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Gendering Counter-Terrorism: *Kunya* and the Silencing of Male Victims of CRSV in Northeastern Nigeria

Emeka Thaddues Njoku  and Isaac Dery 

Abstract: As the silence of male CRSV victims continues to be debated, some argue that gender norms and a lack of agency contribute to the silence of victims, even as others assert that victims exercise agency by speaking selectively about their experiences. In northern Nigeria, the concept of *kunya*—a model for appropriate behaviour rooted in the importance of secrecy and discretion—plays a role in the silencing of victims. We examine how *kunya* contributes to the invisibility of victims and influences

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their silence, as well as how victims use silence to gain social tolerability and/or protect themselves from re-victimization. We argue that an attentiveness to such community-specific cultural precepts and norms can further our understanding of the silence (and silencing) of victims and survivors.

Résumé : Alors que le silence des victimes masculines de violences sexuelles continue d'être débattu, certains soutiennent que les normes de genre et le manque d'action contribuent au silence des victimes, même si d'autres affirment que les victimes exercent leur libre arbitre en parlant sélectivement de leurs expériences. Dans le nord du Nigéria, le concept de *kunya* – un modèle de comportement approprié enraciné dans l'importance du secret et de la discrétion – joue un rôle dans le silence des victimes. Nous examinons comment les *kunya* contribuent à l'invisibilité des victimes et influencent leur silence, ainsi que la manière dont les victimes utilisent le silence pour acquérir une tolérance sociale et / ou se protéger d'une nouvelle victimisation. Nous soutenons qu'une attention portée à ces préceptes et normes culturels spécifiques à la communauté peut nous aider à mieux comprendre le silence (et la réduction au silence) des victimes et des survivants.

Resumo : No contexto dos debates sobre as vítimas masculinas de violência sexual relacionada com conflitos (CRSV – *conflict-related sexual violence*), há quem defenda que as normas de gênero e a falta de agência contribuem para o silêncio das vítimas, ainda que haja também quem assegure que as vítimas exercem a sua agência falando seletivamente acerca das suas experiências. No norte da Nigéria, o conceito de *kunya* — um modelo de comportamento exemplar enraizado na importância do secretismo e da discrição — desempenha um papel importante no silenciamento das vítimas. Neste artigo, analisamos o modo como a *kunya* contribui para a invisibilidade das vítimas e influencia o seu silêncio, bem como o modo como as vítimas utilizam o silêncio para conseguirem tolerar a vida social e/ou protegerem-se da revitimização. Do nosso ponto de vista, que aqui desenvolvemos, o enfoque nestes preceitos e nestas normas comunitárias específicas permite compreendermos melhor o silêncio (e o silenciamento) das vítimas e dos sobreviventes.

Keywords: terrorism; counter-terrorism; gender; sexuality; conflict-related sexual violence; masculinity; victimhood; LGBTQ+; Africa; Nigeria; *kunya*

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Introduction

In the last few years, debates on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) against men have gained considerable momentum in policy and research. But while some valuable insights on the diverse consequences of CRSV have emerged from the current debates, researchers including Philipp Schulz (2018) and Emeka Njoku et al. (2022) maintain that the complex processes through which multiple masculinities are implicated, affected, and refashioned during periods of conflict have not been adequately integrated into

much of the theoretical and empirical work. Schulz observes, for instance, that while male victims of rape are perceived as being “stripped” of their manhood, “how exactly the compromising of masculinity unfolds empirically remains poorly understood” (2018:1101). As a result of such gaps, scholars have labelled existing works on CRSV against men as reductionist and essentialized, lacking contextual sophistication (Baaz & Stern 2013; Wood 2018; Schulz 2018; Schulz & Touquet 2020; Eichert 2019; Njoku et al. 2022).

As scholarship continues to grapple with the experience of male CRSV victims, the silence of these victims has become a focus of debate (Touquet & Schulz 2021). While some scholars have attributed victims’ silence to gender norms and a lack of agency (Sellers & Nwoye 2018; Lewis 2014), others argue that victims exercise agency by choosing when and where to speak and when to remain silent (Touquet & Schulz 2021). Heleen Touquet (2022) also notes that when victims do not remain silent, their testimonies are sometimes co-opted or entextualized, with stories being filtered or lost in translation, a situation that recalls what Jennifer Hornsby (1995) calls “disempowered speech.” Despite these advancements in CRSV theories and their implications for enhancing the agency of survivors, we argue that little is known about how community-specific cultural precepts and norms, such as *kunya* in northern Nigeria, influence the silence (and silencing) of male survivors and victims of CSRV.

