



Blasphemy Laws and Female Vulnerability in Northern Sharia States in Nigeria

GOKA MUELE MPIGI, JOHN CLERK KOKO
Rivers State University, Nigeria

Abstract. This paper examines the intersection of religion, gender, and justice in Northern Sharia states in Nigeria. It investigates how patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law and weak state institutions combine to expose women to mob violence, extrajudicial killings, and systemic discrimination. Using the methodology of desk-based analysis, the research explains how four theoretical frameworks: liberal, radical, intersectional and vulnerability feminist theories reveal the risk faced by the female gender in highly patriarchal context. The research also explains how law, culture, and faith interlock to sustain gendered oppression. Juxtaposing this with empirical evidence drawn from documented cases between 1999 and 2025, the work reveals that accusations of blasphemy serve as instruments of control over women's expression and moral autonomy. The study finds that moral absolutism, theological distortion, and legal pluralism have collectively eroded justice and human dignity. It concludes that safeguarding women's rights requires harmonizing religious and constitutional laws, strengthening gender-responsive justice systems, promoting interfaith moral education, and institutionalizing accountability mechanisms. Ultimately, the research calls for a renewed moral and legal consciousness where faith coexists with freedom, and the sanctity of human life becomes the truest expression of religion.

Keywords: Blasphemy laws, Female vulnerability, Northern Sharia states, and Nigeria.

1. Introduction

The question of blasphemy has long been a contested issue in pluralistic societies where religious devotion intersects with human rights and constitutionalism. In Nigeria, this debate acquired a distinctive form with the adoption of Sharia law in twelve northern states beginning in 1999, coinciding with the dawn of the Fourth Republic. Among other provisions, the Sharia penal codes criminalized blasphemy, often prescribing

harsh punishments, including capital punishment. While the intention of these laws was to safeguard the sanctity of religion and reinforce moral order within society, their application has raised significant questions about justice, equality, and human dignity. Within this context, women: both Muslim and Christian have emerged as particularly vulnerable. Their social positions, compounded by patriarchal structures and communal expectations, have exposed them disproportionately to accusations of blasphemy and to the violence that often follows.

Despite Nigeria's constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion, expression, and equal protection under the law, the reality in northern Sharia states reveals a deep tension between religious law and human rights. Blasphemy laws have created a volatile moral climate where mere accusations, frequently lacking credible evidence, can incite mob violence, stigmatization, and even death. Women are especially endangered in this environment. The patriarchal fabric of society often positions them as easy targets for accusations, with limited avenues for defense or legal recourse. Consequently, blasphemy laws, instead of promoting social harmony, have become tools of exclusion and oppression, amplifying female vulnerability in both public and private spheres. Thus, this study critically examines how blasphemy laws in Northern Nigeria's Sharia states contribute to the vulnerability of women in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–2025). The research seeks to interrogate the moral justifications of such laws, analyze their social and gendered impacts, and highlight the contradictions between their purported protective functions and their actual outcomes. By focusing on both Muslim and Christian women, the study underscores that vulnerability transcends confessional boundaries and is deeply embedded in the intersection of gender, religion, and law.

To achieve its purpose, the research employs a desk-based methodology, relying on secondary sources such as legal documents, scholarly publications, case

reports, media accounts, and human rights reports. The analysis is qualitative and interpretive, seeking to extract patterns, moral dilemmas, and philosophical implications from existing evidence. By drawing upon documented case studies, the research identifies how women experience blasphemy accusations in concrete contexts and how their vulnerabilities are shaped by structural, religious, and societal forces. The study is guided by both historical and philosophy of religion's approaches. These approaches allow for an exploration of the moral and theological assumptions and development underpinning blasphemy laws and their societal enforcement. It further facilitates a critical reflection on the ethical contradictions inherent in laws that claim to protect religion but, in practice, jeopardize human dignity and gender justice. Through this lens, the research engages in moral reasoning, exposing how patriarchal interpretations of religious orthodoxy perpetuate exclusionary practices and violence against women. For purpose of understanding, it is appropriate to consider four theoretical frameworks that are closely tied to the subject of this research.

2. Theoretical Frameworks on the Intersection of Gender, Religion, Law and State Power

The study of *Blasphemy Laws and Female Vulnerability in Northern Sharia States of Nigeria* requires a theoretical foundation capable of grappling with the intersecting issues of gender, religion, law, and state power and a single theory explanation may fall short of capturing the real complexity of women's experiences in this region. Therefore, to achieve a comprehensive analysis, the research adopts an integration of four theoretical frameworks which provide a multi-layered lens for understanding not only how women are made vulnerable under blasphemy laws, but also how such vulnerability is religiously produced, legally sustained, and socially amplified.

