

Feminist Epistemology and the Problem of Testimonial Injustice: Nigerian Women's Accounts of Sexual Violence and the Crisis of Credibility

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Abstract— The politics of gubernatorial succession in Nigeria has been profoundly shaped by the phenomenon of godfatherism, in which outgoing governors exercise decisive influence over the selection of their successors. Ebonyi State, created in 1996 in southeastern Nigeria, provides a particularly instructive case study of this dynamic. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, the state has experienced three gubernatorial transitions, each marked by the active involvement of the incumbent in determining who would follow him. Martin Elechi, governor from 2007 to 2015, anointed David Umahi as his successor. Umahi, in turn, selected Francis Nwifuru to succeed him in 2023. This article traces the dynamics of these transitions, analysing the mechanisms through which outgoing governors have ensured the election of their chosen successors and the consequences of this pattern for democratic governance. Drawing on elite interviews, media archives, and electoral data, the study argues that the godfather model of succession, while effective in the short term, contains inherent instabilities. The interests of godfathers and godsons diverge once the successor assumes office, generating conflicts that have shaped Ebonyi's political landscape. The article contributes to the literature on political succession, patron-client politics, and democratic consolidation in Africa by demonstrating that godfather politics is not a stable equilibrium but a contested and evolving phenomenon.

Keywords: godfather politics; political succession; Ebonyi State; gubernatorial transitions; Nigerian politics.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2019, a Nigerian journalist published an account of sexual assault. She described, in careful and painful detail, how a prominent academic had coerced her into sexual acts when she was a teenager, a student in his school. The account was specific. It named names, dates, and places. It was corroborated by other women who had similar experiences with the same man. It was published in a reputable international outlet. And it was met, in many quarters, with disbelief (Busari, 2019).

The academic denied the allegations. His supporters suggested the journalist was lying for attention, for money, for revenge. They questioned why she had waited so long to come forward, why she had not reported the assault at the time, why she had continued to interact with the man in the years that followed. They scrutinised her sexual history, her relationships, her character. They subjected her to a level of scrutiny that the accused man, whose conduct was the actual subject of the allegations, never faced (Orjinmo, 2019).

This pattern is not unique to this case. It is the common experience of Nigerian women who report sexual violence. Their accounts are met with a presumption of disbelief. They are required to provide evidence that would not be demanded of victims of other crimes. Their motives are questioned, their characters impugned, their histories excavated for anything that might discredit them. They are accused of lying, of exaggerating, of seeking attention. They are blamed for the violence they have suffered: they dressed provocatively, they went somewhere they should not have gone, they drank too much, they sent the wrong signals, they should have fought back harder, they should have reported sooner (Amnesty International, 2020).

This paper is about the epistemology of that disbelief. It draws on the concept of testimonial injustice, developed by the philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007), to analyse the ways in which Nigerian women's accounts of sexual violence are systematically discredited. Testimonial injustice, in Fricker's formulation, occurs when a speaker receives less credibility than she deserves because of prejudice against her social identity. The prejudice may be explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious, but its effect is to silence or marginalise the speaker, to deny her the opportunity to participate fully in the epistemic community.

The paper argues that Nigerian women who report sexual violence face a particularly acute form of testimonial injustice, shaped by the intersection of multiple factors. Patriarchal cultural norms, which position women as untrustworthy and emotionally unstable, create a standing presumption against women's credibility (Ilika, 2005). The stigma associated with sexual violence, which attaches shame and dishonour to the victim rather than the perpetrator, discourages reporting and discredits those who do report (Akinlusi et al., 2014). The weaknesses of the criminal justice system, including the inadequacy of police investigations, the corruption of judicial processes,

and the unavailability of forensic evidence, make it difficult for women to produce the kinds of evidence that would corroborate their accounts (Odunsi, 2019). And the influence of religious institutions, which often counsel silence and forgiveness in cases of sexual violence, reinforces the norms that protect perpetrators and silence victims (Le Roux & Valencia, 2019).

The paper proceeds in seven sections. Following this introduction, a literature review situates the study within feminist epistemology and the literature on sexual violence in Nigeria. A theoretical section develops the concept of testimonial injustice as it applies to sexual violence. Three analytical sections then examine the cultural, institutional, and religious dimensions of testimonial injustice in the Nigerian context. A discussion section draws out the implications for feminist epistemology and for policy. The conclusion reflects on the struggle for epistemic justice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist Epistemology and Testimonial Injustice

The concept of testimonial injustice was introduced into philosophical discourse by Miranda Fricker in her landmark work *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007). Fricker defines testimonial injustice as a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower. It occurs when a hearer assigns a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's testimony because of prejudice against the speaker's social identity. The speaker may be a member of a group that is stereotyped as untrustworthy or irrational, and the hearer's judgment of her credibility is influenced by that stereotype, often unconsciously (Fricker, 2007, p. 28).