This study is based on ethnographic accounts from male CRSV victims, as well as security agents, legal experts, and aid workers in terrorism-affected northeastern Nigeria, where many survivors recounted their refusal to speak of their experiences to avoid being re-victimized, stigmatized, shamed, or humiliated for failing to measure up to normative expectations of masculinity which reject and discredit homosexuality.

Steven Pierce (2007) has observed that perceived cultural patriarchy and heteronormativity in Northern Nigeria are trademarks of Islamic theological reforms, and that there nevertheless exists a gay subculture in northern Nigeria where normative and non-normative sexuality co-exist and are mutually constitutive. He argues that secrecy or being discreet about one’s sexuality enables the co-constructiveness of normative and non-normative sexualities, because discretion is typically considered a hallmark of good behavior (Pierce 2007). Building on Pierce’s argument, we contend that the invisibility of male CRSV victims is rooted in cultural expectations regarding how people with non-normative sexualities, including those who are victims of same-sex violence, should respond to their ordeals. Keeping silent about one’s experiences or avoiding disclosing non-normative sexual encounters is perceived as a form of modesty, and these standards of acceptable behaviour contribute to the silence of male CRSV victims. Even so, we argue, the silence of male victims and survivors should not always be interpreted as a sign of vulnerability or powerlessness, as empirical evidence suggests that this silence is often strategic, a tool male victims and survivors use to negotiate societal tolerance or defend themselves from re-victimization.

Silencing or Silence of Male Victims of CRSV

In heteronormative societies, male victims of same-sex violence are often reluctant to talk for fear of being perceived as gay (Eichert 2019) or, in some contexts, for fear of facing socio-legal prosecution (Touquet 2022). Because of this, people tend to view male victims of CRSV as being powerless or lacking agency (Clark 2014; Meger 2016). Some have argued that the three predominant images of men and boys in international legal discourse around sexual violence—the ‘Male Perpetrator,’ the ‘Strategic Ally,’ and the elusive ‘Male Victim Subject’—are to blame for the lack of attention paid to male victims, given the emphasis on the “Male Perpetrator” and concomitant repression of the “Male Victim Subject” (Lewis 2014:203–4). Thus, the victimization of men is “systematically silenced” in the discourse on victimization and vulnerabilities because of binary assumptions about male perpetrators and female victims (Carpenter 2006). It has also been argued that male victims need to take the initiative and speak out about their ordeals in order to encourage more advocacy and humanitarian efforts. This perspective holds that male sexual violence is underreported and underrepresented due to a lack of media attention, making it imperative that men “break the silence” in order to create platforms for advocacy on the need to formulate international and national laws that adequately address the situation (Stemple 2011; Skjelsbæk 2012; Solangon & Patel 2012:436).

But according to Touquet (2022), who notes that survivors actually choose when to speak and when to remain silent, the selective speech of male survivors of CRSV not only demonstrates a form of agency, it also contradicts assumptions of unspeakability and shows that it is the socio-legal environment that imposes encumbrances or limits what is said.

The foregoing arguments show the need for studies that account for how contextual issues contribute to the silencing of male survivors and the unspeakability of CRSV against men. Thus, we expand previous research through ethnographic field accounts of male survivors of CRSV in northern Nigeria.

Our study is not isolated from the larger body of literature on male victims of sexual violence in war and other conflict environments. Rather, our intervention builds on these studies and extends the ongoing conversations about the importance of bringing the varied experiences of CRSV among men and boys to the forefront of research, humanitarian intervention, and public policy (Carpenter 2006; Dolan 2014; Sjoberg 2015 Njoku & Dery 2021). Thus, we contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of CRSV by providing empirical and contextual analysis that adds to the discourse on the complex, multi-layered consequences of CRSV against men.

Methods

As African researchers faced with rising conflicts and the attendant cases of sexual violence in various parts of Nigeria, our positionality influenced the

urgency of this study. We believe there is a need to amplify the voices of male victims of CRSV, which are often buried in a largely patriarchal and heteronormative Nigerian society. Our positionality, which also influenced our critical approach to articulating our findings, further enabled us to gain access to survivors, as well as to organizations that support survivors or facilitate the prosecution of perpetrators. Finally, it made it easy for us to refer victims to reliable support both before and after the interviews. (A more detailed autoethnographic account of our experiences conducting interviews with vulnerable or marginalized groups in northeast Nigeria is currently being developed.)

Our study draws on the lived experiences of male victims of CRSV in northeastern Nigeria, and on accounts from legal practitioners, NGO workers, and security agents. Thus, the article addresses the methodological and ethical challenges of researching CRSV against men. Male sexual violence survivors are often difficult to identify, and the argument has been made that the paucity of empirical evidence means that the extent of gender and sexual violence perpetrated against men and boys is yet to be fully documented (Pearson & Nagarajan 2020). This study contributes to closing the methodological gap, providing empirical knowledge of male victims of sexual violence in the Lake Chad area, and building on existing work in Congo, Bosnia, and South Sudan (Touquet 2022; Baaz & Stern 2013; Wood 2018; Schulz 2018; Schulz & Touquet 2020).

