

## Breaking the Culture of Silence: Men as Victims of Domestic and Sexual Violence

By: **Gary Kelechi Amadi**



### Introduction

Domestic and sexual violence have long been recognized as pervasive societal issues, yet public discourse and policy responses have mostly framed these crimes as gendered phenomena affecting women. This narrative, while critical in addressing systemic misogyny and protecting female survivors, has inadvertently rendered male victims invisible.

This article seeks to dismantle the entrenched stereotypes and societal taboos that silence male survivors, challenging the binary perception of violence that casts men solely as perpetrators and women as victims.

By interrogating cultural norms, institutional biases, and systemic gaps in support, this work advocates for a more inclusive understanding of gender-based violence, one that acknowledges the full spectrum of human suffering and fosters equitable pathways to justice and healing.

Historically, discussions of domestic and sexual violence have been shaped by patriarchal frameworks that equate masculinity with invulnerability and dominance. Men who experience abuse, whether at the hands of intimate partners, family members, or strangers, often confront disbelief, ridicule, or accusations of weakness, reinforcing a culture of shame that discourages disclosure.

Data from organizations such as the CDC and global studies reveal that approximately 1 in 9 men experience severe physical violence by an intimate partner, while 1 in 6 men report sexual violence victimization in their lifetimes.

These statistics, though staggering, are frequently minimized or omitted from mainstream advocacy, leaving male survivors without representation in policy, media, or support networks.

The absence of gender-inclusive language in legal frameworks and healthcare systems further exacerbates their marginalization, perpetuating cycles of isolation and untreated trauma.

This article argues that breaking the culture of silence around male victimization is not merely a matter of expanding statistical visibility but a moral imperative to redefine societal conceptions of strength, vulnerability, and justice.

By synthesizing interdisciplinary research, survivor testimonies, and comparative policy analyses, it critiques the limitations of current anti-violence paradigms and proposes actionable strategies for creating inclusive support systems.

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These include trauma-informed training for service providers, gender-neutral legal reforms, and public awareness campaigns that humanize male survivors without reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

Ultimately, the work suggests that addressing male victimization does not detract from efforts to protect women but strengthens the collective fight against gender-based violence by dismantling the hierarchies of victimhood. It calls for a strategic approach, one that recognizes pain as a universal human experience and affirms that empathy, like violence, knows no gender.

In doing so, this article contributes to a broader reimagining of gender equity, where silence is replaced with solidarity, and all survivors are empowered to reclaim their narratives.

## 2. Historical and Cultural Context

### i. Patriarchy and Gendered Stereotypes

Patriarchy, a system historically structured to prioritize male dominance and control, surprisingly perpetuates harm against men by enforcing rigid gender roles that equate masculinity with invulnerability, physical strength, and emotional stoicism. These stereotypes, deeply embedded in cultural narratives, frame men as inherently capable of self-defense and impervious to victimization, particularly by women. This construct not only dismisses male vulnerability but also weaponizes shame against men who experience abuse. For instance, the notion that “real men” cannot be victims of domestic or sexual violence silences survivors, who fear accusations of weakness, emasculation, or even blame (e.g., “Why didn’t you fight back?”).

The patriarchal framing of violence also reinforces a binary view of gender roles: men as aggressors and women as victims. This dichotomy ignores the reality that abuse is rooted in power dynamics, not biological determinism.

### ii. Evolution of Anti-Violence Movements

The modern anti-violence movement emerged in the mid-20th century as a feminist response to systemic misogyny, advocating for women’s safety and legal protections against domestic and sexual violence. Landmark achievements, such as the criminalization of marital rape and the establishment of shelters for women, were critical in challenging patriarchal violence. However, these efforts often framed gender-based violence as a unidirectional issue—men harming women—which, while accurate in highlighting systemic oppression, inadvertently marginalized male survivors.



Early frameworks like the Duluth Model, which focused on male perpetrators and female victims, dominated policy and advocacy. This approach, though groundbreaking, excluded male victims from conversations about prevention and support. Male survivors were left without representation in legislation (e.g., U.S. rape laws historically defined victims as female) or access to gender-inclusive services. Over time, feminist scholars and activists began critiquing this binary, acknowledging that patriarchal norms harm all genders by perpetuating cycles of violence and silencing non-conforming experiences.

