

What Do Streets and Sidewalks Represent? Policing the Youths and City Dwellers in Nigeria

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Protests and demonstrations often originate from a place of strong motivation. But what exactly motivates demonstrators, and where do these events typically begin? Cities' dwellers perceive and define each demonstration. Most of the urban residents create and challenge suppression. Moreover, do street activities have an impact on government programs and reflect the everyday experiences of the population? What are the state, regional, and formal institutions' contributions to street demonstrations? These are some of the questions that arise considering the colonial and postcolonial police activities in Nigeria and how they have approached their duty of "protecting lives and properties". This research explores these questions by examining the 2020 End SARS protests in Nigeria. The movement demonstrate how the streets have defined laws and protected the interests of the people, which had resulted in numerous deaths. This research utilizes ethnographic and library-historical methods to discuss urban streets as a last resort for ordinary people in pursuance of public interest and government reforms and policies that adversely affect them. The streets, using the postcolonial demonstrations, have become a symbol of people's everyday lives and a space where activities often define the programs and policies of the Nigerian government.

Keywords: streets, urban dwellers, protests, Nigeria, everyday life

Introduction

Nigeria's famous aphorism is that the "police is your friend." However, Nigerians and the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) are always at daggers drawn. This face-off between Nigerians and the police took another dimension on 8th October 2020, when young Nigerians took to the streets to end one of the notorious police units known as the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). SARS was established in 1992 by former police commissioner Simeon Danladi Midenda (Ogbette et al., 2018). The main reason behind its formation was attributed to the killing of Colonel Rindam of the Nigerian army at a police checkpoint in Lagos. When the news of his brutal murder got to the Nigerian Army, soldiers were sent to the streets of Lagos in search of the policeman. Realizing their blunder, the police withdrew from checkpoints, safe zones, and other points of interest to criminals; some police officers allegedly resigned while others fled for their lives. Due to the absence of the police for two weeks, the crime rate

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rose, and the SARS unit was formed with just 15 officers operating in the shadows. Due to three anti-theft teams already in existence and operational at the time, Midenda needed to distinguish the newly established team from the existing ones. Midenda named the team Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). After months of dialogue, the Nigerian military and the Nigerian police reached a truce, and official police duties resumed in Lagos. The SARS unit was officially commissioned in 1992 in Lagos, becoming a vocabulary in the Nigerian security system (Ogbette et al., 2018). To this end, Jimoh Moshood averred that

SARS is one of 14 units under the Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department of the Nigerian Police that was created to arrest, investigate and prosecute those involved in violent crimes such as robberies, murders, kidnappings, contract assassinations and other forms of extreme crime. (Okogba, 2017)

As a unit, too, the fight against theft has always existed in all the criminal investigation services of the Force Headquarters, Zone, and State Levels of Command (Okogba, 2017).

The idea behind SARS's creation seems to have failed to live up to its expectations. Aside from its gross mismanagement of funds allocated to the NPF, police brutality against innocent citizens became commonplace. Bakare (2018) argued that,

Unlawful or extrajudicial killings, which is killings outside the dictates of the law and the recent upsurge in the menace, torture, degrading and inhumane treatment of citizens in the society by the officers of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) reveals a need for the appraisal of the criminal justice system so as to prevent judicial usurpation and a lack of reverence for constituted authority which could result in the complete breakdown of law and order.

However, since 8th October 2020, Nigeria has been undergoing one of its historical moments to end police brutality through a series of protests nationwide. The study, using evidence, explores the rise of police brutality in Nigeria and how the youths reacted to the Nigerian leadership. This paper also investigates SARS brutality on innocent Nigerians since its inception in 1992 and its countless human rights violations. The research shows that the significant challenge that reshaped the Nigerian police force was the poor salary structures of the unit from the government. Recently, Negligence has given rise to massive extortion, bribery, and intimidation for survival. In all, the research pursuit is to answer what led to the increase in draconic discharge of duties among SARS personnel in Nigeria. How has the Federal Government addressed police brutality in Nigeria? Should the unit be scrapped totally or reformed?