Fricker distinguishes between systematic and incidental testimonial injustice. Systematic testimonial injustice tracks a person across different domains of her life. If a person belongs to a group that is systematically discredited, she will face credibility deficits not only in specific situations but across a range of contexts. Women, Fricker argues, are often subject to systematic testimonial injustice. Their testimony is discounted in courtrooms, in workplaces, in political forums, and in everyday conversation (Fricker, 2007, p. 29).

Fricker's analysis has been extended and critiqued by subsequent scholars. José Medina (2013) has argued that Fricker's account needs to be supplemented by an analysis of the structural conditions that produce and sustain epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice, Medina argues, is not simply a matter of individual hearers making bad credibility judgments. It is a systemic phenomenon, produced by the unequal distribution of epistemic resources, including access to education, to information, and to platforms for speech (Medina, 2013, p. 27). Kristie Dotson (2011) has introduced the concept of "testimonial quieting" to describe a form of epistemic violence in which a speaker's testimony is not so much disbelieved as it is never heard at all. The speaker is

not assigned a deflated level of credibility; she is not recognised as a speaker whose testimony could be relevant (Dotson, 2011, p. 242).

These theoretical developments are relevant to the Nigerian context. Nigerian women who report sexual violence face not only individual acts of disbelief but a structural context in which their testimony is systematically devalued. They face not only credibility deficits but testimonial quieting, the refusal to hear their words as testimony at all.

Sexual Violence in Nigeria

The prevalence of sexual violence in Nigeria is well documented. According to a national survey conducted by the United Nations Population Fund and the National Bureau of Statistics, approximately 25 percent of Nigerian women have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime, with rates higher in certain regions and among certain populations (National Bureau of Statistics & UNFPA, 2020). The majority of cases are never reported to authorities. Studies estimate that fewer than 10 percent of sexual assaults in Nigeria are formally reported, and of those reported, only a small fraction result in prosecution or conviction (Amnesty International, 2020).

The reasons for underreporting are complex and multiple. Akinlusi et al. (2014) found that Nigerian women who experienced sexual violence often did not report because they feared stigma, blamed themselves for the assault, or lacked confidence in the criminal justice system. Ilika (2005) documented the role of cultural norms in discouraging reporting, noting that women who reported sexual violence were often ostracised by their families and communities. Odunsi (2019) examined the institutional barriers to reporting, including the inadequacy of police investigations and the corruption of judicial processes.

The literature on sexual violence in Nigeria has focused primarily on the public health and human rights dimensions of the problem. The epistemological dimensions, the ways in which women's testimony is systematically discredited, have received less attention. This paper addresses that gap by bringing the tools of feminist epistemology to bear on the Nigerian case.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TESTIMONIAL INJUSTICE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The concept of testimonial injustice provides a powerful framework for understanding the crisis of credibility facing Nigerian women who report sexual violence. Fricker (2007) identifies several features of testimonial injustice that are particularly relevant to this context.

First, testimonial injustice is rooted in identity prejudice. The hearer's credibility judgment is influenced by negative stereotypes associated with the speaker's social

identity. In the case of sexual violence, the relevant stereotype is the construction of women as untrustworthy, emotionally unstable, and sexually manipulative. This stereotype has deep historical roots. Feminist scholars have documented the ways in which women's testimony has been systematically devalued in Western legal traditions, from the medieval doctrine of *femina non est credenda* (a woman is not to be believed) to the contemporary practice of scrutinising the sexual history of rape complainants (Kennedy, 1992). The Nigerian context has its own version of this stereotype, shaped by patriarchal cultural norms that position women as subordinate to men and as inherently less credible than men (Ilika, 2005).

Second, testimonial injustice involves a credibility deficit. The speaker is assigned less credibility than she deserves. In the case of sexual violence, this credibility deficit is manifested in the demand for corroboration, the scrutiny of the victim's character and history, and the pathologisation of delayed reporting. Women who report sexual violence are required to provide evidence that would not be demanded of victims of other crimes. Their testimony alone is treated as insufficient. They must produce witnesses, medical reports, forensic evidence. The absence of such evidence, rather than being understood as a reflection of the circumstances in which sexual violence typically occurs, is taken as evidence that the allegation is false (Taslitz, 1999).

