* 1. What barriers, challenges and threats do women in the public sphere face in exercising their freedom of opinion and expression online and offline?

Women face lot of challenges ranging from denial of opportunity to participate in public space and career, seen as not capable of achieving, not allowed to take absolute charge of responsibility, to not being allowed to attain the highest positions as the male folk. Women are being treated as less of a human and unfit to be allowed to be featured in the public places. In Nigeria women still take a back seat in political and economic platforms, only 6.7%1 of women represented in both political (House) leadership in the house of reps and in appointments in the different arms of government. In parastatals and corporate space, women are still put at the service levels with a very small % being the leadership levels of such entities. This is associated with a deeply entrenched patriarchal norm that fronts leadership as a man’s responsibility in Nigeria. Women are strongly relegated to reproductive and home making/care duties; roles that pull the few who are in leadership positions behind as they are not expected to delegate these care duties.

* 1. What are the distinct challenges faced by those who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination?

In Nigeria, the group of people who can be described as those who face or experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination are Middle aged women, especially those who are being displaced due to the protracted insurgency in the north east Nigeria. This set of people have been relegated to be background and have mostly not been allowed either by the societal norms or their husbands to participate in form of activity from the household level to the society thereby keeping their views to themselves and have little or nothing to contribute to the society. These women mostly lose their focus in life and some fall into depression especially those being displaced and have lost their sense of pride and dignity. Being treated as an object has demoralized these women so badly that they are beginning to pick the bits and pieces of their lives as a result of awareness raising and other gender centred programs in those communities. Besides the above issues posed by the displacement situation, women and girls in the NE experience barriers to education where 47.3%2 (less than 50% of girls) have access to basic education in the North compared to 61% in the Southern part of the country. This is due to lack of resources (education facilities), retrogressive cultural norms and little value for education.

* 1. How has the pandemic, economic crises and recent political unrests affected women’s ability to communicate, protest and access information online and offline?

For the people of Yobe State Nigeria, the pandemic has worsened the economic situation especially during the lockdown where most families that depended on daily income to survive had to struggle, it however has shifted the social/cultural norm of having to depend on the woman’s petty trade and other forms of business to be the only source of income/livelihood for the family, thereby giving the woman the right to decision making in the immediate family. Before the pandemic, household resources were usually controlled by a male head, except in female-headed households. The COVID-19 pandemic is disrupting established gender roles due to the im­mediate effects of lockdown measures and possible longer-term socio-economic impacts.

Opportunities for traditional male income-earning activities outside of the home, including jobs such as carpentry and motor repair, are limited because of the pandemic. Without the possibility of earn­ing an income, men’s status in the household is threatened, as they are no longer able to provide as breadwinners. Men are traditionally less concerned with family hygiene matters and other caretaking responsibilities. As such, traditional gender roles might be challenged in situations where the domes­tic sphere, traditionally associated with women’s reproductive roles and responsibilities, is elevated under lockdown.1 “It is women who take care of the community. With the new circumstances, women take more leading roles.”4 However, Access to services, particularly health services for both men and women have been negatively affected due to COVID-19 mobility restrictions. Women are doubly affected as they also experience limited access to sexual reproductive health (SRH) services. Because of previously existing educational and digital literacy gaps, women and girls have less access to mobile phones and internet, hampering their access to accurate and timely information on COVID-193. Women and youth (both boys and girls) are generally missing from the decision-making structures, both at the community level and in high-level institutionalized decision-making processes.

1. Can you provide examples or information on ways in which freedom of opinion and expression has been abused or appropriated to undermine women’s human rights?

Most times institutional policies deny women such opportunities where women are only allowed to use one medium or the other, or simply, they are assigned a different network from others to simply discriminate and may deny access to such opportunities. From a recent Rapid Gender Analysis conducted in the BAY (Borno, Yobe and Adamawa) states of Nigeria, people have reported 49% disruption of services due to COVID-19. The Rapid Gender Analysis reveals that affected populations are aware of the different hu­manitarian organizations providing aid in their com­munities/camps and the kind of aid they provide. They also believe that men and women are benefit­ting equally, However, female-headed households, especially those in IDP camps, reported that they have difficulty accessing services related to food and non-food items due to their marital status, and that men tend to have more access than women thereby undermining the human rights which is mostly tied to marital statuses4. This clearly shows that gender-based discrimination is pervasive in North East Nigeria and unmarried women are more at risk.