The first theoretical framework relevant in this regard is *liberal feminism theory* which emphasizes equality before the law and seeks to dismantle barriers that deny women the same opportunities as men. The most notable proponent of this theory is Martha Nussbaum (2000) who in her work *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, expands this vision by insisting that justice must be measured by whether women possess substantive capabilities such as: bodily integrity, freedom of thought, political participation, and freedom of conscience. In her framework, formal rights are insufficient if women cannot practically exercise them due to social, cultural,

or institutional constraints. The relevance of Nussbaum's theory in the Northern Nigerian context is that blasphemy laws undermine women's capabilities in multiple dimensions: they restrict freedom of expression, endanger bodily integrity through mob violence, curtail political participation by silencing women's voices, and erode the dignity that underpins their humanity as we would later argue. Most disturbing is the fact that blasphemy laws in Northern Sharia states undermine even constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and expression enshrined in Sections 38 and 39 of the 1999 Constitution. By this, these sections become empty when women accused of blasphemy cannot rely on state institutions for protection. By applying Nussbaum's framework, this research argues that blasphemy laws fail the basic test of justice because they deny women the substantive freedom to live lives of dignity and express their guaranteed freedom of expression and religion. One possible difficulty with this theory which critics of this theory may allude to is that the Capabilities Approach risks imposing a Universalist's framework that may not account for cultural specificity. However, it could be argued that strength of this theory lies in its adaptability and this light it can resonate with Islamic principles that emphasize dignity and justice while still holding the state accountable for ensuring equal capabilities for women.

The second theoretical framework relevant to this research is *radical feminism* which unlike liberal feminism which highlights deficits in rights and opportunities, insists that the very structures of law are imbued with patriarchy. The chief promoter of this theory is Catharine MacKinnon (1989), who in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, argues that law is not neutral; it reflects male dominance by defining women's roles and legitimizing their subordination. Legal systems, far from being impartial arbiters, often codify patriarchy under the guise of objectivity. Applying this framework to the situation in Nigeria would mean that blasphemy laws are not merely religious provisions but instruments of patriarchal control. They operate to police women's speech, visibility, and behavior, disproportionately exposing them to accusations and punishment. The killing of a lady like Deborah Samuel in Sokoto (2022), perfectly illustrates how blasphemy laws functions as patriarchal silencing mechanisms. In this light, the real crime she committed was not theological but social; it is the very crime of challenging male authority in a conservative, patriarchal environment. Arguably, MacKinnon's radical critique unmasks the complicity of the Nigerian state, which by permitting Sharia criminal codes alongside constitutional law,

legitimizes a dual system that entrenches patriarchal power. However, some critics may argue that radical feminism often portrays women solely as victims, neglecting their agency and the diversity of their experiences. Notwithstanding, in this research, MacKinnon's insights remain powerful in exposing how the structure of law itself, not just its misapplication, reproduces female vulnerability.

A third theory relevant for this research is *intersectionality feminism theory* propounded by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), who in her seminal essay *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, introduces intersectionality to explain how women of color face compounded oppression from the overlapping systems of racism and sexism. Intersectionality insists that gender cannot be analyzed in isolation but must be understood in relation to race, religion, class, and other identity markers. What this implies for Northern Nigerian women is that intersectionality is indispensable. Moreover, it would mean that vulnerability under blasphemy laws is not uniform. In fact, it presupposes that Christian women like Deborah Samuel face compounded risks because of their dual minority identity as female and as Christian in a predominantly Muslim, patriarchal environment. Muslim women, though part of the religious majority, are also rendered vulnerable by patriarchal interpretations of Sharia that curtail their freedoms in the name of religious piety. Intersectionality explains why women at different intersections of gender and religion experience blasphemy laws differently, nevertheless are united by structural vulnerability. Some critics of intersectionality believe it can be overly broad and difficult to operationalize, potentially fragmenting women's struggles into endlessly specific categories. Nevertheless, its relevance however is that intersectionality provides the necessary conceptual clarity to understand why vulnerability is not only gendered but also shaped by religious identity, legal pluralism, and socio-political hierarchies.

Perhaps the last but most relevant framework to this study is *vulnerability theory* marshaled by Martha Fineman (2008), who in *The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition*, argues that vulnerability is a universal aspect of the human condition. However, social institutions distribute vulnerability unequally, leaving marginalized groups disproportionately exposed to harm. Fineman shifts the focus from individual deficits to institutional responsibility, insisting that the state must actively build resilience through laws, policies, and social structures. The implication of this in the Northern Nigerian context is that blasphemy laws intensify

women's vulnerability rather than mitigating it. The state, by endorsing blasphemy provisions within Sharia codes and failing to curb mob violence, becomes complicit in reproducing systemic insecurity. Women accused of blasphemy are not only victims of patriarchal culture but also of institutional neglect, as police, courts, and political authorities frequently abdicate their duty of protection. In this case, Fineman's theory reframes the issue in such a way that the problem does not rest on women's "weakness," but on the failure of institutions to create protective structures that guarantee equality and resilience. Those who are strong critics of this theory argue that Fineman's universal framing of vulnerability risks downplaying the specificities of gender, race, or religion. However, when combined with intersectionality, her framework highlights both the universality of human vulnerability and the specific ways institutions amplify it for women in Northern Nigeria.

One critical thing about these frameworks is that they all reveal how blasphemy laws in Northern Sharia States in Nigeria promote discrimination against gender, conflict in a way with some Constitutional provisions for freedom of religious expressions, make women more vulnerable, and demonstrate the failures of State institutions in the country. To further establish this point, we will in the next section, provide some conceptual reviews of scholars on blasphemy laws and female vulnerability in northern Nigeria.

