolation of FSWs due to the reduction of alternative income generating opportunities and limited access to crucial resources such as access to clean water. All these in fact materialized during the lockdowns across Nigeria.

One of my FSW respondents stated that:

> "[…] Our greatest fear is *how do we sustain our programs when the donors are no more*? That has always been our fear and that is still our fear. […] Before [COVID-19] we used to give [SWs] like one box of condoms but now you don't give them up to one pack. Yes! Like some [clients] like to give them a little condom demanding that they buy others for themselves while some of them, when they come for drugs, they used to give them some money or when they come for their education… little incentives that are being given to them. But those things are no longer there. So, you start seeing that fear of those things not being sustainable.

She goes on to provide, another example through the programming her organization does:

> "The government of Nigeria can practically say, in the space where I operate, the three states my organization is covering, no sex worker got a dime from the government! Nothing!"

Another FSWs respondent provided an example detailing the process of acquiring bank loans. She stated that:

> "[…] People do go to pick up loans in banks but as a sex worker, you can't even pick up a loan. Because the first thing is that you don't have a property, you sell sex so why should we give you a loan? This is basically what we have been virtually scared of and we really look for ways where opportunities and these conversations will go on where we can initiate these conversations within our policymakers and the rest. People that we felt like had the mandate to make those change"

However, it doesn't stop there as many FSWs acquire their income on the daily basis based on the availability of clients. As according to one of my respondents:

> "In terms of their living spaces, some of them in some of the brothels, they are [daily wagers]. It is not like they are paying every month their house rent. They pay daily, its daily they pay! Now no clients to come. Will they be able to afford even eating? Not to even talk that now they even need to go buy more volumes of water compared to the regular one that they get."

The Executive Director of HAN also added, speaking from his experience working with FSWs that:

> "Due to the restrictions, we could not access the [SWs] in their regular locations. This impacted on access to lifesaving medications and interventions. It costed much more to move around and provide services."

This leads to the next highlighted fear express by all respondents that the perception of FSWs as citizens as "respected reputable members of society" will reduce significantly or disappear

altogether. This also has an impact on intervention efforts and service provision for FSWs. The Executive Direct of HANadded that:

> "[SWs] are not recognized and respected as reputable members of the society. Most religious and faith-based groups even preach sermons against them as being immoral. Yet they are patronized for sexual gratification by the same society that castigate them. [SDWs are equally stigmatized due to their association with [SWs]. We have not being able to overcome this difficulties. Even healthcare providers sometime allow personal values to influence their decision to treat [SWs]. Sometimes they are preached to as sinners"

A respondent that works primarily on projects concerning on HIV/AIDs and STI testing and treatment, expressed deep concerned to me stating that:

> "[…Treatment failure] is one of my fears or one of my greatest fears is that reason. This is a community where some of them are not as open about their sexual journey and sexual behaviours. […] At the same time, some are also HIV positive. Now COIVD-19 has sent everybody back. The only safe place they have to be able to take their drugs, be able to be themselves is either in their community of friends or even in our community centres. Now restriction of movement, closing of offices."

Regarding the fear of limited access to crucial resources that impact the SW community in general, but the respondent above also stated that:

> "For a sex worker you must have interactions before you make your money. Now COVID-19 is zero interaction and those are some of those things that you also need to look at. Then another point again is that it's also my challenge is, when we talk of sanitation level, more than 70% of vulnerable population are also poor. So even one's access to sanitation and hygiene conditions and sanitary issues like water is like a luxury for many of them. A lot of them use community wells and during restrictions now, the usage of their water will increase because they need to wash every other time. In terms of their living spaces, some of them in some of the brothels they are [daily wagers]. It is not like they are paying every month their house rent. They pay daily, its daily they pay! Now no clients to come. Will they be able to afford even eating? Not to even talk that now they even need to go buy more volumes of water compared to the regular one that they get."