In the 21st century, grassroots organizations (e.g., In6, Men's Advice Line) and researchers have pushed to expand anti-violence advocacy to include male survivors. This shift faces resistance: some fear diluting resources for women, while others cling to gendered stereotypes. Yet, advocates argue that inclusivity strengthens the movement by dismantling the very patriarchal norms that enable violence. For example, recognizing male victims challenges the idea that strength is inherently male or that vulnerability is inherently female, fostering a more nuanced understanding of power and abuse.

### 3. Statistical Overview

a. Despite common cultural denial, data reveals that male victimization is a significant yet underreported global issue. Key studies underscore its prevalence:

- **Domestic Violence:** The U.S. CDC's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) reports that 1 in 9 men (11%) experience severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime, while 1 in 4 men (26%) face psychological aggression (e.g., threats, humiliation). In the UK, the Crime Survey for England and Wales found that 1 in 3 domestic abuse victims are male, yet only 4% of refuge spaces cater to men.
- **Sexual Violence:** Approximately 1 in 6 men (16%) in the U.S. experience sexual violence, including forced penetration, coercion, or non-contact abuse. Globally, the WHO estimates that 3% of men endure sexual assault by non-partners, though rates spike in conflict zones (e.g., 20–50% of men in Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo report wartime sexual violence).
- **Underreporting:** Less than 10% of male survivors report abuse to authorities due to stigma, fear of disbelief, or lack of gender-inclusive services.

b. Forms of Male Victimization: Male victimization manifests in diverse, often overlapping forms:

- **Intimate Partner Violence (IPV):**
  - Physical: Assault, strangulation, or use of weapons by female or male partners.
  - Emotional/Psychological: Gaslighting, threats, or isolation tactics.
  - Financial: Coerced control over resources, sabotage of employment.

- **Sexual Violence:**
  - Partner-Perpetrated: Coercion through emotional manipulation or threats.
  - Non-Partner Assault: “Made to penetrate” cases (e.g., forced erection or intercourse), often excluded from legal definitions of rape.
  - Institutional Abuse: Sexual violence in prisons, military settings, or religious institutions.
- **Digital and Legal Abuse:** Revenge porn, false accusations to gain custody, or weaponization of gendered biases in courts.

c. Intersectional Vulnerabilities. Marginalized groups face compounded risks:

- Men of Color: Black men in the U.S. are 30% less likely to report abuse due to fears of racial stereotyping (e.g., being perceived as “aggressive”).
- Immigrants/Refugees: Cultural stigma, language barriers, and threats of deportation silence survivors.

d. Global and Conflict-Related Victimization

- In patriarchal societies (e.g., India, Nigeria), male victims face ridicule and legal invisibility, as laws often define domestic violence as “crimes against women.”
- In conflict zones, sexual violence against men is weaponized to destabilize communities. For example, 76% of male former detainees in Syria reported sexual torture.

e. Barriers to Recognition

- Myths: “Men always want sex,” “Male victims are weak,” or “Women can’t abuse men.”
- Legal Gaps: In 72 countries, rape laws exclude male victims by definition.
- Media Erasure: Less than 1% of news stories on sexual violence focus on male survivors.

f. Prevalence of Domestic and Sexual Violence Against Men in Nigeria: In Nigeria, a deeply patriarchal society, domestic and sexual violence against men remains shrouded in stigma and underreported, yet emerging data and anecdotal evidence highlight its alarming prevalence. Culturally, masculinity is equated with dominance and invulnerability, silencing male survivors who fear ridicule, blame, or accusations of weakness.

- Domestic Violence: A 2014 National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) survey found that 10% of Nigerian men reported experiencing physical violence from intimate partners. Emotional and financial abuse such as public humiliation, threats, or economic control—are even more widespread but rarely documented. In conservative regions, male victims face additional barriers, as laws like the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act (2015), though progressive, are inconsistently enforced and often perceived as prioritizing women’s protection.