The authors interviewed purposively selected male survivors of sexual violence. NGO workers, legal experts, and security agents were selected based on their expertise, work on issues of gender-based violence, or (in the case of security agents) being involved in counter-terrorism operations in northeast Nigeria. The study locations included two states in the northeast—Borno and Adamawa—which were chosen because they are considered to be the epicenter of terrorist violence in Nigeria. Abuja and Lagos were chosen because they are home to NGOs and legal practitioners who are actively involved in addressing, litigating, and advocating for issues related to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). In total, 23 participants took part in the study: twelve sexual violence survivors, two security agents, three NGO workers, one community leader, and five legal professionals.¹

A pilot study was conducted in 2019, which helped in framing the research instruments and establishing a conceptual framework. The National Health Research Ethics Committee of Nigeria (NHREC) and Department of Health Planning, Research and Statistics (DHRPS) of the Federal Ministry of Health, Abuja, Nigeria, granted ethical approval in October 2020. The researchers worked with some gender-based NGOs to interview the male survivors of CRSV, ensuring that all interviewed survivors and families received professional psychological counseling afterward. Interviews lasted between five and sixty-five minutes. A research assistant conversant with the issue of CRSV and who speaks the Hausa language—the predominant language in the area—carried out the interviews with the survivors and with a community leader in Hausa, as most of the participants did not speak English. However, for other categories of

respondents, we used the English language. We rephrased some participants' statements for clarity and ease of reading.

For the sake of anonymity, researchers used labels such as "Survivor 1" and "Legal Professional 5" to identify participants. For the survivors, the interview questions covered issues including sexual violence against males and its effects on them; who the perpetrators of CRSV were; how they made sense of perpetrators' motives; and whether or not they had reported their experiences. For those who did not report or share their experiences, the researchers asked what factors affected their decision or hindered their capacity to do so. Further inquiry was made into the effects of the violence they experienced on their physical, social, and psychological well-being and how this may have influenced their feelings toward society and the government.

We asked the following questions of legal professionals: Is there a comprehensive law on male-to-male rape in Nigeria? How effective are the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPPA) and Child Rights Act (CRA) in addressing same-sex violence in Nigeria? Is there a legal vacuum on same-sex violence, and if so, what are the consequences of this legal vacuum?

NGO workers were asked these questions: how frequently do you receive reports of male sexual violence victimizations in the northeast? What are your advocacy strategies or humanitarian efforts? Who are the perpetrators of sexual violence against males? How does your organization make sense of male sexual violence? What are the physical, psychological, and socio-legal challenges faced by victims reporting their experiences of sexual violence? In what way(s) is the government collaborating with NGOs in addressing terrorist-related sexual violence? How effective is such collaboration in responding to sexual violence?

Finally, security agents were asked about their views on constructions of masculinity and male sexual violence or rape. They were also asked about their members' alleged involvement in sexual violence, their views on reporting cases of sexual violence, their responses to reports, and the effects sexual violence may have on the male victims.

Data Analysis

Professional interpreters transcribed the interviews from Hausa to English. The research assistant, who is a native speaker of Hausa, crosschecked the transcribed interviews to ensure that the transcripts accurately represented the voices of the participants. Following this, the transcripts were thematically coded, considering legal issues on sexual violence and the socio-legal and psychological consequences of reporting sexual violence. The secondary data were used to triangulate the findings of the study.

Contextual Background: Gender and Sexual Minorities in the Lake Chad area

Northeastern Nigeria and other Lake Chad regions, including areas in Niger and Chad, have a same-sex subculture (Pierce 2007). According to Gaudio

(2009: 9), there exists a covert network of gender and sexual minorities spread across various Hausa-speaking communities, with Kano serving as the nerve center of what he refers to as the “Hausa-homosexual community.” The *yan daudu* (effeminate men) is one of the most prominent sexual and gender identities in Hausaland. *Yan kefi* (lesbians) and *masu harka* (“men who have sex with men” or “men who do the deed”) are two more examples of non-heteronormative sexual and gender identity. Although everyone acknowledges the existence of sexual minorities, the level of acceptance or toleration has varied over time and space due to religious reforms (Gaudio 2009), and the co-existence of normative and non-normative gender and sexual identities (which are also co-constitutive) is facilitated by secrecy (Pierce 2007).