4.3 Government Hypocrisy and Misinformation of the during COVID-19

Galtung's (1990) third definition of cultural violence provides an explanation on how structural violence is legitimized and how direct violence is justified rendering both forms of violence as acceptable within a given society. A core reason, as according to my interview respondents, is the clear hypocrisy of the government influenced religious and cultural factures, patriarchal value systems and misinformation disseminated by the Nigerian Government during COVID-19. One aspect regards the fact that many Nigerian political leaders and many police offices have patronized sex from FSWs while actively criminalizing them and the misinformation about COVID-19 disseminated by political leaders standing as health professions.

The FSWs I spoke to were very focal regarding this this aspect. The Executive Director of HAN pointed out that, as the Nigerian police are agents of the government:

> "The lockdown was fully enforced for close to 6 months during which the impact was much on the country. The Nigeria police used the opportunity to cause more harm on the community as people could not move about freely to do business. [SWs] were badly affected as they were victims of arrest and extortion."

One of the FSW respondents went on to state that:

> "[…] because of what the society, or rather, the Nigerian situation confined in us police themselves now use that as a weapon of war to practically abuse [SWs]. And imagine when someone is abusing you and if the person is telling you, *you can't do nothing* and deep within yourself you also know you can't do nothing because when you come out to speak up everybody wants to say *but you are selling yourself for money, why would yourself your body for money?*

What both of the FSW respondents made explicitly clear is that there are a lot of negative forces and people in high decision-making areas such as policy makers. One of the FSWs honestly and blunted stated that policy makers are:

> "Rooted in that custom, and that religious belief system of theirs. So, in as much as they are presidents, they're this, they're that, when they look at us demanding for those rights, they also like look at their religious system. They want to apply what their system informed them or what they believe in and not based on the reality of life […]. They DO patronize [SWs]! When they are doing their political parties, [SWs] are invited to offer them services. So, even if you need to criminalize me, you are part of them, you are part of us, because you are the one patronizing me. So, why will I be the one facing the consequences? So, they don't even what to look at it in an angle that this is a reality you can change! But rather you can work with this people to protect them because you patronize them. But they want to flaunt their religious practices that they believe in. Should I say, that they even hold that one at a high esteem, any other thing is zero! So, it was like that. The COVID-19 now came."

When the COVID-19 period began the case was still the same. Her opinion above regarding policy makers is the same all the way down to the police that patrol the streets and highways during lock downs and periods of movement restriction. For example. She also powerfully state that:

> "[In] as much as the Nigerian police most time, they behave like, how do I say, like spirits, because I don't know a human being that would be behaving like a wild animal who does not want to think! So, in as much as they are behaving that way and we have been trying so many times to see a way that we can reduce the violation of sex workspaces, and it was not working. So, we say fine, it's not working but if we become *friends*[53] with these people, we might not reduce the violence 100% but, to an extent.

The above highlights on how she delivered this this statement is the process of exposing how rooted the problem is especially during COVID-19 and the strategies that she and her fellow community of FSWS use to address the violence they experience and the violations to their right during lockdowns and movement restrictions. Additionally, COVID-19 misinformation disseminated by the government, in term of the government's attitude

[53] Sex work clientele.

towards the virus show a different image. It also shows the process for which some FSWs living in poor and crowed brothels or cheap accommodation, who have sex for survival or have poor negotiation skills due to lower educational levels for example, are confused regarding what the pandemic is. Here, I categorize *information* as a crucial resource during COVID-19 for vulnerable populations as a whole across the country as science is what should lead COVID-19. The Key Population Advisor for HANsubstantiates the above claim by providing an example:

> "[…T]here was an incident that happened in a state in Nigeria, Lagos state, where I think it was in December [2020] where they organized a Christmas party for people who are still at the isolation centres. [This] brought about a lot of artillery reinforces in the misinformation people were getting, that oh! we see [that…] in Europe and the US in ICU units, they have masks, they are giving them oxygen, they are putting that there. But here! They say they have COVID-19 and they are busy dancing! Are you sure COVID-19 really exists!? Or these people are saying it because they want to collect money from the western governments? […] So that's why first thing first, science has been pushed to the background. So the people who are leading the issue where people, politicians that actually got the trust of the people. So, in one way or the other, they never knew that they are also reinforcing the misinformation that people have."