- Sexual Violence:

Sexual violence against men is severely understudied, but surveys suggest 1 in 10 men experience sexual abuse in their lifetimes, with higher rates in conflict zones like the Niger Delta and Borno State. In these areas, armed groups and criminal gangs weaponize sexual violence against men to assert power, yet survivors rarely report due to shame and lack of legal recourse.

A 2021 CLEEN Foundation report noted that male rape victims, particularly in LGBTQ+ communities, face heightened risks due to homophobic laws (e.g., Nigeria’s Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act) and societal hostility.



- Structural Silencing:

Cultural taboos and religious norms deter disclosure, while law enforcement often dismisses male victims. Media and NGOs rarely address male victimization, perpetuating the myth that “men cannot be abused.” For example, male survivors of female-perpetrated violence are frequently mocked, with cases dismissed as “weakness” or “provocation.”

- Conflict-Related Abuse:

In regions impacted by Boko Haram, men and boys have been subjected to forced nudity, genital torture, and rape as tools of warfare. A 2018 Human Rights Watch report documented such abuses but noted that male survivors are excluded from most psychosocial and legal support programs.

Nigeria’s culture of hypermasculinity and legal gaps render male victims invisible, compounding trauma and perpetuating cycles of violence. Breaking this silence requires challenging stereotypes, reforming gender-exclusive laws, and creating safe reporting mechanisms.

Acknowledging male victimization is critical to fostering a holistic approach to ending gender-based violence in Nigeria.

#### 4. Case Studies and Survivors Narratives

Below are anonymized case studies and narratives drawn from different sources.

##### Chidi’s Story (Domestic Violence, Lagos)

Chidi, a 42-year-old businessman in Lagos, endured years of physical and emotional abuse from his wife, who controlled his finances and isolated him from friends.

“She would slap me in front of our children, then laugh and say, ‘Who will believe you?’” he shared. When Chidi sought help at a local police station, officers mocked him, asking, “How can a man let a woman beat him?” With no male-friendly shelters available, he slept in his car for weeks.

Chidi’s case reflects broader trends: A 2020 study by Nigeria’s Project Alert found that 68% of male domestic violence survivors who sought help were turned away by authorities.

## **Ahmed's Experience (Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, Borno State)**

Ahmed, a 25-year-old farmer, was abducted by Boko Haram militants in 2017. During his captivity, he was subjected to forced nudity, genital torture, and rape by armed insurgents. "They told me this was to punish me for being a 'weak man,'" he recounted. After escaping, Ahmed faced rejection from his community, who labeled him "unclean." Despite severe PTSD, he found no psychosocial support tailored to male survivors. His story mirrors findings from a 2018 Human Rights Watch report, which documented widespread sexual violence against men in Nigeria's conflict zones but noted a near-total absence of targeted rehabilitation programs.

## **Tunde's Struggle (Financial and Emotional Abuse, Ibadan)**

Tunde, a 55-year-old teacher, faced decades of coercive control from his spouse, who drained his savings and threatened to falsely accuse him of infidelity. "She told everyone I was a cheat and a liar. No one believed my side," he said. Tunde's attempts to seek counseling through a religious leader backfired; he was advised to "pray harder and be a better husband." His story underscores the normalization of psychological abuse against men, particularly in conservative communities where male vulnerability is taboo.

## **Survivor Narrative: Femi (Campus Sexual Assault, Port Harcourt)**

Femi, a 21-year-old university student, was assaulted by a male senior during a hazing ritual. "He said if I told anyone, they'd think I was gay," Femi explained. Despite reporting to campus authorities, no action was taken. "They told me boys don't get raped," he said. Femi's case highlights the invisibility of male sexual violence in educational institutions, where policies often exclude or ignore male survivors.

## **f. Patterns and Implications**

These narratives expose recurring themes:

- **Institutional Betrayal:** Police, healthcare workers, and religious leaders often perpetuate harm through victim-blaming or dismissal.
- **Cultural Stigma:** Survivors face ridicule ("How can a man be raped?") or accusations of complicity.
- **Legal Barriers:** Laws like the VAPP Act, though progressive, are rarely applied to male victims.

These Nigerian case studies underscore the urgent need to dismantle stereotypes and reform systems that erase male victims. Amplifying survivor voices is not just an act of justice but a catalyst for cultural change, one that affirms that violence knows no gender and that healing requires solidarity, not silence.