Secretiveness is a significant traditional value in northern Nigeria. This secretiveness can be linked to *kunya* which, according to Pierce (2007), means modesty or shame. Individuals who have a respectful relationship with their family or relatives feel *kunya*, manifestations of which can include young women not looking straight into the eyes of men and a general avoidance of inappropriate topics such as sex. *Kunya* also influences the norms of secrecy about certain conducts (Pierce 2007).

Within the gay subculture, languages or slang are used to code sexual identities and experiences to distinguish them from heterosexual and homosexual identities and to maintain secrecy. For example, same-sex intimacy is referred to as “the deed” or *harka*. Masculine men who participate in same-sex relationships are referred to as “people who do the deed,” or *masu harka* which means “civilians.” Furthermore, *masu harka* name themselves *mai ido* (“ones with eyes”) and refer to heterosexuals as “*makaho*” (“the blind”) (Gaudio 2009:113). Although gender and sexual minorities employ coded language to set themselves apart from the mainstream, this does not mean that the rest of the community is oblivious to the existence of a same-sex subculture. Rather, they often ignore its presence (Pierce 2007).

With religious reforms beginning in the early 2000s, the *yan daudu* and other sexual and gender minorities have experienced harassment from state and religious institutions. These reforms, which have involved the adoption of sharia law systems in Northern Nigeria, tend to empower perpetrators of sexual violence to target members of the homosexual community for assault and rape with few legal recourses (Gaudio 2009; Pierce 2007).

A heightening of terrorist activities beginning around 2009 has made the Lake Chad area a hotspot for egregious gender and sexual violence, primarily against kidnapped women and girls who are raped, forced into marriages, and used for labor or even suicide bombings. Abducted young men and boys are forced to join terrorist groups as fighters (UNHCR 2017; Owonikoko et al. 2023), but young boys may also be forced to serve as tools of sexual pleasure in terrorist camps (Njoku 2022). Despite a growing awareness of incidents of gender and sexual violence perpetuated against males in the context of conflict in Nigeria, academic understanding of the continued silence of their gendered subjectivities remains limited.

It is important to note that this study does not claim that there were no male rapes before 2009, when terrorists began their campaign of violence in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. It does, however, argue that the precarious nature of the area as a result of terrorism, government response, and religious reforms has led to an increase in sexual violence by men in the community, aid workers, terrorists, and security agents against kidnapped women, girls, men, and boys alike (Njoku 2019; Njoku & Akintayo 2021; Njoku & Dery 2021; Njoku 2022). Since 2009, reports from NGOs have indicated an increase in sexual violence against both males and females, which has been dubbed a “rape epidemic” (Amnesty International 2021). In 2019, there were reports of the rape of young men and boys by terrorist suspects in detention facilities (Njoku & Dery 2021; Amnesty International 2019). Moreover, during our interviews with staff of the Sexual Assault Referral Centre, an organization whose oversight mandate is to facilitate the apprehension of rape perpetrators in northeastern Nigeria, it was revealed that the organization deals with about 20 to 30 cases of CRSV perpetrated against men and boys every month (Njoku et al. 2022). The interviews further revealed that these numbers were likely underreported due to the potential sanctions associated with disclosure.²

Additionally, interviews conducted with representatives from the Sexual Assault Referral Centre indicated that male victims of CRSV may not feel empowered to disclose their experience and seek justice, due to their distrust of state authorities (including the police) and/or fears of retaliation by the perpetrators. The views of the representatives from the Sexual Assault Referral Centre were confirmed during an interview with one victim of CRSV who stated that security operatives were among the perpetrators. “When my friends report to them,” he told us, “they are frequently beaten or threatened with death.”³ Thus, it appears that the inability to identify support providers and the fear of receiving negative reactions are potential reasons for the silence of male victims of CRSV.

Silencing or Silence as Agentic in Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Men

The stigma associated with CRSV has led many men to remain silent about their experiences. Those who talk about it tend to do so only to people such as friends and family to whom they can speak in confidence (Touquet 2022; Schulz 2018). Our examination of the northern Nigerian context shows that the reasons for the silence of survivors can be more nuanced than is commonly assumed. In this context, it originates in the *kunya* norm, which attaches great importance to “discreetness.” A person who has same-sex experiences, whether the experiences are consensual or forced, is expected to act modestly by being discreet about the incidents.

Furthermore, many of the victims interviewed admitted that they were reluctant to disclose their experience for fear of being stigmatized. For these victims, stigmatization is much more complicated than disgrace. Stigmatization

means classification as *yan daudu* or *masu harka*, and survivors are wary of being thus misjudged and classified, because being tagged as a member of the gay community leads to being targeted by men in the community seeking sexual favors, who may go as far as sexually violating branded survivors.