4.5 Gender Insensitivity: Lack of Women in COVID-19 Decision-Making

Across the board, all the respondents acknowledged and believe that the Nigerian government has the capacity, resources, and money to not only expand their COVID-19 response policy to be inclusive of FSWs and address the impact of the virus and the associated lockdowns. All the respondents clearly stated that an issue within that the NCPRP is that it does not include women in COVID-19 decision-making. This is not unknown as gender inequality is a major development issue. Not only does this directly impact FSWs, it also renders them invisible in the impact of the pandemic and has effected the work SDWss during COVID-19 so far. This leaves the Nigerian government's COVID-19 response and mange gender insensitive. As according to Ho (2007), as mentioned in the theoretical/analytical framework previously, structural violence is the foundation of any systems of domination that deny mutual respect and equality. "There may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The violence is built into the structures and shows up as unequal power and consequently unequal life chances" (Ho, 2007: p.4). One of my respondents highlighted that the same patriarchal value systems that characterize Nigerian culture is also deeply embedded in the government and how it manifests into political decision-making:

> "You know this kind of heteronormative thing; everybody conforms to the *norm. Oh, you are a man, or you are a male identified going out with a female identified person*, that heteronormativity is there. That brings a lot of challenges in the work, and you need to also know that it's this heteronormativity that brought about the patriarchal laws that we have. Because those laws are entrenched based on those perceived ideas and perceived normative behaviours and those are some of the barriers that you have in terms of the law and in terms of the policy."

He goes on the clarify that, "[…] the response itself is not gender sensitive. So as a result, you can't even look at it like *oh, does it include marginalized women?* Because in the first place, they exclude women entirely. So, there is a lack of political will by the government during COVID-19 to be gender sensitive not only for vulnerable key populations such as FSWs but women in general. Another interview respondent made it very clear that Nigerian women are crucial to fighting the Coronavirus nationwide. Gender insensitivity promoted by powerful political elites, whether direct or indirect sustains the message that women and girls are not impacted by the pandemic weather they are a SW or not. Of course, that is proven to not be true. It has been proven that the gendered impact of COVID-19 is overtly clear. Therefore, it is not that women and girls are not impacted at all, they are impacted differently which requires gender sensitive policies especially during COIVD-19. Regarding women in sex work in Nigeria, one of my respondents points out that within the context of Nigeria:

> "[…] Women have a way they learn and how they react to the messages [the government shares], the message is as important as the messenger! We needed to build technical capacity from within the women groups and have champions who are respected by the women themselves as fellow women who have leadership quality to influence others positively, for desired change. The women can do anything if they are given the opportunity and the necessary exposure.

A FSW, who has her own sex worker-led community-based organization also agrees, regarding the government's capacity especially when it comes to stating:

> "Hmm, I'll say that the Nigerian government has 100% capacity. They have what it takes to ensure an all-inclusive environment that accommodate [SWs]. They do. But the problem is that the Nigerian government is not willing to overlook what they believe in, in terms of their religion and face the reality that we are all human. First and foremost, before we became [SWs], we are human and after being human, we are citizens of Nigeria before [the government starts] counting *what* we do. What we do shouldn't be a problem! What should be [their] problem is [them] taking care of us, [them] providing for us whatever [they] are providing for the next person. It's simple! The government will always recognize doctors, right? They will recognize lawyers. They all get paid. So, the bottom line is everyone gets paid for the services they rendered! So, [SWs] are rendering services and they are expecting to get paid. If the doctors, lawyers or if they can provide for us or people of all walks of life, why can't they provide for [SWs]. It's not that the money is not there.

Interestingly, the above is not unique to Nigeria but, the level of distrust of the government across the country creates a situation unique to Nigeria to the Nigerian context. A Key Population Advisor for Heartland Alliances pointed out that:

> "And even at the beginning you find out that it's not just the US or in Europe. Even in Nigeria, you find out that they put science to the background and politics at the forefront. Political leaders became incident managers of COVID-19. They were the ones giving you updates about COVID-19. So, you see that somebody who is telling you about a virus that is a lot of disinformation is about. And the person that is supposed to provide are people you do not trust! Politicians! They are the ones that became like the incident manager! And they are talking. These are people that like the trust of the people!"