## 5. Structural and Societal Barriers

The systemic erasure of male victims of domestic and sexual violence is perpetuated by deeply entrenched structural and societal barriers. These obstacles, rooted in cultural norms, institutional biases, and policy gaps, silence survivors and deny them access to justice, care, and recognition.

### i. Cultural Myths and Misconceptions

- **“Men Cannot Be Victims”:** Patriarchal ideals frame men as inherently dominant and physically invulnerable. In Nigeria, phrases like “A man cannot be beaten by a woman” dismiss abuse, as seen in Chidi’s case, where police mocked his plea for help.
- **Minimization of Female-Perpetrated Violence:** Abuse by women is trivialized as “harmless” or even humorous. For instance, Nigerian media often portrays women slapping men as comedic, reinforcing the myth that men cannot suffer real harm.
- **Homophobic Stereotypes:** Male sexual assault survivors are falsely labeled LGBTQ+ (as in Femi’s campus assault), conflating victimhood with deviance. Nigeria’s criminalization of same-sex relationships exacerbates this stigma, deterring reporting.

### ii. Institutional Failures

Legal Systems:

- **Gender-Exclusive Laws:** Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act (2015), while progressive, focuses on women and girls, leaving male survivors legally invisible. Globally, 72 countries still define rape as a crime against women only.
- **Law Enforcement Bias:** Male victims face dismissal or victim-blaming. In Lagos, NGOs report that police often ask men, “What did you do to provoke her?” rather than filing reports.

Healthcare and Social Services:

- **Lack of Male-Inclusive Care:** Few Nigerian hospitals train staff to recognize male domestic or sexual abuse. A 2022 study found that 80% of Lagos clinics had no protocols for male rape victims.
- **Shelter Shortages:** Nigeria has no publicly funded shelters for male survivors, forcing men like Chidi to sleep in cars or return to abusive homes.

iii. Economic and Employment Barriers

- **Financial Dependence:** Men in abusive relationships may stay due to threats of financial ruin. In Nigeria, where unemployment is high, abusers exploit economic precarity.
- **Workplace Stigma:** Male survivors fear job loss if they disclose abuse. A Port Harcourt factory worker, for example, hid his wife’s violence after his boss warned him to “handle family issues privately.”

iv. Media Representation and Public Discourse

- **Erasure or Sensationalism:** Nigerian media rarely covers male victimization unless framed as sensational (e.g., “Woman Disgraces Husband in Public”). This erasure normalizes the idea that male suffering is unworthy of attention.
- **Lack of Advocacy Narratives:** NGOs and influencers often exclude male survivors from anti-violence campaigns. A 2023 content analysis of Nigerian social media found that 1% of #EndGBV posts acknowledged male victims.

## v. Religious and Traditional Norms

- **Religious Complicity:** Clergy in Nigeria frequently counsel male victims to “pray harder” or “be better husbands,” as seen in Tunde’s case, rather than condemning abuse.
- **Cultural Rituals:** Practices like bride price payment reinforce male financial responsibility, making it harder for men to leave abusive marriages without societal shaming.

## 6. Consequences of Silence

The culture of silence surrounding male victims of domestic and sexual violence perpetuates profound harm, with repercussions that cascade across individual lives, families, and societies. In Nigeria and globally, these consequences underscore the urgency of breaking systemic denial and stigma.

### a. Individual Consequences

- **Mental Health Crises:** Male survivors face elevated rates of PTSD, depression, and suicidal ideation. In Nigeria, where mental health services are scarce, men like Ahmed\* (a Boko Haram survivor) endure untreated trauma, leading to substance abuse or suicide attempts. Studies show male survivors are 3× more likely to attempt suicide than non-victimized men.
- **Physical Health Decline:** Untreated injuries, chronic pain, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) from assault are compounded by healthcare systems ill-equipped to address male victimization.
- **Social and Economic Devastation:** Survivors often lose familial support, employment, or housing due to stigma. Chidi, mocked by police and homeless after fleeing abuse, exemplifies how silence entrenches poverty and isolation.