Specifically, eight survivors expressed the view that they were afraid of reporting their rape as it would expose them to the potential risk of re-victimization by perpetrators who might take their initial victimization as confirmation of their preference for same-sex relations. In the words of three different survivors:

It makes you a target when other perpetrators hear of it; you instantly become their target. They want to try you. After the first incident [of rape], a guy asked me to escort him to the toilet at the back of our community. I didn't anticipate that he was thinking otherwise. He sexually harassed me and attempted to rape me. He told me he had heard of my earlier incident from a friend and wanted to try his luck. He probably thought that I was gay. He failed.⁴

If not for the people that saw it when it was happening, I would never open my mouth to tell anyone... They will even want to attempt it with you.⁵

It happened to us all at different times, so we discussed it and shared our experiences.... They will see you as homosexual and want to perform the act with you.⁶

The comments of one aid worker underscored this perspective: "I have not seen any boy come out to say 'I have been sodomized'. People will look at you as a homosexual; you enjoyed it; you did it because of pleasure. So for you not to be branded as a homosexual, some of them prefer to keep quiet and die with it instead of reporting.... Hence, nobody is saying anything, and they are afraid of saying anything."⁷

Interviews held with a community leader and security agents revealed that family members and communities at large find it difficult to deal with CRSV against men, and these difficulties are complicated by reluctance to talk about the problem, not just on the part of victims but also the community. "It's very hard to identify or talk about this because the victims don't report this issue for fear of stigmatization. When cases like this happen, it's only reported when the perpetrator is caught red-handed," stated the community leader.⁸ It is telling that, rather than naming the rape of men as a form of gender and sexual violence, the community leader euphemistically described it as "this issue." But there are more serious indications of communities' difficulties grappling with these cases. One security agent recounted a case where a soldier (who was also a member of the community) was apprehended for sexually violating a young boy, and the community leaders in this case argued against bringing the soldier to justice. According to the security agent:

A message came from the representative of the Emir palace in Potiskum that they are interested in the case and that they should allow the soldier to be

freed because they will handle the issue by themselves and wouldn't want the soldier to be dismissed because of that.⁹

Some security agents also spoke of the difficulty of providing proof of male rape, and attributed the dearth of reports to this, in addition to stigmatization. According to a security agent with the Gender Desk of the Nigerian Police in the Northeast:

Yes, we do have [incidents of sexual violence against males] though they are not much, we do have, and mostly the ones reported are the ones that are children. Yeah, male children that have been abused sexually, we do have them, but they are very few. From January till now [October], the highest I don't think they are more than ten; if they are up, they are not more than ten. Evidence to prove that, yes, it's true is another thing. So if you cannot prove it at the end of the day, there's no way you can say whether it happened, but the court will decide.¹⁰

For the survivors, their unwillingness to disclose their experiences to government authorities and their communities also had to do with the belief that everyone was already aware of the problem and chose not to show concern due to the assumption, already discussed above as a reason for re-victimization, that victims or survivors are members of the homosexual community. "I left it to myself because everyone knew what was happening there," explained one victim. "[...] Some believed it was done with my consent."¹¹ Two others recounted how family members ignored their stories. "I refused to tell anyone at first, but later I told my father, who did nothing about it," said the first.¹² And according to the other: "I told my mum, she kept quiet about it, but she told me I was abused, and it is not supposed to be so."¹³

As is evident from these reports, the reactions that male survivors of CRSV receive from family members, security agents, and the larger society are often less than supportive. These reactions included having security agents questioning, doubting, or even minimizing their experience on the grounds of insufficient evidence, in addition to family members choosing to do nothing. Narratives of some male victims highlight their disappointment at the reactions of their fathers and/or mothers, since they imagined their parents as sympathetic figures to whom they could disclose and confide their experiences. But while parents' refusal to take action on behalf of their children comes across as insensitive, it is important to situate these negative reactions within the context of a largely heteronormative society such as Nigeria and the disposition of northern Nigerian communities toward non-normative gender and sexual identities, particularly as shaped by the concept of *kunya*.

The survivors of male sexual violence often feel a deep sense of shame and face doubts about their identity as heterosexual men, as evidenced by the above quotations. By coming forward about their rape experiences, they risk having their masculinity questioned and scrutinized. Survivors often ask,

“how will society perceive me?” and this reflects the contentiousness of same-sex relationships in Nigeria. But while some survivors have claimed that the high cost of coming forward prevents them from speaking out, this does not mean that survivors never talk about their experience; instead, they exercise control over the conversation by choosing when and how to discuss their experiences with others. This is often done to spare their loved ones the shame and stigma of hearing about what they went through and to prevent themselves from being stigmatized and re-victimized. In other words, much like the gay subculture in northern Nigeria, survivors are influenced by the extant culture of silence about non-normative sexuality.