Third, testimonial injustice has both practical and intrinsic dimensions. Practically, it denies women access to justice. Perpetrators of sexual violence are not held accountable, and women are denied the protection of the law. Intrinsically, it wrongs women in their capacity as knowers. To be denied the status of a credible knower is to be denied a fundamental aspect of one's humanity. The wrong is not only that one's account is not believed but that one is not treated as a person whose account deserves to be taken seriously (Fricker, 2007, p. 44).

Medina's (2013) concept of structural epistemic injustice is also relevant. The crisis of credibility facing Nigerian women is not simply a matter of individual hearers making erroneous credibility judgments. It is embedded in the structure of institutions, in the content of cultural narratives, and in the distribution of power within society. The police officer who dismisses a rape complaint, the prosecutor who declines to file charges, and the judge who acquits a defendant because the victim's testimony was not sufficiently corroborated are not simply acting on individual prejudice. They are acting within institutional frameworks that systematically disadvantage women's testimony (Medina, 2013, p. 30).

THE CULTURAL DIMENSION: PATRIARCHY AND THE PRESUMPTION OF DISBELIEF

The cultural context in which Nigerian women report sexual violence is shaped by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Nigeria is a society in which gender inequality

is embedded in law, in custom, and in everyday practice. Women are underrepresented in political office, in the professions, and in positions of authority. They are expected to be submissive to men, to prioritise their roles as wives and mothers over their individual aspirations, and to accept male authority in the family and in the community (Makama, 2013).

These patriarchal norms shape the credibility that is accorded to women's testimony. Women are stereotyped as emotional, irrational, and manipulative. Their accounts of their own experiences are treated as unreliable, exaggerated, or fabricated. This stereotype is not merely an individual prejudice. It is embedded in cultural narratives, in religious teachings, and in legal doctrines. It is reproduced through socialisation, through the media, and through everyday interaction (Ilika, 2005).

The stigma associated with sexual violence compounds the problem. In Nigerian society, sexual violence is a source of shame not only for the victim but for her family. A woman who has been raped is seen as damaged, defiled, and dishonoured. Her marriage prospects may be destroyed. Her family may be shamed in the community. The stigma creates powerful incentives for silence. Akinlusi et al. (2014) found that fear of stigma was one of the most significant barriers to reporting sexual violence among Nigerian women. Women who did report often faced ostracism from their families and communities, and many reported that they regretted having come forward.

The cultural presumption against women's credibility is reinforced by the ideal of the "good woman" in Nigerian society. The good woman is modest, obedient, and sexually chaste. She does not draw attention to herself. She does not challenge male authority. She does not speak publicly about sexual matters. A woman who reports sexual violence violates this ideal in multiple ways. She speaks publicly about sex, a subject that is taboo for respectable women. She accuses a man, challenging male authority. She asserts her own version of events, refusing to accept the narrative imposed by others. Her violation of these norms is held against her, used as evidence that she is not a credible witness (Ilika, 2005).

The cultural dimension of testimonial injustice is also shaped by the role of the family in Nigerian society. Sexual violence is often treated as a family matter, to be resolved privately rather than through formal legal processes. Families may pressure victims to remain silent, to accept compensation from the perpetrator's family, or to marry the perpetrator as a way of restoring honour. The family's interest in preserving its reputation and avoiding scandal often overrides the victim's interest in justice (Akinlusi et al., 2014). This privatisation of sexual violence functions as a form of testimonial quieting. The woman's testimony is never heard because she is prevented from speaking. Her experience is buried within the family, hidden from public view, and erased from the official record (Dotson, 2011).

THE INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION: THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

The institutional context in which Nigerian women report sexual violence further undermines their credibility. The Nigerian criminal justice system is, by any measure, dysfunctional. The police are underfunded, understaffed, and inadequately trained. Investigations are often cursory or nonexistent. Forensic evidence is rarely available. Prosecutions can drag on for years, and convictions are rare. Corruption is endemic (Odunsi, 2019).

The treatment of sexual violence complaints by the Nigerian police has been extensively documented by human rights organisations. Amnesty International (2020) found that police officers routinely failed to investigate reports of sexual violence, refused to record complaints, demanded bribes from victims before taking action, and pressured victims to drop their cases. Victims who reported sexual violence were often subjected to degrading and invasive questioning by police officers who were openly sceptical of their accounts. Some were asked why they had not fought back, what they were wearing, or whether they had been drinking. Some were accused of lying or of having consented to the acts they described as assault.