This paper reviews several related works that address emerging issues of police brutality and human rights abuse in Nigeria. On this premise, P érouse de Montclos and Marc-Antoine (2014) investigated the incessant killings of both criminals and innocent citizens in Nigeria between 2006 and 2014. They reported that killings of criminal suspects and innocent citizens by the security forces in Nigeria are reported in the media almost on a daily basis. The author stated that in general, the Nigerian security forces—including the army, navy, air force, police, SSS, customs, immigration, National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), and Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC)—exhibit a culture of violence and kill with impunity. They are often responsible for violent deaths whenever they intervene in any violent incident. To this, Etannibi (1993) added that, historically, law enforcement agencies in the country have been characterized by violence and extrajudicial executions. From its origin as a “consular guard” whose main function was to protect the economic and political interests of the colonial authority, the security forces have continued to use excessive force, including arbitrary assassinations, in their commitment to the civilian population. In his analysis Abiodun (2010) observed that, the repressive character of the security forces was accentuated by the militarization of internal security during the

military government, when the army, the police and the para-military forces were used to repress and kill people. Thus, Aborisade and Obileye (2018) reveal that the police relied heavily on the use of torture to extract “confessions” from detainees. Former detainees reported experiences that included being tied up and suspended in the air in painful positions, kicked and beaten with gun butts, boots, animal skins, fists, electrical cables, machetes, and other instruments.

The impact of SARS can be classified into two basic parts: the positive and negative consequences. Under the positive effect, SARS has been an excellent performer over the years, helping to arrest some notorious criminals in different parts of the country. In Muhammad’s (2017) account, it is instructive to note that the very SARS that many people are clamoring to scrap was central to the arrest of the most notorious criminals in the country. He gave an example of sometimes in 2016, two notorious armed robbers who terrorized and robbed residents of Ire Akari Street, Ejigbo, and Isolo areas of Lagos, stealing and vandalizing vehicles in the area for a long time, were arrested by agents of the Federal Special Anti-Theft Team (FSARS) on Adeniji Adele Road, Lagos Island. It certainly brought a sigh of relief to the neighborhood residents. Likewise, in 2015, due to the relentless activities of cultists and other violent crimes, including kidnappers and armed robbers in Edo state, Inspector General of Police (IGP) Idris dispatched a special crack brigade, including SARS operatives to the state to combat the situation. The situation was brought under control a few days later. As the record shows, SARS has been able to arrest more than three thousand suspected kidnappers across the country and, in fact, recent successes in reducing the high rate of crime and criminality, especially kidnappings and other fatal vices in most parts of the country, is largely the work of SARS operatives (Muhammad, 2017). Another major success was the arrest of the notorious kidnappers who terrorized the country for over six years, popularly known as Henry Chibueze, a.k.a Vampire, and Onwumadike Chukwudumeme, a.k.a Evans, was achieved through the ingenuity and gallantry of the SARS Unit of the Force (Muhammad, 2017). In contrast, Ogbette et al. (2018) examined the negative impact of SARS, just as there is no perfect human institution or person, it cannot be denied that SARS also has some negative elements that have acted over time beyond its line of responsibility. SARS, as we have it today, has created a space for external influence through the power of money. People with financial power now use their money to control SARS (bad elements) by telling them who to arrest, slap, harass, etc., taking them away from the original reasons the Unit was created. In Nigeria, you can’t move freely in a starched shirt, a nice gaudy wristwatch, a nice portable phone (like an iPhone), and a car as a young man without being harassed and extorted. They already have the perception that when you live well, it means that you are a “Yahoo boy” (Internet scammer), forgetting the fact that there are more Nigerians who are actually doing well in their different businesses. If one is lucky when caught (SARS), one will be asked to pay a reasonable amount of money into their account, but if not, one can be shot, jailed, robbed, or framed (Ogbette et al., 2018). Still on the high-handedness of the SARS operatives, Abiodun et al. (2020) reported that the lives of several young and adult Nigerians; students, football players, private and commercial drivers, and other innocent ones have been cut short in the name of searching for the “Yahoo boys”. In its findings, the violent/unlawful killings occur as a result of unprofessionalism, lack of funds/resources, uncontrolled anger/emotions, corruption, use of illicit drugs, and drinking of alcohol while on duty, among others on the part of officers of Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and as well absence of Police reforms in Nigeria.