Thus, survivors demonstrated resistance and were deliberate or strategic about when to speak and what to say, just like the *yan daudu*, *masu harka*, and other sexual and gender identities in Northern Nigeria, who have endured years of assault from religious reformist groups. This builds on the findings of Christine Keating (2013) and Susan Thomson (2013), with respect to the strategic use of silence as a form of resistance to power. In addition, drawing from cases in Croatia and Uganda, Touquet and Schulz (2021:221) argue that silence should be viewed in terms of its “spatial-geographic” and “spatial-temporal dimension,” which defines the strategic silence of survivors as the decision to remain silent in areas where they are well-known due to language, demography, or timing.

“They did that thing to me”: The Ineffability of Speech as a Means of Survival for Male Victims of CRSV.

When we talked to survivors, we found that they were careful about what they shared with us about their experiences as a means of demonstrating their agency and protecting themselves in a society that is predominantly heteronormative. When asked about their experiences with CRSV, for instance, survivors provided responses including these:

“They were forcing me to have that thing with them,” (Suna tilasta mana mu yi wannan abun.)¹⁴

“They took us to the room and did that thing with us.” (Sun shiga da mu cikin ɗaki sun yi abin nan da mu.)¹⁵

“Boko Haram sacked us from our town, and one of them had that thing with me against my will. A young brother of my friend also had that thing with him too.” (Boko Haram sun kore mu daga garinmu sannan ɗaya daga cikin su ya yi wannan abin da ni ba tare da yarda ta ba. Sun kuma yiwa fanin abokina wannan abin.)¹⁶

“They pointed a gun at our forehead before the act.” (Sun nuna bindiga daidai saitin goshinmu kafin su aikata abin.)¹⁷

“We were sleeping in a room, and I noticed someone touching me. I rejected it at first, but they pointed a gun, and I had to do that thing again to survive.” (Muna tsakar yin bacci a cikin ɗaki sai na lura cewa wani na taɓa min jiki.

Daga farko na nuna bana so, amma sai suka nuna min bindiga, don haka dole na yarda na yi abin karo na biyu domin in tsira da rayuwata.)¹⁸

“Someone met me sleeping on floor, he began to touch me and asking me to do that thing.” (Wani ya same ni ina kwance a farfajiyar ɗaki, sai ya fara taɓa mini jiki sannan kuma yana ce mini in yi wannan abin.)¹⁹

“They like doing that thing with fellow men. It happened to me.” (Suna son yin wannan abin da ɗan uwansu namiji. Hakan ya taɓa faruwa dani.)²⁰

The above quotes demonstrate the pervasiveness of *kunya* norms. Survivors’ words are often filtered or coded in euphemisms when they speak in settings beyond their immediate communities or with representatives of humanitarian organizations. They use language such as “the act,” “the thing,” and “they did that to me” to describe their experiences, mirroring the language used to describe same-sex intercourse within same-sex subcultures.

“Where there is wrong, there must be a remedy”: *Kunya* and the Legal Vacuum on Same-Sex Violence.

Nigeria’s laws consider sexual violence, including rape, a serious issue. The country is signatory to most international and regional human rights conventions and treaties, including the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325, 2242, 1206. However, legal attention focuses on sexual violence against women and girls to the neglect of violence against men and boys.²¹ In the media and in legal debate, it is not uncommon to hear such statements as “only women are capable of being raped by men.” This is a clearly defined clause in the criminal and penal code and the criminal laws of Lagos.²² Explicitly, these laws address only domestic violence/intimate partner violence and sexual violence, harassment, and rape of women. We contend that the concept of *kunya* can shed light on the negative disposition of society toward issues of same-sex relations, or why communities are often opposed to prosecuting CRSV against men and why the state refuses to acknowledge same-sex violence.

A legal professional had this to say about same-sex sexual violence:

There is no such law(s) in Nigeria. Nigerian law does not recognize male-to-male rape or female-to-female sexual violence. The law only recognizes rape as valid [worthy of attention] when it is from a man to a woman and nothing else. It is kind of vague and archaic as far as sexual diversity is concerned.²³

Another legal professional lamented the lack of comprehensive legal investment in sexual violence against men:

Nigerian law recognizes rape to involve women as victims and men as perpetrators. If a man says another man has raped him, it is rare to believe such stories. We do not have any comprehensive law to define what is involved for a man to be raped by another man, but we have one that makes

provisions for men being raped. That's the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act of 2015, which isn't applicable in all states in Nigeria.²⁴