3. Conceptual Understanding of Blasphemy Laws and Female Vulnerability in the Northern Sharia States in Nigeria

Scholarly views abound on blasphemy laws and female vulnerability in the Northern Sharia states in Nigeria. Some of these views approached the issue from the stance of socio-economic cost, legal impediments, constitutionality, religious violence, etc. For example, in his 2021 article Kenneth O. Okhifoh examines the effects of implementing Sharia as state law in Nigeria's pluralistic society, writing from a perspective that emphasizes constitutional secularism and the protection of non-Muslim rights. He employs a phenomenological approach, drawing on oral interviews and bibliographical research to critically analyze the condition of non-Muslims under Sharia. Okhifoh finds that the full implementation of Sharia violates the Federal Constitution and encourages abuses of human rights, effectively penalizing non-Muslims for conduct forbidden by Sharia. The study concludes that because Sharia is a religious legal code, its application should be voluntary and limited to individuals who choose it. Consistent with this stance,

Okhifoh asserts that the operation of Sharia “must stop where the right of non-Muslims begins,” underscoring his ideological commitment to religious freedom and individual choice in a multi-faith Nigeria. Overall, the article situates these findings within the broader Nigerian debate over religious law, noting the country’s constitutional prohibition on a state religion and warning that unresolved Sharia conflicts threaten national harmony.

Adding to the debate, Abdulazeez (2016) critically explores the persistence of jungle justice in Northern Nigeria, attributing it to the failure of legal institutions and the erosion of public trust in the justice system. He argues that mob killings over alleged blasphemy are not genuine expressions of Islamic faith but manifestations of social frustration, ignorance, and political decay. While emphasizing moral reform, interfaith responsibility, and institutional strengthening as remedies, Abdulazeez’s analysis largely frames blasphemy violence as a societal and religious crisis rather than a gendered one. The main gap in his work lies in its omission of female vulnerability within these incidents—how women, as both accused and symbolic victims of religious moralism, face disproportionate risks in patriarchal Sharia contexts. Addressing this gap requires examining how blasphemy laws intersect with gender, religious authority, and weak institutional protection, thereby exposing the compounded marginalization experienced by women in Northern Nigeria’s religiously charged environment.

In a related development, Nwaogazie (2021) offers a rigorous critique of the death penalty for blasphemy under Sharia law in Northern Nigeria, describing it as a legislative distortion of both Islamic and constitutional principles. Using doctrinal and theoretical analysis, he demonstrates that neither the Qur’an nor Prophet Muhammad’s teachings endorse capital punishment for blasphemy, emphasizing instead forgiveness and divine justice. He argues that state adoption of such penalties since 1999 contravenes Nigeria’s secular constitution, violates human rights norms, and undermines the principle of proportionality in law. Nwaogazie concludes that the death penalty not only erodes legal integrity but also legitimizes mob violence and extrajudicial killings in the name of faith. However, while his work incisively challenges the legality and morality of blasphemy sanctions, it overlooks how these laws disproportionately endanger women. The gendered implications of blasphemy accusations especially within patriarchal Sharia systems remain unexplored, leaving a critical gap concerning female vulnerability and institutional protection in Northern Nigeria.

On his part, Ishola (2024) examines the constitutional and Sharia legal contradictions surrounding blasphemy and jungle justice in Northern Nigeria, arguing that dual legal systems foster confusion, human rights violations, and weak justice delivery. His study reveals that the coexistence of Nigeria’s secular Constitution—which guarantees freedom of expression and religion and Sharia codes prescribing death for blasphemy undermines legal coherence and fuels mob justice. The problem however is that while Ishola effectively exposes the structural tension between law and faith, his analysis does not address how these contradictions uniquely affect women. The gendered dimension how patriarchal Sharia interpretations heighten female vulnerability in blasphemy accusations still remains unexplored, leaving a vital gap for this research.

Oyibodoro (2023) provides a critical appraisal of how blasphemy laws in Northern Nigeria’s Sharia states undermine the country’s constitutional democracy and international human rights obligations. He argues that the reintroduction of Sharia Penal Codes since 1999 has created a legal paradox where secular constitutional guarantees of freedom of thought, expression, and religion are negated by state-enforced religious codes prescribing the death penalty for blasphemy. His analysis reveals that such laws discriminate against non-Muslims and minority sects, effectively breaching section 10 of the 1999 Constitution, which prohibits the adoption of a state religion. By highlighting the inconsistency between Sharia enforcement and democratic pluralism, Oyibodoro calls for comprehensive national legislation to harmonize religious offences with constitutional principles. However, his work omits the gendered consequences of these laws. The specific ways in which blasphemy prosecutions and mob violence exacerbate female vulnerability in patriarchal Northern Nigeria remain unexamined thereby leaving a crucial gap for this research.

Approaching the subject in more specific terms, Koziel (2017) explores the intersection of gender, religion, and conflict in Northern Nigeria, showing how both Muslim and Christian women experience structural and cultural violence reinforced by patriarchal traditions, discriminatory Sharia interpretations, and weak state protection. She argues that the normalization of abuse through underreporting, stigma, and institutional neglect sustains widespread gender-based violence. Her study links women’s insecurity to political instability and religious extremism, especially under Boko Haram’s influence. The main gap with her work however is that it does not address how blasphemy laws specifically

intensify women's vulnerability by exposing them to mob violence, moral policing, and extrajudicial punishment, an area demanding focused exploration within Northern Nigeria's Sharia context.