4.4 Defying Odds: The Resilience and Capacity of Female Sex Workers During COVID-19 in Nigeria and Lessons Learned

As all the respondents are SDWs that work either with HAN, or on global projects for HAI, or have their own community-based organization, they all highlighted that even though the impact of COVID-19 on FSWs under the government-mandated repones and management has been detrimental to the community, COVID-19 did bring a silver lining regarding the power and importance of community empowerment and community mobilization. According to Moore et. al. (2014), community empowerment regarding FSWs across Africa is "a collective process through which the structural constraints to health, human rights and well-being are addressed by SWs to create social and behavioural change, and access to health service (p.2). `this definition expands into other areas beyond just health as well. My respondents made it clear that COVID-19 in brought about the need to start expanding collaborative means and through that, it has been reported FSWs are getting empowered and mobilizing across the country. Both respondents that are solely SDWs proudly proclaimed that the FSWs that they have worked with are not only the most courageous groups of women they have worked with. One of the SDWs stated:

> "FSWs are some of the most amazing human beings I have met. They are some kind-hearted fellows who are only concerned about their work. I have learnt that some of the privileged few [SWs] were able to take care of the very vulnerable ones among them. They created alternative sources of income to complement the low turnover from sex work. The solidarity and comradery among the [SWs] during the pandemic was very encouraging and humbling. Though we lost some [SWs] during the period, but it was really an experience seeing how friends and colleagues stood by each other"

The success rate of supporting each other, as according to the above quote is that some international donors are now become flexible enough to allow for reprogramming of resources for COVID-19. A FSW respondent goes on to substantiate the above by stating:

> "[…That] when it comes to NGOs, they tend to reach out to the community. They use the community members to get to the community. But the government is not really doing that but NGOs are doing that. So if we can use NGOs Like Heartland Alliance, Society for Family Health and FHI 360 to reach out to the community and to the government to educate them, tell them what to do give them some of the strategies that is working for them so that the government can also apply these strategies in whatever they are §doing that has to do with FSWs in the community."

According to all the respondents A great lesson learned from the constraints of COVID-19 across Nigeria was the importance of community interventions. According to the Key Population Adviser from Heartland Alliance

> "We learned is that we do a lot of community interventions. We call it *differentiated care model* which is the most convenient. So that has worked for us for a long time. So, in terms of the impact itself of COVID-19 concerning our interventions, although, […] I'm going into detail in term of [SWs] […]. In terms of COVID-19 and our interventions it is also helped us to

also do, like what we call, peer-to-peer field training using the peers to also get their drugs to others. They are now becoming open, like a community of support for themselves to say that *oh, my friend is coming to pick their drugs why don't you give my friend my drugs instead of me to come, my friend can do this small as a friend*. We are seeing dynamics changing."

Chapter 5 The Research Conclusion

COVID-19 as a context has and continues to test the Nigerian government's ability to provide and care for all its citizens. The objective of this research was to identify the key dynamics and structures that facilitates and justifies the increase of violence and human right violations against FSWs as a key vulnerable population to understand how the government's COVID-19 efforts is actively deprioritizes FSWs marginalizing them further. The main research finding shows that it does not matter whether the violence is direct through the law enforcement agencies or the community, indirect through unequal distribution of COVID-19-specific services and provisions by the government, or because of culture through conservative, religious patriarchal value systems overtly clear in the governments, its agents and the general Nigeria Society. All aspect works together to provide proof of the justification and legitimization of the violence against FSWs and the violations to their human rights under the efforts of curtailing the spread of the.

My greatest takeaway from this research is the FSWs across Nigeria are one of the most resilient and courage's group of women as one of my respondents had mentioned. FSWS deserve to be respected, protected, supported, and empowered through the structures that are meant to do so. Cultural and religious beliefs aside, another key finding is that all the respondents agree that the government has the capacity to be inclusive of FSW and its clear what needs to be addressed. This shows the future of FSW and the strides towards decriminalization and recognized agency and bodily autonomy is not just speculation. Although I was not able to confirm more interviews, the conversations had with the interviews provided a plethora of rich information that I unfortunately had to choose which aspects to include in this research paper.