The above conversations confirm that no comprehensive laws prohibit same-sex violence. According to the legal professionals interviewed for this study, the lack of extensive legal provisions likely silences multiple forms of sexual violence against men:

In light of this [lack of adequate laws], you have an infinite number of rape cases without reports. The perpetrators are not held to account, and if the beginning principle of justice is where there is a wrong, there must be a remedy, we are, in principle, ensuring that this wrong is not remedied. Again, we must deal with the social stigma attached to rape.²⁵

This state of affairs, according to another legal expert, impinges on the power of reporting victims and the possibility for them to receive justice:

The consequences could be a delay in justice for a male person raped. Another result is that victims of such rape wouldn't even have access to justice. And most times, it just leads to others keeping quiet about it (or) not airing out what has happened to them because there isn't an easy process or procedure for them to be heard. So, these are limited but not exhausted consequences of this backwardness of the Nigerian legal system.²⁶

Additionally, the legal professionals interviewed assert that the SSMPA—Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act—of 2014 further compounds male victims' challenges, empowers and encourages perpetrators, and reinforces the fears of criminal liability that might stem from reporting cases. "It's just like saying you prohibit any form of consensual relationship but you did not comprehensively protect them (people/victims) from predators," stated one legal professional.²⁷

In short, our interviews revealed the existence of factors that continue to frustrate and amplify the vulnerability of male victims of sexual violence under the law, as well as perpetuate a legal vacuum. These interviews also showed how the principle of *kunya* sheds light on public opinion of same-sex violence, as well as how the lack of legal investment in protecting and supporting male victims of sexual violence speaks to public sentiments about the issue of homosexuality.²⁸ It is important to note, however, that not all Nigerians hold negative views of homosexuals.

In the course of our research in northern Nigeria, we observed that a heightened level of secrecy surrounded discussions of gender and sexuality, and *kunya* affected public opinion regarding prosecution efforts. Thus, communities and parents are often hesitant or resistant to attempts to prosecute offenders, even in areas where the CRA or VAPPA apply. Words like "let the matter die here" and "we do not want it to get out" are common. The "good thing to do" or "good behavior" is to remain silent about gender and sexual identities that deviate from the norm.

Some legal professionals expressed the opinion that legal recognition of sexual diversity would mitigate victims' lack of agency in the system. One of these professionals stated:

I do not think talking about men or women who may want to engage in a same-sex relationship is new. In every society, this is bound to happen. We cannot run away from this reality. My concern has always been that the law should protect them as citizens. Our criminal laws, specifically the penal and criminal codes, should be revised because they are outdated.²⁹

Another added that, because talking about same-sex encounters is "challenging" in "our culture and tradition" due to the widespread belief that same-sex relationships are unacceptable, "when a man is alleged to have been involved in such a relationship, the stigma affects both the victim and his family."³⁰

The absence of effective laws to address male sexual violence highlights the pervasiveness of heteronormativity within socio-political structures (Njoku & Dery 2021), and it presents significant socio-legal challenges for male sexual violence victims in peacetime, conflict, and/or post-conflict settings in Nigeria. This is not unrelated to Touquet's argument that "masculinist bias" prevents legal systems from including discourses that consider the sexual victimization of men and boys (Touquet 2022:10). Victims' experiences are filtered, so that they lose their power to motivate the public's awareness and the ability to make sense of male victimhood. This contributes to the difficulty of effecting change in favor of male victims.

Despite Nigeria's membership in the United Nations, which recognizes violent acts on men or boys in its United Nations Security Council Resolution 2106, the country has yet to domesticate these resolutions.³¹ Furthermore, while legal professionals underscore the existence of the VAPPA and the CRA, they also suggested that significant loopholes in the laws and a slow court system make the prosecutorial process difficult, even in cases of female rape.³²

Conclusion

This article has attempted to nuance the ongoing debates on the nexus between gendered subjectivities and CRSV. Our findings highlight the socio-political nature of voice and silence. Our conclusions are built on the argument advanced by feminist sociologist Shulamit Reinharz (1994). Reinharz (1994:180) argues that being agentic means having the ability, the means, and the right to express oneself, one's mind, and one's will on a particular phenomenon; she further argues that "if an individual does not have these abilities, means, or rights, he or she is silent." While our findings indicated that male victims of CRSV have a voice (meaning they have the ability, the means, and the right to speak about their gendered subjectivities)

the sociopolitical nature of voice may render their voices inaudible. To be able to speak and be heard about one's experiences is to exercise some form of power. In a religiously conservative country such as Nigeria, the silencing of male CRSV victims frequently serves as a weapon against marginalized masculinities while absolving specific versions of hegemonic masculinity, including heteronormativity. Within feminist scholarship, silence has been conceptualized as emblematic of powerlessness. While this argument is not entirely true for all male victims of CRSV, our findings reveal that some male survivors of CRSV remain silent or refuse to disclose their violent experiences because they do not want to be misconstrued as being powerless. Our findings further suggest that, for male victims of CRSV, silence often functions as a form of agency.