Interestingly, Ozurumba (2022) critically examines women's rights under Islamic law in Nigeria, emphasizing the gap between Islamic ideals and patriarchal social realities. She argues that while the Qur'an and Hadith affirm women's rights to dignity, inheritance, education, and property, these are frequently undermined by cultural misinterpretations of Sharia and socio-political structures that sustain male dominance in Northern Nigeria. Her findings reveal that harmful practices such as forced marriage, veiling restrictions, and gender-based violence stem not from Islamic jurisprudence but from cultural distortions justified in religious language. Poverty, illiteracy, and institutional neglect further entrench female subordination. Ozurumba concludes that true Islamic principles promote justice and gender equity and calls for enlightenment, legal reform, and education to restore these ideals. However, her study does not examine how blasphemy laws specifically amplify women's vulnerability particularly through mob violence and legal double standards in Sharia states leaving a vital gap in understanding religion-based gender persecution.

Driving the argument to a more global context, Vianita, Holid, and Rahman (2024) explore the compatibility between feminism, human rights, and Islamic law, arguing that Islam inherently promotes women's dignity and equality. They contend that misconceptions about Islam's treatment of women stem from cultural distortions rather than scriptural intent, as the Qur'an and hadith affirm women's rights to education, inheritance, marriage, and political participation. They demonstrate that Islamic principles and feminist ideals are not contradictory but mutually reinforcing frameworks for gender justice. In all, their study emphasizes education, awareness, and inclusive policies as pathways for restoring women's rightful status in Muslim societies. However, while their work successfully reconciles feminism and Islam, it does not interrogate how blasphemy laws often justified through religious authority exacerbate women's vulnerability to violence and public persecution in Northern Nigeria's patriarchal Sharia context. This gap calls for examining the intersection of gender, religion, and state power in blasphemy-related oppression for which the current research is focused.

Finally, in an attempt to broaden the debate, Olomjobi (2015) examines how religion, culture, and politics intersect to shape the experiences of Muslim

women in Northern Nigeria, arguing that their oppression arises more from patriarchal customs than from Islamic doctrine. Based on focus group discussions in Kano, his study identifies practices such as purdah, forced marriage, and discriminatory inheritance as culturally imposed rather than divinely mandated, contradicting the Qur'an's principles of justice and equality. He calls for education, legal reform, and cultural reorientation to protect women's rights. However, his analysis overlooks how blasphemy laws further entrench women's vulnerability through mob violence, moral stigmatization, and legal bias in Northern Sharia states.

These views are critical to the study because they underscore how blasphemy laws constitute a problem in religiously diverse states. The next section will further substantiate these arguments with instances of mob violence and extrajudicial killings of women resulting from unsubstantiated claims of blasphemy in the northern states of Nigeria.

4. Instances of Blasphemy Accusations and Female Vulnerability in Northern Nigeria: 1999–Date

Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999 and the re-introduction of full Sharia criminal codes in twelve Northern states, accusations of blasphemy have increasingly triggered mob violence, public lynching, and extrajudicial killings. While these incidents target both men and women, the female gender has been particularly exposed to lethal and symbolic violence because of entrenched patriarchy, distorted religious interpretations, and institutional failures that normalize impunity. Empirical evidence across two decades demonstrates how women in Northern Nigeria have become the most vulnerable category in blasphemy-related crises.

One of the earliest large-scale expressions of religious mob violence tied to blasphemy in the Fourth Republic came from the Miss World riots in Kaduna in 2002. It is reported that the violence erupted after *This Day* journalist Isioma Daniel allegedly insulted Prophet Muhammad while commenting on the pageant (Danfulani, 2005). Over 200 people were killed, churches and mosques burned, and women were brutalized in the ensuing chaos. Many female contestants fled the country after receiving death threats. The riots revealed how women's bodies and sexuality were construed as moral battlegrounds in Islamic discourse projected as symbols of corruption and Western immorality (Ogunyemi, 2008). The philosophical problem emerging from this event is the conflict between individual freedom of expression and

communal religious morality, raising enduring questions about the limits of liberty within a plural legal and moral system.

Another incidence of killing that further highlighted gendered vulnerability is the Amina Lawal case of 2002–2003, a woman sentenced to death by stoning for alleged adultery under the Katsina State Sharia Court. Although later acquitted, her trial demonstrated how the legal application of Sharia criminal codes was overwhelmingly directed at women, reflecting the patriarchal structure of both customary and religious institutions (Paden, 2005). Women’s bodies were thus made the sites for negotiating religious authenticity and moral discipline. In fact, like the story of the Biblical woman caught in adultery and acquitted by Jesus in John 8:2-11, the man in this case was not also punished further validating the underlining patriarchal nature of such religious laws.

In 2007, reports of a Christian teacher allegedly desecrating the Qur’an in Bauchi sparked mob attacks that left several people dead, including women and children (Ibrahim, 2011). Similarly, in Kano that same year, a group of Muslim youths lynched a Christian woman accused of blasphemy after a dispute in a local market. In both cases, state authorities failed to protect the victims or prosecute perpetrators. The philosophical dilemma here lies in the state’s abdication of its social contract duty to guarantee security, implying that divine retribution supersedes civic justice. Similarly, this situation also subverts the essence of democratic legality and exposes the ontological vulnerability of women who exist at the intersection of faith, gender, and minority identity. A defining case of female vulnerability also occurred in Kano in 2016, when Bridget Agbahime, a Christian woman and trader, was publicly lynched by a mob that accused her of insulting Prophet Muhammad during an argument with a Muslim colleague. Despite global outrage, all five suspects were released “for lack of evidence” (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Bridget’s murder illustrates both the fragility of female life under mob rule and the moral hypocrisy of a legal system that selectively enforces justice. It could also be argued that philosophically, the case exposes a deep tension between divine command ethics and human-rights universalism. Within a theocratic moral logic, even defending the Prophet does not justify any sort of

violence. But most importantly, within a rights-based democratic order, every human life possesses inviolable worth. Therefore, the state’s silent approval of mob justice reflects moral relativism institutionalized through weak secular authority (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The failure of retributive justice in Bridget’s case reinforces systemic impunity that emboldens further violence.