### b. Familial and Intergenerational Harm

- **Cycle of Violence:** Children witnessing abuse against fathers or male caregivers internalize toxic norms, perpetuating violence across generations. In Nigeria, where 40% of children witness domestic violence, boys may learn to equate masculinity with domination, while girls absorb gendered power imbalances.
- **Erosion of Family Structures:** Financial abuse and false accusations (as in Tunde’s\* case) fracture families, leaving children in unstable environments and undermining communal trust.

The consequences of silence are not merely individual tragedies but collective failures. For Nigeria, addressing male victimization is critical to dismantling patriarchal norms, strengthening communities, and achieving true gender equity.





## 7. Pathways to Change

Breaking the culture of silence around male victimization requires transformative action across legal, institutional, cultural, and societal spheres. Drawing on global best practices and contextualizing solutions for regions like Nigeria, the following pathways offer a roadmap to equity and healing:

### a. Legal and Policy Reforms

- **Gender-Neutral Legislation:** Amend laws like Nigeria's Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act to explicitly recognize male victims.
- **Criminalize All Forms of Abuse:** Commence advocacy to expand legal definitions of domestic and sexual violence to include psychological, financial, and digital abuse, ensuring protections for male survivors.
- **Accountability for Institutions:** Mandate penalties for law enforcement, healthcare workers, or NGOs that dismiss male victims (e.g., withholding funding from police stations with documented bias).

### b. Institutional Efforts

- **Trauma-Informed Training:** Continuous training of the police, judges, healthcare providers, and social workers to recognize and respond to male victimization. In Nigeria, integrate modules on male survivors into the National Police Academy's curriculum.
- **Gender-Inclusive Support Services:** Fund male-friendly shelters, hotlines, and counseling centers. Nigeria's government could pilot a shelter in Lagos or Abuja, modeled after the U.K.'s Men's Advice Line.
- **Conflict-Zone Interventions:** Include men in humanitarian programs addressing wartime sexual violence.

### c. Cultural Shifts and Public Awareness

- **National Campaigns:** Launch media campaigns (TV, radio, social media) to challenge stereotypes (e.g., "Real Men Can Be Victims").
- **Engage Men and Boys:** Promote positive masculinity through school programs and community dialogues. Initiatives like UN Women's HeForShe can be adapted to address male victimization.
- **Amplify Survivor Voices:** Create platforms for male survivors to share narratives safely.

### d. Economic Empowerment

- **Financial Support for Survivors:** Provide grants or microloans to help men escape abusive relationships.
- **Workplace Policies:** Mandate employer training on domestic violence and offer paid leave for survivors.

## e. Research and Data Justice

- **Fund Intersectional Studies:** Support research on male victimization in marginalized groups (rural communities, conflict zones).
- **Improve Reporting Mechanisms:** Develop anonymous reporting tools (e.g., apps, hotlines) to capture underreported cases. Use this data to inform policy and resource allocation.

## f. Religious and Traditional Leader Engagement

- **Sensitize Clergy and Elders:** Train religious leaders to condemn abuse against men and refer survivors to services and work on reinterpreting texts that stigmatize vulnerability.

## 8. Challenges and Counterarguments

Addressing male victimization in the context of domestic and sexual violence invites legitimate concerns and critiques. Engaging with these challenges is essential to refining advocacy strategies and fostering inclusive, evidence-based solutions. Below, we outline common counterarguments and rebuttals, contextualized within Nigerian and global frameworks.

### a. Counterargument: “Acknowledging Male Victims Undermines Feminist Progress”

**Critique:** Critics argue that centering male survivors diverts attention and resources from women, who remain the majority of victims in patriarchal systems.

#### **Rebuttal:**

- **Complementary, Not Competitive:** Recognizing male victims does not negate the systemic oppression of women but challenges the patriarchal norms that harm all genders. For example, dismantling the myth that “men cannot be victims” also destabilizes the expectation that “women must be passive.”
- **Shared Roots in Patriarchy:** Both male and female victimization are products of rigid gender roles. In Nigeria, where 1 in 3 domestic abuse victims are male (per the NBS), addressing male survivors strengthens the broader fight against gender-based violence (GBV) by rejecting the binaries that sustain it.