As literature is limited regarding FSW in Nigeria and the violence they experience, this research paper is contributing to the body of growing literature for not only Nigeria but for West Africa and for Africa as a whole. As COVID-19 is still present, there is a growing body of literature being conducted with COVID-19 as a context. I hope the consolidated findings of this reach helps ad to the body of literature around COVID-19 and its impact on various vulnerable populations. Another insight presides on the idea that simply signing international doctrines and pledges does not conceal the ills of major social/development issues within a country. At a time like this, it is important to constantly keep the government and its state actors accountable as address the impact of the pandemic is also a collaborative one.

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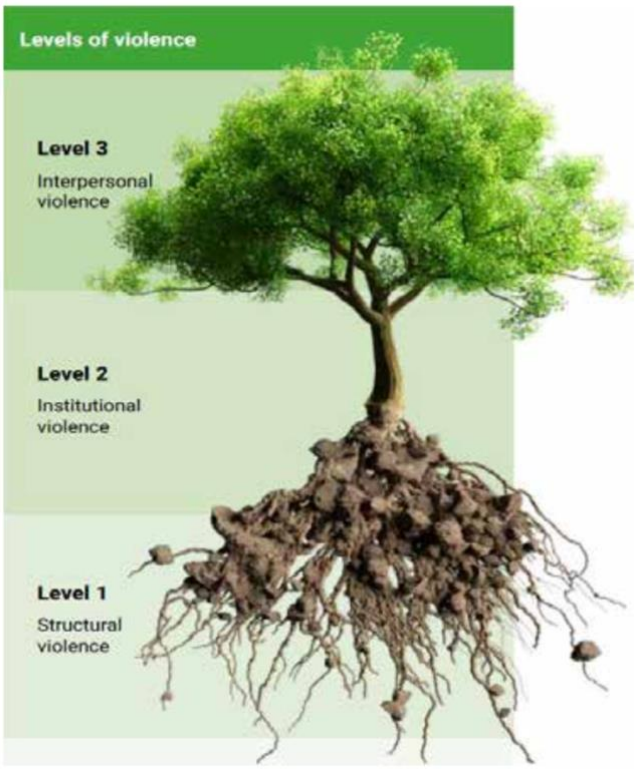
Appendices

Appendix 1:



(Source: African Sex Worker Alliance (2019). "*Every sex worker has got a story to tell about violence": Violence against sex workers in Africa.* Nairobi.).

Annex

Description of Interview Respondents:

Respondent 1: **Bartholomew Boniface Ochonye (hi/him)**

Bartholomew "Bart" Boniface Ochonye is the Executive Director of Heartland alliance Nigeria with "20 years' of experience in public health and human rights […and] lead one of the largest HIV and AIDs prevention, care and treatment program for the key populations in sub-Saharan Africa." (Heartland Alliance Nigeria, 2021). Bart also facilitated the connections to the following respondents.

Respondent 2: **Josephine Aseme (she/her)**

Josephine Aseme is the founder of Greater Women Initiative for Health and Rights, "a sex worker led-community organization" (AVAC, 2021). As a sex worker herself, Josephine and her organization have been immensely supported by the services and programmes of Heartline Alliance Nigeria and continues to work closely with them where she continues to strive center sex workers in advocacy. Josephine was the first female sex worker, I was fortunate enough thanks to Bart to engage in a conversation about her experiences as a female sex worker, her organizations, COVID-19 in Nigeria and the violence experienced by female sex workers.

Respondent 4**: Michael Akanji (all pronouns accepted)**

Michael Akanji is the Key Population Advisor for Heartland Alliance Nigeria. To summarise, some of Michael's work revolves around "human rights using the public health approach for sexual minorities and Sexual Health and Rights Advocate with over a decade experience on LGBTI issues and interventions on West Africa. Michael is also the "co-author of the book "*Through the Gender Lens"* edited by Funmi Soetan and Bola Akanji." (9jafeminista, 2019).

Respondent 4: **Adah C. Ada (She/Her)**

Adah C. Ada is the Executive Director of Unique Women and Children Health and Rights Initiative also known as (Unique Women).