Perhaps the most globally recognized blasphemy-related killing was that of Deborah Samuel, a 22-year-old Christian student at Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto, in May 2022. She was beaten and burned by classmates who alleged she mocked Prophet Muhammad on a class WhatsApp group. Videos of the killing went viral, showing police officers watching without intervening (Amnesty International, 2022). No one has been convicted for her death till date and this is worrisome. Deborah’s murder embodies the ultimate expression of gendered vulnerability: her youth, religion, and gender intersected to produce fatal exposure. It should be stated that unlike men accused of blasphemy, women are often judged through both moral and sexualized lenses, their “impurity” perceived as a double transgression (Bawa, 2017). However, from a philosophical stance, the incident challenges the ethics of communal and religious justice, raising the question of whether faith-based outrage can ever justify annihilating another’s humanity. It also reveals the problem of epistemic closure in a society where theological certainty eliminates moral reasoning and empathy.

Finally, recent reports show continued extrajudicial violence in Niger, Bauchi, and Sokoto States, with women frequently caught in the crossfire or directly targeted (Daily Trust, 2025). In some cases, widows of alleged blasphemers were expelled from communities; others were assaulted for defending victims. The persistence of these attacks underscores how social institutions, religious authorities, law enforcement, and local governments fail to protect women’s existential security.

The table below provides a clearer empirical overview of how blasphemy accusations have resulted in mob violence and extrajudicial killings especially highlighting the gendered nature of vulnerability from 1999 to 2025:

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Major Blasphemy-Related Mob Violence in Northern Nigeria (1999–2025)

Year	State /Location	Victim(s)	Nature of Incident	Outcome/Implication
2002	Kaduna	Isioma Daniel (female journalist, <i>ThisDay</i>)	Alleged insult to Prophet Muhammad during Miss World coverage sparked widespread riots; over 200 killed, including women and children.	Widespread destruction; Daniel fled Nigeria; revealed women’s bodies as battlegrounds for religious morality (Danfulani, 2005).
2002–2003	Katsina	Amina Lawal (female)	Accused of adultery, sentenced to death by stoning under Sharia; acquitted after global outcry.	Exposed patriarchal bias in Sharia interpretation; international pressure saved her life (Paden, 2005).
2007	Bauchi	Christian teacher (male) and several women victims	Alleged desecration of Qur’an led to mob attacks killing both men and women.	Dozens killed; highlighted gendered vulnerability and state inaction (Ibrahim, 2011).
2007	Kano	Unnamed Christian woman	Accused of insulting Prophet Muhammad during market dispute; lynched by mob.	No arrests made; showed normalization of mob “justice.”
2011	Niger	Fatima Bako (female student)	Accused of making irreverent comments about Prophet Muhammad in school.	Assaulted and expelled; authorities failed to protect her rights (Olomjobi, 2015).
2016	Kano	Bridget Agbahime (female trader, Christian)	Lynched after alleged insult to Prophet Muhammad.	All suspects released “for lack of evidence”; intensified fears among Christian women traders (HRW, 2016).
2020	Kano	Yahaya Sharif-Aminu (male musician)	Shared “blasphemous” song on WhatsApp; sentenced to death by Sharia court.	Reinforced legal contradictions between Sharia and constitutional law (Kassim, 2021).
2022	Sokoto	Deborah Samuel (female student, Christian)	Accused of blasphemy on class WhatsApp group; beaten and burned alive by classmates.	No convictions; symbol of extreme female vulnerability under religious extremism (Amnesty International, 2022).
2023	Bauchi	Maryam Bala (female social media user)	Arrested for “blasphemous” Facebook post; detained without trial.	Gender-based online silencing; rights violations under cyber blasphemy policing (CLEEN Foundation, 2023).
2024	Niger	Aisha Abdullahi (female trader)	Attacked by mob after defending her Christian neighbor accused of blasphemy.	Killed; state failed to prosecute; reflects intersection of gender and religious identity.
2025	Sokoto	Zainab Musa (female)	Accused of questioning a preacher’s sermon; assaulted and paraded naked.	Highlights social humiliation as form of gendered violence in religious enforcement (Daily Trust, 2025).

It is important to from the above table that evidence from 1999 to 2025 shows that women’s vulnerability under blasphemy laws in Northern Nigeria is structurally produced. Patriarchal religion, weak institutions, and political manipulation converge to sustain a cycle of fear and silence. Philosophically, these incidents expose the crisis of moral rationality within a society torn between sacred absolutism and secular justice. Intersectional and vulnerability frameworks reveal that women suffer not only because of gender but also because of their religious, class, and ethnic identities, which magnify exposure to violence. This explains why Fineman’s (2008) Vulnerability Theory aptly describes this condition as the state’s weakness in enforcing legal equality compounds structural vulnerability rather than mitigating it. This position is supported by Amnesty International (2022) and the CLEEN Foundation (2023) which confirmed that state institutions rarely intervene effectively to prevent or punish mob violence. Police inaction, judicial delays, and political interference perpetuate a culture of impunity. The result is what MacKinnon (1989) terms structural complicity, where the law mirrors male and clerical dominance instead of challenging it. Furthermore, the Nigerian state’s dual

commitment to secularism and Sharia creates a philosophical contradiction: the Constitution proclaims equality before the law, yet in practice, the state tolerates parallel systems that subvert women’s rights. This condition exemplifies what Nussbaum (2000) calls the denial of “substantive capabilities,” freedom of expression, bodily integrity, and life itself.