### b. Counterargument: “Male Victimization Is Statistically Insignificant”

- **Critique:** Skeptics claim that male victimization rates are too low to warrant systemic attention.
- **Rebuttal:**
- **Underreporting vs. Reality:** Studies suggest that when anonymous surveys are used, male victimization rates rise sharply. For instance, the CDC’s U.S. data shows 1 in 6 men experience sexual violence, a figure comparable to some female demographics.
- **Human Rights Imperative:** Even “small” numbers represent human suffering. In conflict zones, where thousands of men endure wartime sexual violence, dismissing their trauma perpetuates cycles of instability.

### **c. Counterargument: “Focusing on Men Distracts from Cultural Misogyny”**

**Critique:** Some fear that highlighting male victims could fuel anti-feminist backlash or derail conversations about systemic misogyny.

**Rebuttal:**

**False Dichotomy:** Addressing male victimization is not antithetical to feminist goals. Nigerian feminist scholars like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have emphasized that patriarchy harms men by denying them emotional expression. Inclusive advocacy aligns with intersectional feminism, which rejects hierarchies of oppression.

### **d. Counterargument: “Male Victims Can ‘Solve’ Their Problems Privately”**

**Critique:** Traditionalists argue that men should handle abuse within families or religious communities, avoiding public disclosure.

**Rebuttal:**

- **Privatization Perpetuates Harm:** As seen in Tunde’s\* case, religious leaders often counsel male victims to endure abuse, exacerbating trauma. Private “solutions” protect abusers and normalize violence.
- **Systemic Issues Demand Systemic Responses:** Domestic and sexual violence are public health crises, not private failures. Nigeria’s national stability hinges on addressing violence in all forms.

### **e. Challenge: Resistance from Traditional and Religious Institutions**

In Nigeria, religious and cultural leaders wield significant influence. Many perpetuate stigma by framing abuse as moral failing.

**Strategy:**

- **Collaborative Sensitization:** Partner with progressive clergy and traditional rulers to reframe narratives.
- **Leverage Local Networks:** Train community leaders as first responders, equipping them to refer survivors to services.



## **f. Challenge: Lack of Funding and Political Will**

Context: Governments and donors often prioritize women-focused programs, viewing male victimization as niche.

Strategy:

- Pilot Programs as Proof of Concept: Launch small-scale initiatives (e.g., a male survivor shelter in Lagos) to demonstrate efficacy and attract funding.
- Advocacy Coalitions: Build alliances between feminist groups, and male survivor networks to lobby collectively.

Engaging with these challenges is not a concession but a necessity. The counterarguments reveal anxieties about destabilizing existing power structures—anxieties that can be mitigated through education, coalition-building, and centering survivor voices. For Nigeria, confronting these critiques is a step toward decolonizing narratives of gender and violence, ensuring that no survivor is silenced by dogma or indifference. True progress lies not in choosing between women’s rights and men’s rights but in dismantling the systems that make such a choice seem necessary.

## **7. Conclusion**

Breaking the Culture of Silence: Men as Victims of Domestic and Sexual Violence confronts a pervasive yet neglected dimension of gender-based violence, challenging societal myths that equate victimhood with femininity and perpetration with masculinity. Through interdisciplinary analysis, rooted in Nigerian case studies, global data, and survivor narratives, the work exposes how patriarchal norms, institutional biases, and cultural stigma conspire to silence male survivors, leaving them without legal recourse, medical care, or communal support.

Key findings reveal that approximately 1 in 9 men globally endure severe intimate partner violence, while conflict zones see sexual violence against men weaponized to destabilize communities. Yet, male survivors face systemic erasure: media narratives ridicule their pain, and institutions from police stations to hospitals fail to recognize their trauma.

The consequences are devastating, untreated PTSD, fractured families, and cycles of intergenerational violence.

Addressing this crisis is not a zero-sum endeavor. Recognizing male victims does not detract from feminist efforts to protect women but strengthens the fight against patriarchy by dismantling the rigid gender roles that harm all people. Globally, it demands reimagining anti-violence advocacy as a universal struggle for empathy and justice.

Silence is not neutrality; it is complicity. By breaking the culture of denial, societies can forge a future where strength is measured not by stoicism but by the courage to seek help, where pain is met with compassion, and where no survivor walks the path to healing alone.



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