On the international scene, Amnesty International (2019) investigated the human rights abuse of the Nigerian media by security operatives. It collected several stories of abused pressmen and journalists. The Organization found out that the failure of the Nigerian authorities to investigate cases of indiscriminate arrest,

detention, and prosecution of journalists and media professionals ensures that the perpetrators are not held accountable for these human rights violations. Furthermore, Amnesty International (2019, p. 5) reported that victims who suffered arbitrary arrest and detention stated that they were tortured and pressured to write confessional statements, which were used to prosecute them in court. While many of them faced indiscriminate charges such as “defamation,” “terrorism,” and “cyberstalking,” others had charges such as “kidnapping,” criminal trespass, and theft of state documents brought against them. Worse still, many journalists were prosecuted under the Cybercrime Act and Terrorism (Prevention) (Amendment) Act 2013, alongside other laws. The Terrorism (Prevention) (Amendment) Act 2013 prescribed the death penalty for those found guilty. Thus making journalism a dangerous venture. In line with the above findings, Human Rights Watch (2007) reveals that the Nigeria Police Force is mired in deeply entrenched patterns of torture, corruption, murder, and other forms of abuse of human rights. To them, torture remains a regular part of police interrogations, and police officers have carried out numerous extrajudicial killings of suspects in their custody. According to the study, the Nigerian police cannot generally cope with their challenges. Police officers are poorly trained, equipped, and poorly paid. Some human rights abuse by the police are, in part, a response to public pressure to reduce high levels of violent crime. Nigerian civil society groups and Human Rights Watch investigations revealed that lacking the means to carry out effective criminal investigations, some police officers obtain confessions by torture or murder suspects in their custody whom police believed to be guilty. Other cases represent a simple abuse of power against ordinary civilians.

Unfortunately, a large part of these cases is hidden by Nigerian police officers in their police stations, and evidence is occasionally destroyed and hidden from the public. In reality, this is because, many times, the relatives of the victims are denied justice when seeking redress in court (Taiwo, 2018). Additionally, the International Center for Reporting Investigation (2018), in their study, identified that great members of the Nigerian population have been illegally killed and eliminated by drunk and trigger-happy SARS police officers in the states of Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, and Osun, respectively. The agency further noted that these SARS officers would storm several locations such as checkpoints on interstate highways, beer parlors, movie theaters, clubhouses, and many others to enforce illegal arrests in the name of searching for “yahoo-yahoo guys” or scammers and internet fraudsters in the states.

In all, these existing studies will help understand the FSARS and police brutality in Nigeria. This paper aims to unearth the reasons for human rights violations by SARS operatives and how the Nigerian populace and the government have addressed the situation. Through its evidence, the study presents how digital technology has helped disseminate information on police brutality in Nigeria. However, with the state of SARS brutality in Nigeria, many Nigerians are calling for the total abolition of the unit, while some see the situation as a function of several social problems confronting the Police Force as a whole, thus calling for the reformation of the Nigerian Police Force. This study, with its evidence on SARS molestations, hopes to fill these existing gaps in the literature.

The study is hinged on the Frustration-Aggression Displacement theory by Dollard et al. in 1939 which was later developed by Miller in 1941 and in 1969 by Leonard Berkowitz. Dollard et al., after the First World War, theorized reasons wars and revolutions occur in societies or countries. The theorists noted that frustration always gives birth to aggression if not properly handled. However, in using wars in Europe, the theory, according to Dollard et al. (1939), states that “frustration always precedes aggression, and aggression is the sure consequence of frustration”. It further avers that “frustration prompts a behavior that may or may not be aggressive; any

aggressive behavior is a result of frustration, making frustration not sufficient, but a necessary condition for aggression” (Miller et al., 1941; Sears, 1941; Zillman, 1979). Thus, in analyzing the theory as it reflects on individuals, the theorists opined that the frustration of an individual is the “condition which exists when a goal-response suffers interference,” while aggression is “an act of individuals whose goal-response is an injury to an organism.” This means that situations or conditions of a society could lead to frustrations that might, in no distant time, metamorphose into aggression. Aggressive individuals could be violent or peaceful regarding revolutions and the quest for justice if frustrated (Okenwa, 2024). The End SARS protesters were seeking justice from the Nigerian government against the incessant police brutality on the youths.

Dollard et al.’s theory reveals that the #ENDSARS protests in Nigeria were because of abuses of human rights, extortions, looting, killings, and harassment of youths by the Anti-Squad unit of the Nigerian police force. The protesters argue that the Nigerian government had not addressed the ills of this unit, even with streams of their actions and molestations on social media and memoirs. Hence, for the government to feel the pains and impacts of the frustration on the citizens, the youths took up their aggression to the streets, roads, and government houses to seek justice and either the scrape of that particular police unit. The outcome of these frustrations led to the destruction of prisons, looting of homes and stores, burning of monuments and artifacts, as well as setting ablaze of government properties and individual companies to draw the attention of the government to the plights of ordinary Nigerians. The result is the dissolution of the Anti-Squad unit of the police across the nation by the federal government.