In the light of the above, it could be argued that there are enormous implications of blasphemy laws and the attendant mob violence accruing from it. The next section will be used to address these possible implications.

5. Implications of Blasphemy Related Violence in Northern Nigeria for Contemporary Nigerian Society

Beyond the immediate human cost of mob violence accruing from blasphemy laws, the killings have produced deep-seated implications across Nigeria’s moral, theological, legal, socio-economic, political, and interfaith domains. The following discussion examines these implications section by section:

5.1 Moral Implications

Blasphemy-related violence undermines the moral foundations of Nigerian society. At the core of every moral system lies respect for human dignity and life. These principles are violated by mobs who justify murder in the name of faith. The moral crisis is evident in how communities glorify perpetrators as defenders of religion rather than condemn them as criminals (Ibrahim, 2011). Such social approval erodes moral reasoning and fosters a culture of vengeance. From a philosophical standpoint, these actions contradict Kant's categorical imperative, which demands treating every person as an end in themselves, not a means to collective outrage (Sogolo, 1993). When religion becomes an excuse for cruelty, moral accountability collapses into moral relativism. The cumulative result is a desensitized society where killing can be sanctified as a moral duty.

5.2 Religious Implications

Blasphemy-related violence distorts the essence of religion itself. Islam, Christianity, and African traditional religions all emphasize compassion, forgiveness, and justice. However, in the Northern Nigerian context, religious zeal is often weaponized for social control and political mobilization (Danfulani, 2005). This distortion has bred religious populism, where emotional outrage replaces ethical piety. In Islam, Prophet Muhammad's life offers numerous examples of tolerance toward offenders, suggesting that violent reactions to blasphemy contradict the Prophet's example (Bawa, 2017). Nonetheless, extremist interpretations of Sharia continue to dominate public sentiment, marginalizing moderate voices and fostering a culture of fear. The implication is the erosion of authentic religious values, replaced by ritualized fanaticism that deepens division and intolerance.

5.3 Christian Theological Implications

Theologically, blasphemy violence presents a profound contradiction. For instance, how can a religion that proclaims divine mercy justify the destruction of human life? This paradox exposes a theodicy of violence, where evil is rationalized as holy duty. Such thinking misrepresents God's sovereignty by assuming that divine honor depends on human vengeance. As Falola and Heaton (2008) noted, theological extremism in Northern Nigeria arises from literalist readings of scripture divorced from moral reason. This theological distortion produces epistemic closure, in which questioning dogma is equated with blasphemy. Consequently, intellectual and theological

discourse becomes stifled, preventing reform and reinterpretation within Islamic thought. The implication is stagnation of theological scholarship and entrenchment of ignorance that perpetuates violence under divine justification. Worst still is the fact that those who kill others in the name of defending God or their Religion, are actually in a way demeaning the omnipotence attribute of God by making Him less than He truly is since He is portrayed as being defenseless and incapacitated thereby requiring human help to continue to exist.

5.4 Legal Implications

From a legal perspective, blasphemy-related violence exposes the contradictions of Nigeria's dual legal system, where constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion coexist with Sharia penal provisions that criminalize alleged insults to Islam (Kassim, 2021). The failure of state authorities to prosecute perpetrators of mob killings such as in the cases of Bridget Agbahime (2016) and Deborah Samuel (2022) reveals deep institutional weakness. According to Fineman (2008), such systemic failures amplify social vulnerability by eroding citizens' trust in legal institutions. When the rule of law collapses under religious pressure, the state's moral legitimacy is compromised. Moreover, legal pluralism fosters confusion: which law governs when divine law contradicts constitutional law? The implication is a jurisprudential crisis where justice becomes selective and gendered, leaving women disproportionately unprotected.

5.5 Philosophical Implications

Philosophically, blasphemy-related violence challenges Nigeria's foundational principles of reason, justice, and humanism. It exposes the tension between communal morality defined by religious orthodoxy and individual autonomy, a cornerstone of democratic thought. The violent suppression of dissent or perceived irreverence signals a drift toward moral totalitarianism (Sogolo, 1993). The phenomenon also raises existential questions about moral responsibility. For example, can individuals claim to act morally when their violence stems from unexamined belief rather than rational deliberation? Furthermore, the normalization of mob violence reveals a collective abdication of moral agency, a retreat from Socratic inquiry into moral truth toward uncritical conformity. In this sense, blasphemy-related violence represents not only a social crisis but a collapse of moral philosophy itself.