1. What in your view are the key elements of a gendered perspective on the human right to freedom of opinion and expression? What would a feminist perspective add to the understanding of this right?

They become marginalised economically and socially thereby affecting their overall productivity and achievement in life. Feminists movements have been threatened with deregistration and gagging to discourage them from amplifying women’s voices. Social media platforms such as twitter, Facebook and Clubhouse have been instrumental in helping women amplify their voices through feminist movements in Nigeria. With the gagging of such platforms, the focus towards building agency suffers a blow and a lot of young women and girls may lose focus on the gains made.

When women have no economic power, they lose their voices and depend on decisions made for them by others. Feminist movements must continue to prioritize women economic justice as a pathway towards women’s participation in leadership and decision making. All levels of governance must be put to task to ensure this is a priority in the policy making processes and adequately planned and budgeted for.

1. Do you see any legal gaps, inconsistencies or controversies that should be clarified in this report, e.g. between protecting the right to freedom of expression and protecting women from ICT violence? Please indicate any specific issues in the international legal framework that in your view would benefit from further analysis in this report.

Women have always been affected by GBV generally and the pandemic worsened the situation as the lock down could only increase the intimate partner abuses they have been facing, the men vent anger on the women for even what the child does wrongly , the resilience strategy or coping mechanism the women are used to (including attending naming ceremonies, group meetings parties and visitations ) can no longer be accessed because large crowd gathering was banned, women couldn't get stuffs handy to help families and this traumatised them, the care givers and front liners a lot to give adequate care to the households.

In Nigeria, there is an existing policy framework which is central to the transformation of cultural and religious practices, which date back in history. Even though many of the problems legislated against are often prevalent in many states in Nigeria, only few states have legislated against them e.g. child marriage, FGM, and domestic violence. It is important to give these legislations a national outlook, and if possible to enforce them in all the Nigerian states especially in the North East Nigeria where development is being truncated due to the protracted crisis. Protecting the rights of the girl child from street hawking, child labour, begging, early forced marriage and the likes and granting the right to full education should also be a specific issue to look into.

Continuous advocacy for the domestication of the VAPP (Violence against People Prohibition) Act should be reinforced especially within the BAY states in Nigeria to curb the prevalence of Gender-based violence. Other gaps which are identified such as rights to freedom of expression, rights to education, rights to protection which are being identified as part of the policy goals in Nigeria are still falling through the gaps of implementation at the community for a common citizen.

1. What do you believe States should do to a) uphold women’s human right to freedom of opinion and expression b) protect women from violence, harassment and intimidation online and offline and c) promote women’s public participation?

By domesticating the Violence against people’s prohibition (VAPP) Act which was passed into law in 2015 in Nigeria will be a covering banner for freedom of expression especially to the marginalized groups (such as the female headed households, the separated women who are mostly internally displace). It will in turn protect women from violence perpetrated against them right from girlhood through early and forced marriage, lack of bodily autonomy and harmful traditional practices. Introducing the Prevention from sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse in public offices will also set women free from being harassed and being intimidated by patriarchal tendencies that perpetuate violence against women both in private and public spheres of life. Continuous awareness raising and engaging men and boys to promote gender equality should be embraced as a way forward in encouraging women’s public participation. Women economic empowerment should also be prioritized through actions that facilitate formation of solidarity groups where women can build agency, learn and unlearn how to challenge social and gender norms while working transforming structures both at the household, community and national levels of influence to ensure the environment supports women economic justice.

Challenging harmful cultural norms also includes engaging key stakeholders at all levels to understand the importance of including women to participate in leadership and decision making in public spheres and thereby taking back their rights to freedom of expression which will edify the societal development.

**References:**

1 <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/Finland_Oct2016/Documents/Nigeria_paper.pdf>

2 <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/education>