Equally important aspects of the protests are the misappropriation of public funds and the poor salary structure of the police unit. The protesters also narrated the poor monthly salary of the SARS officials as part of the frustrations the unit is using against innocent citizens (Segun, 2024). Thus, Ogbonna (2024) noted that a SARS officer with a wife and four kids receives a monthly salary of ₦49,000 (\$128.61) and is expected to pay his house rent, buy his bullets and guns as well as give a stipend to his boss in the office. This explores the theory that “frustration causes aggression, but when the source of the frustration cannot be challenged, the aggression gets displaced onto an innocent target” (Dollard et al., 1939). This is the scenario in Nigeria where the police officers could not challenge the government for salary increments but rather vent their grievances on hapless citizens.

The study investigates the rising human rights abuse by SARS operatives in Nigeria. It examines human rights violations by Nigerian security officers, the stereotyping of Nigerian youths as potential criminals, and the pervasion of injustice that led to nationwide protests. The research uses field survey methodology to obtain the views and responses of selected participants by examining the case studies of SARS brutality. The field survey design used in the research accommodates the different positions of the respondents’ views, reactions, experiences, and the meaning they attach to this phenomenon.

The data for this research was generated through primary and secondary sources. The primary information for this research was collected through personal communication, video footage, random social media testimonies, and telephone conversations. The researchers reviewed reports, press statements, court documents, videos, and images provided by ordinary citizens, journalists, media practitioners, and media houses. The study was conducted in an informal setting where the respondents expressed themselves without any fear of intimidation, harassment, molestation, or abuse from anyone. For accurate study validation, 100 questionnaires were distributed and collated for the findings.

Newspapers, journal articles, and online materials constituted the secondary source materials. Data obtained from this study were analyzed using content and descriptive techniques, such as frequencies and percentages, using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) tool. The research design used included a case study derived through qualitative techniques of the independent variables.

SARS Molestations in Nigeria: “The Month of Rage”

The term “police brutality” dates back to early 1872, when it was a common phrase in use in the press in the United States. The first police brutality reported during this period was when a civilian was arrested and beaten in a coma at the Harrison Street State Police in Chicago (Chicago Tribune News, 1999). Police brutality is one of the various forms of misconduct that involve undue violence by security agents against the citizens of a society. Police brutality exists in many states and territories of the world, most especially in underdeveloped or developing countries. Police brutality refers to the intentional use of excessive force directed toward the citizens of a state by police officers or security agents (Francis, LaPin, & Rossiasco, 2011). Furthermore, the concept of unlawful killing includes extrajudicial executions of citizens and death resulting from excessive use of force by law enforcement officials. The officers of the SARS violated the right to life, as enshrined in Nigeria’s Constitution, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights. A person disappears after being arrested, detained, abducted, or even deprived of his/her freedom by the authorities or people acting with their authorization (Osuyi & Oritsedere, 2012). Therefore, unlawful killing is any form of arbitrary death inflicted on a suspect or a criminal outside the due process of law.

In law enforcement, security forces use a form of authorized state coercion, but they do so under “tensed and often emotionally charged interpersonal encounters” with members of the public (Harmon, 2008, p. 1120). Hence, security forces are regulated through institutional laws and codes of conduct, including “rules of engagement”, while discharging their duties to avoid abuse of their mandates. In Nigeria, however, the law grants the security forces broad discretionary powers. For instance, the Criminal Code Act permits the security forces, notably the police, to use force in the suppression of civil unrest and the arrest of suspects and to use “any reasonable force” to prevent the “escape of an arrested person”; and in the case of serious crime, it permits them to kill the suspect if he/she cannot be arrested by any means (Criminal Code Act, 1990). Police Order 237 also allows police officers to shoot detainees and suspects who try to escape or evade arrest (Afeni, 2014). In contrast, SARS has shown a track record of human rights abuse since its inception. In a report of police brutality filed by Amnesty International (2020), it narrated an event thus:

Ndudiri Onyekwere (m), a 28-year-old student, was arrested on 11 June 2002 in Onitsha, Anambra State, and taken to Alausa Police Station. A friend had accused him of robbery. Onyekwere died six days later, after he had been transferred to the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) facility in Panti. According to his family, he was taken to Ikeja General Hospital on 17 June, as he complained of stomach pain, and died there hours later. An autopsy showed that Onyekwere had been severely beaten. The autopsy stated that he suffered from “...battered face with cuts and bruises and encrusted blood in the nose, upper and lower lips and chin (...) bruises all over the body involving, in particular, head, neck and torso”. The autopsy report attributes Onyekwere’s death to “traumatic shock consequent upon multiple soft tissue and skeletal injuries. (p. 15)

The trauma of the parents is better imagined in a country where justice eludes the poor. In line with this Isiani (2024, 11th March) shares his encounter with the SARS officials on 30th September, 2020. According to him:

I was going to my elder brother’s house in Onitsha when SARS officers arrested me. They requested my phone, which I gave them. They asked me to unlock my phone and saw a balance of ₦250,800 in my First Bank account. I was arrested

on the account that I was not supposed to have that kind of money as a youth. I tried to explain that I work at Olive Guest, but they were adamant and pushed me into their vehicle. On our way, I was asked to submit my ATM card which they used on their POS to collect ₦88,200... I was released immediately the transactions was successful.

Another respondent avers that:

I was arrested at night on my way back from the REX clinic to buy drugs for my sick father. They labeled me a thief and “Yahoo boy” because I was using an iPhone and requested my parents pay ₦250,000 for my bail, which they did. (David, 2024, 10th March)

However, another respondent lamented how the police killed his brother with absolutely no proper investigation. According to her:

On our way back from the market, we were stopped by the SARS officers. They asked us a series of questions which we responded. One of the officers labelled my brother a criminal for wearing a “rough jeans.” They took him to the police custody and subsequently demanded for ₦500,000 which my parents could not produce within the specified weeks... my brother was tagged a thief and was killed (Jane, 2024, 9th April)

Amnesty International (2020) went on to recount four cases of police brutality on young Nigerians. One thing is common among these cases: SARS operatives randomly pick people, label them as suspects, try to extort money from them or their parents, use lethal means of forcing out confessions, and eventually kill suspects whom they find non-cooperative. Another shuddering story of SARS brutality was collected from Awkuzu experience. The infamous Awkuzu SARS of Anambra State was brought to the fore in the heat of police brutality discourse. Amnesty International describes the Awkuzu SARS cell as the most notorious in Nigeria because of human rights violations and abuse. Corpses numbering about 35 were on January 19, 2013, discovered floating on the Ezu River at the boundary between Anambra and Enugu states in Amansea, Awka North Local Government Area of Anambra State (Sahara Reporters, 2020). The stories inside the Awkuzu cell are horrifying. People are alleged to be killed on trump-up charges, even in civil matters in the Akwuzu SARS cell, which was under CSP James Nwafor. Those who could not meet the exorbitant financial demands of the SARS officers were allegedly tortured to death (Sahara Reporters, 2020). Akwuzu SARS was a center for intimidation of the poor in the state (Nworah, 2024). In narrating how the Akwuzu wasted lives in the state, Ezeani (2024, 10th March) noted that:

The worse thing that would happen to anyone in Anambra was to visit the Akwuzu SARS station. The rich ones use it to threaten the poor. A family in my house had lost their child in Akwuzu SARS having tagged the young man “thief and rapist.”

Another respondent on the account of Akwuzu SARS narrated that:

Families in chaos always use this unit to intimidate each other. The unit does not investigate any crime before they arrest anyone. One of the worst encounters I had with Akwuzu SARS was the killing of an innocent youth because of his dress. They labeled him a criminal and asked him to give them ₦150,000, which the guy refused. They have seized his car to date. (Amaechi, 2024, 10th March)

In documenting how the Akwuzu SARS unit threatens the lives of the citizens in Anambra state, Ogbuefi, one of the chiefs in Akwuzu, lamented that:

The community regrets bringing this station here. Intimidation, molestation, rape and theft are the basic terms for describing SARS officers in Akwuzu. Their target are mostly young ones who are holding expensive phones or riding flashy cars. Recently, you rarely see youth putting on good shoes to church. (Ogbuefi, 2024, 20th April)

The fear of Awkwuzu SARS is the beginning of wisdom in Anambra State and its environs. The atrocities committed under CSP Nwafor will forever remain indelible in the people's memory. What is worse is the traumatic experiences of parents who lost their children in the hands of those who are supposed to protect them. The world is a global village, and events in one area are easily known in another. The "black lives matter" campaign in the USA played a significant role in the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria, where the youths decided to use the only legitimate means of protest to end the father of all brutality by the Nigeria security operatives-SARS. This protest, the first of its kind, became a wake-up call for the government of the day to reform the police.