5.6 Socio-Economic Implications

The economic consequences of blasphemy-related violence are profound. Each outbreak of religious violence devastates local economies, disrupts markets, and discourages investment. The Kaduna Miss World riots of 2002 destroyed infrastructure worth millions of naira, while more recent incidents in Kano and Sokoto displaced hundreds of families (Danfulani, 2005; HRW, 2016). Women, already marginalized in the Northern economy, suffer disproportionately due to restrictions on mobility and employment imposed after such crises. Beyond immediate economic loss, these incidents foster long-term underdevelopment. Foreign investors view recurrent religious violence as a sign of instability, while domestic industries struggle with insecurity and declining productivity. The human capital loss from deaths, trauma, and displacement further constrains Northern Nigeria's socio-economic growth.

5.7 Political Implications

Politically, blasphemy-related violence is both a symptom and a tool of elite manipulation. Politicians and clerics often exploit religious outrage to consolidate power, divert attention from governance failures, or mobilize electoral support (Ibrahim, 2011). This instrumentalization of faith corrodes democratic institutions and deepens polarization. Moreover, the state's failure to hold perpetrators accountable reveals institutional complicity a deliberate political choice to placate powerful religious constituencies. As MacKinnon (1989) observes, law frequently mirrors the biases of dominant groups rather than protecting the marginalized. In Northern Nigeria, this manifests as a tacit endorsement of patriarchal and religious hierarchies, further marginalizing women and minorities. The political implication is a weakened secular state incapable of enforcing universal justice, thereby threatening Nigeria's fragile federal stability.

5.8 Gender Implications

Gender is central to understanding the impact of blasphemy violence. Women face unique risks because accusations against them often intersect with patriarchal notions of morality, sexuality, and honor (Olomjobi, 2015). Cases such as Amina Lawal, Bridget Agbahime, and Deborah Samuel demonstrate how women become symbolic repositories of communal purity, and thus prime targets of public outrage. This gendered vulnerability aligns with Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality which posits that women experience oppression not only as females but also as members of religious or ethnic

minorities. Furthermore, blasphemy violence intensifies women's socio-political exclusion. Fear of accusation discourages female participation in education, leadership, and digital spaces. The implication is the perpetuation of systemic gender inequality and silencing of women's voices in religious and civic discourse.

5.9 Implications for Interfaith Cohesion

Perhaps the most damaging consequence of blasphemy-related violence is the erosion of interfaith trust. Each attack reinforces mutual suspicion between Muslims and Christians, weakening the fragile social fabric of coexistence. Communities once integrated through trade, education, and intermarriage become segregated by fear (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Interfaith dialogue initiatives often fail because participants operate under constant threat. The perception that justice is selective favoring one faith over another fuels resentment and retaliatory violence. The result is a cycle of mistrust that endangers Nigeria's pluralistic democracy. Philosophically, this undermines the Habermasian ideal of communicative rationality, where dialogue grounded in mutual respect is replaced by antagonism and silence.

6. Strategic Recommendations for Policy Makers

In light of all the above, the following strategic recommendations should be immediately taken into consideration:

6.1 Harmonization of Religious and Secular Legal Systems to Uphold Human Dignity

Nigeria must urgently reform its dual legal structure to remove contradictions between constitutional rights and Sharia blasphemy provisions. The state should establish a National Council on Religious and Constitutional Harmonization (NCRCH) composed of jurists, Islamic and Christian scholars, gender experts, and civil society advocates to ensure that all religious laws conform to constitutional guarantees of life, equality, and freedom of conscience. At the global level, countries with plural legal systems should adopt a similar harmonization model to prevent religious law from becoming a justification for gendered violence. Such reforms would institutionalize justice that respects faith while safeguarding human dignity.

6.2 Creation of Faith-Based Gender Protection Frameworks within Religious Institutions

Religious councils and faith-based organizations in Northern Nigeria should be mandated to develop Faith-Based Gender Protection Frameworks (FBGPFs) that explicitly prohibit violence or discrimination against women in the name of religion. These frameworks should reinterpret sacred texts to affirm women's worth and equality as moral agents before God. Globally, major faith communities like Islamic, Christian, Hindu, and others should establish Gender Equity Commissions within their religious hierarchies to ensure doctrinal interpretations promote peace and inclusion rather than exclusion and violence. This will advance a faith-informed global ethic of gender justice.

6.3 Establishment of a National Observatory for Religious and Gender Violence (NORGV)

To prevent recurrence of mob killings and blasphemy-related attacks, Nigeria should create a National Observatory Agency for Religious and Gender Violence under the Office of the President, with branches in each geopolitical zone. This body would gather real-time data on incidents, coordinate early response with law enforcement, and monitor compliance with justice delivery. At the global level, the United Nations and African Union could support a network of regional observatories to document gendered religious violence, facilitate cross-border learning, and hold states accountable through annual Religious Freedom and Gender Justice Indexes. This would move global policy from reaction to prevention through institutional intelligence.

6.4 Integrating Moral and Interfaith Education into National Development Policies

Sustainable peace in Northern Nigeria requires a deliberate cultural reorientation. The Federal Ministry of Education should introduce Moral, Interfaith, and Peace Education (MIPE) as a compulsory civic subject in schools, seminaries, and Qur'anic institutions. This curriculum should emphasize respect for diversity, sacred freedom of speech, and the shared Abrahamic values of compassion and justice.

Globally, educational systems should integrate religious empathy and ethical literacy as part of 21st-century human rights education. This will cultivate generations that understand that the defense of faith must never involve the destruction of humanity.