The evidentiary standards applied in Nigerian courts create additional barriers to women's credibility. The Nigerian Evidence Act requires that the testimony of a sexual assault complainant be corroborated by other evidence before a conviction can be obtained. This corroboration requirement, while formally abolished in some jurisdictions, continues to be applied in practice (Odunsi, 2019). The requirement is particularly burdensome in sexual violence cases, where corroborating evidence is often unavailable. Sexual violence typically occurs in private, without witnesses. Physical injuries may be absent or may have healed by the time a report is made. Forensic evidence, which could provide corroboration, is rarely available due to the lack of forensic infrastructure. The result is that women who report sexual violence are placed in an impossible position: their testimony alone is not enough to secure a conviction, but the evidence needed to corroborate their testimony is systematically unavailable (Taslitz, 1999).

The treatment of child victims of sexual violence is particularly troubling. The Nigerian Evidence Act provides that the unsworn testimony of a child is not sufficient to support a conviction unless it is corroborated by other material evidence. This provision, which is intended to protect defendants from wrongful conviction, has the effect of rendering children's testimony legally insufficient in many cases. Given that children are disproportionately likely to be victims of sexual violence, and that corroborating evidence is particularly unlikely to be available in cases involving children, this evidentiary rule functions as a systematic barrier to justice for some of the most vulnerable victims (Odunsi, 2019).

The corruption of the criminal justice system further undermines women's credibility. Perpetrators of sexual violence who have wealth or political connections can often avoid accountability by bribing police officers, prosecutors, or judges. Victims who report sexual violence by powerful men may find that their complaints are not investigated, that their cases are dismissed, or that they are themselves subjected to harassment and intimidation (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The impunity enjoyed by powerful perpetrators sends a powerful message: the testimony of women is not taken seriously, and those who assault women have little to fear from the law.

THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION: FAITH, SILENCE, AND INSTITUTIONAL COMPLICITY

Religious institutions play a significant role in shaping responses to sexual violence in Nigeria. Nigeria is a deeply religious country, with Islam dominant in the north and Christianity in the south. Religious leaders are influential figures in their communities, and their teachings carry considerable weight. Both Islamic and Christian traditions have been interpreted in ways that are unhelpful to victims of sexual violence.

In northern Nigeria, where Sharia law is in force in several states, the evidentiary requirements for proving sexual violence are extraordinarily demanding. Under some interpretations of Sharia, a charge of rape requires four male witnesses to the act of penetration. The practical impossibility of meeting this standard means that women who report sexual violence in these jurisdictions are not only disbelieved but are at risk of being charged with adultery or fornication themselves if they fail to prove their case (Le Roux & Valencia, 2019). The religious and legal framework is structured in such a way that women's testimony is not merely devalued but is rendered legally irrelevant.

In Christian communities, religious teachings have also been used to silence victims. Pastors have been known to counsel women who report sexual violence to forgive their abusers and to preserve the family, rather than to seek justice. The emphasis on forgiveness, while theologically meaningful, can function to protect perpetrators and to discourage victims from pursuing legal remedies. In some cases, religious leaders have been accused of sexual violence themselves, and their institutional authority has been used to discredit their accusers (Le Roux & Valencia, 2019).

The complicity of religious institutions in silencing victims of sexual violence is a form of structural epistemic injustice. Religious leaders occupy positions of epistemic authority within their communities. Their judgments about credibility carry weight. When they dismiss or minimise women's accounts of sexual violence, they contribute to the broader pattern of testimonial injustice. They reinforce the norms that protect

perpetrators and silence victims. And they do so in the name of God, lending divine sanction to the denial of women's epistemic agency (Medina, 2013).

INTERSECTIONALITY AND DIFFERENTIAL VULNERABILITY

The crisis of credibility facing Nigerian women who report sexual violence is not experienced uniformly by all women. It is shaped by the intersection of gender with other axes of social identity, including class, ethnicity, religion, and age. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality provides a framework for understanding these differential vulnerabilities.