Most victims refuse to speak out about their experiences due to the detrimental consequences that disclosure may bring. Findings from this study highlight that male survivors of CRSV who speak out about their experiences will likely be subjected to further trauma and stigma by formal and informal support service providers. Our findings highlight that both formal and informal sources of help are problematic in victims' social healing and recovery journeys. Male victims of CRSV recounted how speaking out about their experiences attracted adverse reactions and stigma from people to whom they turned for help. Thus, adverse reactions and cultural narratives around male rape caused most male victims to engage in what seems to be self-silencing. They tend to conceal themselves from the public gaze as their experience of sexual violence is considered shameful, stigmatizing, and effeminizing.

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Notes

1. The data for this study derives from an original dataset of 31 respondents who were purposively selected.
2. Programme manager of a sexual assault centre, Borno, October 27, 2020.
3. Survivor 11, Borno State, October 28, 2020.
4. Survivor 4, Borno state, October 30, 2020.
5. Survivor 9, Adamawa state, November 3, 2020.

6. Survivor 10, Borno State, October 28, 2020.
7. Advocacy and security NGO programme officer, Abuja, October 12, 2020.
8. A community leader in the IDP Camp, Borno, October 30, 2020.
9. Counter-terrorism officer in the Nigerian Police, Lagos, October 11, 2020.
10. Gender Desk (Unit) of a security institution, Borno, October 27, 2020.
11. Survivor 11, Borno State, October 28, 2020.
12. Survivors 8, Borno State, October 29, 2020.
13. Survivor 12, Borno State, October 30, 2020.
14. Survivor 1, Borno State, October 27, 2020.
15. Survivor 2, Borno State, October 28, 2020.
16. Survivor 3, Borno State, October 30, 2020.
17. Survivor 4, Borno State, October 30, 2020.
18. Survivor 5, Borno State, October 20, 2020.
19. Survivor 6, Adamawa State, November 2, 2020.
20. Survivor 7, Adamawa State, November 2, 2020.
21. Arguably, to address these laws' shortcomings, in 1993, the Nigerian government domesticated the Child Right Act (CRA). Among other issues, the CRA considers sex with a child as rape and prescribes punishment of life imprisonment for the offender (the Federal Republic of Nigeria Child's Right Act 2003). Furthermore, in 2015 the government promulgated the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPPA). This law seeks to "prohibit all forms of violence against persons in private and public life and provides maximum protection and effective remedies for victims and punishments of offenders." (The Federal Republic of Nigeria Violence Against Persons [Prohibition] Act 2015).
22. Criminal Code Act, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 1990; Penal Code (Northern States) Federal Provisions Act (Nigeria) 1960.
23. Legal Professional 4, Abuja, December 7, 2020.
24. Legal Professional 1, Abuja, December 5, 2020.
25. Legal Professional 2, Abuja, December 5, 2020.
26. Legal Professional 1, Abuja, December 5, 2020.
27. Legal Professional 3, Lagos State, December 5, 2020.
28. For example, following the passage of the SSMPA, NOIPolls, the Initiative for Equal Rights, and the Bisi Alimi Foundation conducted a study in 2015 on the perceptions of a cross-section of Nigerians on the issue of homosexuality. According to the findings, 90 percent of Nigerians do not believe homosexuality is innate, implying that it is learned or chosen (NOIPolls 2015), and thus it can be unlearned (Njoku & Dery 2021). Furthermore, the survey revealed that 87 percent of respondents would not accept a homosexual family member, 95 percent are opposed to homosexual marriage, 90 percent are opposed to LGBTQ+ associations in Nigeria, and 90 percent believe the country would be better off without homosexuals. Eighty-seven percent of respondents support the SSMPA, which criminalizes same-sex relationships, and 87 percent support the imprisonment of homosexuals. Similarly, according to NOIPolls (2015), 87 percent of Nigerians believe homosexuals should not have the same rights as heterosexual Nigerians. In the report's conclusion, they stated that the 2015 survey was conducted in tandem with a similar study conducted in 2013, as both results revealed the disposition of the majority of Nigerians on the issue of same-sex relationships (NOIPolls 2015).
29. Legal Professional 2, Abuja, December 5, 2020.
30. Legal Professional 5, Abuja, December 7, 2020.

31. Legal Professional 3, Lagos state, December 5, 2020.
 32. Legal Professional 2, Abuja, December 5, 2020.

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