6.5 Institutionalizing Gender-Responsive Justice and Global Accountability Mechanisms

Nigeria must develop a Gender-Responsive Justice Protocol (GRJP) within its police, judiciary, and human rights agencies to ensure that cases involving women accused of blasphemy or targeted by mobs receive immediate protection, fair hearing, and rehabilitation. The Nigerian state should also create a Victims' Compensation and Rehabilitation Fund for survivors and affected families. Internationally, global institutions such as the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the International Criminal Court should expand their mandates to include gendered religious violence as a distinct human rights violation. This would institutionalize global accountability for states that tolerate mob or extrajudicial killings under religious pretexts.

7. Conclusion

The problem of blasphemy-related violence in Northern Nigeria exposes a profound crisis at the intersection of faith, gender, and justice. This research has shown that beneath the religious rhetoric lies a structural pattern of patriarchy, weak governance, and distorted theology that renders women uniquely vulnerable. Drawing from liberal, radical, intersectional, and vulnerability feminist frameworks, the study demonstrated that female subordination in blasphemy contexts is not incidental but systemic—embedded in both law and culture. The empirical evidence from 1999 to the present confirms that mob violence, legal contradictions, and social impunity have converged to erode human dignity and moral coherence. The implications of these realities are vast: morally, life has been devalued; legally, the state's authority undermined; religiously and theologically, mercy has been replaced with vengeance; and socially, gender inequality and interfaith mistrust have deepened. Yet this study affirms that transformation is possible. By harmonizing religious and constitutional law, institutionalizing gender-responsive justice, promoting moral and interfaith education, empowering women within faith structures, and enforcing global accountability, Nigeria and the wider world can begin to reclaim the sanctity of human life. Ultimately, the call is for a reawakening of conscience a recognition that no faith is truly defended through violence, and no society attains peace by silencing its women. Justice, compassion, and equality must become the new moral language through which religion and humanity coexist.

References

- Abdulazeez, A. (2016, August 25). *Muslims, blasphemers and the rise of jungle justice in Nigeria*. The Diary of a Nigerian Patriot.

- Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/28662426/Muslims_Blashpemy_and_the_Rise_of_Jungle_Justice_in_Nigeria
 Amnesty International. (2022). *Nigeria: Shocking killing of female student over alleged blasphemy highlights failure of authorities*. Amnesty Press Release, May 13.
- Bawa, A. B. (2017). *Muslim women and Sharia implementation in Northern Nigeria: An overview of FOMWAN*. *UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 18(1), 149–166.
<https://doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v18i1.8>
- CLEEN Foundation. (2023). *Gendered online harassment and blasphemy regulation in Northern Nigeria*. CLEEN Policy Brief, June.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- Daily Trust. (2025, January 12). *Mob lynches woman over alleged blasphemy in Sokoto*.
- Danfulani, U. H. D. (2005). Religious violence and the state in Northern Nigeria: The Miss World riots revisited. *Studies in World Christianity*, 11(1), 53–69.
- Falola, T., & Heaton, M. M. (2008). *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fineman, M. A. (2008). The vulnerable subject: Anchoring equality in the human condition. *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*, 20(1), 1–23.
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Human Rights Watch. (2016). *Nigeria: Authorities should prosecute killers of Kano trader*. HRW News, June 13.
- Ibrahim, J. (2011). Politics, religion and democratic culture in Northern Nigeria. *African Journal of Political Science*, 17(2), 23–44.
- Ishola, A. V. (2024). Religious blasphemy, jungle justice, and legal pluralism in Northern Nigeria: A comparative analysis of the Nigerian 1999 Constitution and Sharia law. *African Journal of Law, Political Research and Administration*, 7(2), 60–76.
<https://doi.org/10.52589/AJLPRA-11WJWMDV>
- Kassim, A. (2021). Blasphemy and legal contradictions in Northern Nigeria. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 21(2), 560–584.
- Kozieł, P. (2017). Gender-based violence in Northern Nigeria: The context of Muslim and Christian women’s rights. *Hemispheres: Studies on Cultures and Societies*, 32, 5–24.
- MacKinnon, C. A. (1989). *Toward a feminist theory of the state*. Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nwaogazie, I. E. (2021). *Blasphemy and the death penalty under Shariah law in Nigeria: A legislative monstrosity*. *Trinitarian International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 1(1), 31–46.
- Okhifoh, K. O. (2021). Sharia and the plight of non-Muslims in the multi-religious Nigeria. *Trinitarian International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 1(1), 1–23.
- Olomojobi, Y. (2015). *Gender and Sharia law in Northern Nigeria*. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2713306>
- Ogunyemi, C. O. (2008). Women, Islam and the Politics of representation in Northern Nigeria. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 26(1), 17–31.
- Oyibodoro, U. G. (2023). The effects of blasphemy laws on a constitutional democracy in Nigeria: A critical appraisal. *Achievers University Law Journal*, 3(1), 168–190.
- Ozurumba, F. I. (2022). *An in-depth examination of the rights of women under Islamic law in Nigeria: A discourse*. Faculty of Law, Rivers State University.
- Paden, J. N. (2005). *Muslim civic cultures and conflict resolution: The challenge of democratic federalism in Nigeria*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Sogolo, G. (1993). *Foundations of African philosophy: A definitive analysis of conceptual issues in African thought*. Ibadan University Press.
- Vianita, P., Holid, M., & Rahman, M. H. T. (2024). Feminism in the perspective of human rights and Islamic law. *ICES: International Conference on Education and Sharia*, 1, 563–572.