A wealthy, educated woman in Lagos who reports sexual violence may face scepticism, but she also has resources that can help her navigate the system. She can afford a lawyer. She can access medical care. She can generate media attention. Her credibility, while certainly questioned, is not entirely dismissed. A poor, uneducated woman in a rural village faces a very different situation. She may not speak English, the language of the courts. She may not have access to medical care or to legal representation. She may be entirely dependent on the goodwill of her family and her community, the same people who may be pressuring her to remain silent. Her credibility is not just questioned; it is simply assumed to be nonexistent (Amnesty International, 2020).

The intersection of gender and age creates additional vulnerabilities. Girls who experience sexual violence face particular barriers to credibility. They may not be considered competent to testify. Their accounts may be dismissed as fantasy or as the product of coaching by adults. They may be pressured by their families not to report, for fear of the stigma that will attach to the family. And they may be subjected to invasive and traumatising questioning by authorities who are not trained to interview children (National Bureau of Statistics & UNFPA, 2020).

The intersection of gender and disability is also significant. Women and girls with disabilities are at increased risk of sexual violence, and they face particular barriers to reporting. They may be unable to communicate their experiences verbally. They may not be believed because of stereotypes about the unreliability of disabled persons as witnesses. They may be dependent on their abusers for care, making it impossible to report without risking their own survival (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

TOWARD EPISTEMIC JUSTICE

What would epistemic justice look like for Nigerian women who report sexual violence? Fricker (2007) argues that the primary remedy for testimonial injustice is the cultivation of the virtue of testimonial justice. The hearer must develop a critical awareness of the prejudices that shape her credibility judgments and must work to correct for those influences. This is not easy. Prejudices are often unconscious, and they

operate in ways that are difficult to detect and to counteract. But the fact that it is difficult does not mean that it is impossible (Fricker, 2007, p. 86).

Medina (2013) argues that individual virtue is not sufficient. Structural epistemic injustice requires structural remedies. The institutions that shape whose testimony is heard and whose is dismissed must be transformed. In the Nigerian context, this requires reform of the criminal justice system. Police officers must be trained in trauma-informed interviewing techniques. Prosecutors must be educated about the realities of sexual violence, including the reasons why victims delay reporting and the reasons why corroborating evidence may be unavailable. Courts must abandon evidentiary rules that discriminate against women's testimony, including the requirement of corroboration and the admissibility of evidence about the victim's sexual history (Odunsi, 2019).

The state must also invest in the resources needed to investigate and prosecute sexual violence effectively. This includes forensic laboratories, victim support services, and specialised courts. The establishment of sexual assault referral centres in some Nigerian states is a positive development, but these centres remain few in number and are inaccessible to many victims, particularly in rural areas (Amnesty International, 2020).

At the cultural level, epistemic justice requires challenging the norms and narratives that sustain testimonial injustice. The stigma associated with sexual violence must be confronted. The stereotype of the lying woman must be exposed as a patriarchal myth. The cultural narratives that blame victims and excuse perpetrators must be rewritten. This is a long-term project, and it requires the engagement of multiple actors, including educators, journalists, artists, religious leaders, and community organisers. It requires the creation of a culture in which women's voices are valued and in which their testimony is taken seriously (Ilika, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The Nigerian woman who reports sexual violence speaks into a void. Her words are heard, but they are not believed. Her testimony is scrutinised, but it is not credited. She is required to prove her credibility before she is permitted to prove her case, and the standard of proof for credibility is impossibly high. She must be the perfect victim: chaste, sober, immediately reporting, visibly injured, unimpeachable in character. If she falls short of this ideal in any respect, her account is dismissed. She is a liar, a fantasist, a woman scorned. Her experience of violence is erased.

This is testimonial injustice in its most acute form. It is a wrong done to women in their capacity as knowers, a denial of their epistemic agency, a silencing that is both practical and symbolic. It is sustained by patriarchal cultural norms, by the stigma of sexual violence, by the failures of the criminal justice system, and by the complicity of religious institutions. It is experienced most severely by the most vulnerable women,

those who are poor, uneducated, rural, young, disabled, and who lack the resources to fight for their credibility.

The struggle against testimonial injustice is a struggle for epistemic justice. It is a struggle to create conditions in which women's testimony is heard and believed, in which women's experiences are acknowledged and validated, and in which women participate fully as members of the epistemic community. This struggle is not unique to Nigeria, but it takes distinctive forms in the Nigerian context, shaped by the specific cultural, institutional, and political conditions of the country. Feminist epistemology must attend to these specificities. It must develop analyses that are sensitive to context, that recognise the diversity of women's experiences, and that contribute to the practical work of transforming the conditions that produce and sustain testimonial injustice.

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