Figure 1. Iconic image of human right leader Aisha Yesufu, in Abuja.

As of the writing of this paper, Nigerians have responded against police brutality and the highhandedness of SARS operatives with a series of protests and legal petitions (Durojaiye, 2020). Several events were responsible for touching off these nationwide protests, especially the killing of a young man in front of Wetland Hotel, Ughelli in Delta State, whom the security operatives labeled a "Yahoo boy" (Odunsi, 2020). The killing was captured in a video footage, which went viral on social media. This captured video led to more releases of other videos, which showed how security operatives manhandled young Nigerians. Nigerians, in these videos, saw how SARS officials carried out forced arrests on the streets, dragging young boys by the legs with their backs scrubbing the ground, hitting them with rifles, slapping and punching them across the face, and other brutal engagements. It was these several footages of police brutality that sparked national outrage, which led to social media protests, especially on Twitter, with the hashtag #END_SARS, before the protest took another dimension as the people took to the streets of various cities in the country.

The End Special Anti-Robbery Squad (End SARS) or #EndSARS as at the writing of this paper is now a movement in Nigeria that began on Twitter calling for a ban on the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, a unit of the Nigerian police force (Omonobi, 2017). It was, and still is, a call to end oppression and police brutality in Nigeria and other anomalies in the country. The protests, which began as a social media campaign using the hashtag #ENDSARS, demanded that the Nigerian government eliminate and end the deployment of the Nigerian Police Force Special Anti-Theft Squad, popularly known as SARS (Aisha, 2017; Ogundipe, 2017). In one weekend

(October 9-11, 2020), the #ENDSARS hashtag had up to 28 million tweets (Yomi, 2020). This movement have afforded Nigerians to share stories and videos of how SARS members participated in kidnappings, murders, robberies, rapes, torture, illegal arrests, humiliation, illegal detention, extrajudicial executions, and extortions. Further, this call has gradually metamorphosed into a movement for the total overhaul of the Nigerian political and economic structure (International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 2018).

Furthermore, religious groups and non-governmental organizations have lent their voices against police brutality in Nigeria. Over a hundred people have been injured and a dozen killed in the course of the protest. Most of the killings were either through stray bullets caused by accidental discharge by members of the security operatives who attempted to disperse or quell the mob or through stampedes from protesters fleeing police brutality on protest grounds. In reaction to these killings and deaths, more Nigerian cities joined the nationwide protest. In addition, thousands of Nigerians gathered on October 11 to hold a vigil in remembrance of those who SARS unjustly killed over the years. The demonstrators held out candlelights, held banners, and chanted during the event in Lagos and other cities in the country.

It is pretty unfortunate to put on record that it took the Federal Government of Nigeria several days into the protest to address the situation. With harder resolve by the Nigerians to continue protests unabated, Vice President Professor Yemi Osibanjo responded to the situation in an online letter thus:

Dear Nigerians,

I know that many of you are angry, and understandably so. We could've moved faster, and we are sorry for this.

I fully understand how many young people feel. Many feel that we have been too silent and have simply not done enough.

These feelings of frustration are justified.

There are far too many people who have been brutalised at the hands of the police and this is unacceptable. We must take responsibility for protecting young people, even sometimes from those who are paid to protect them ... (Yemi Osinbajo, 2020, Facebook Handle).



Figure 2. #EndSARS protesters in Enugu (Isiani snapped during the protest, 2020).



Figure 3. A girl carries a placard reading “Special Ant-Robbery Squad (SARS) Kill, SARS Rape, SARS Extort, #End SARS Now” on the road to a government house in Ikeja, on Oct. 9, 2020.

Sustaining a Living Environment Through the SDGs

Police brutality in Nigeria is in discordance with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals. The continuous use of brutality and inhuman treatment by security operatives stand in the way of the UN’s goal for a peaceful, inclusive, and just society by 2030. In this study, we argue that Goal 16 of the SDGs—Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions—can stand as a way of checkmating police brutality in Nigeria. Goal 16 seeks to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels (United Nations, 2020). The Goal has 12 targets to be achieved by 2030. Progress towards targets will be measured by 23 indicators. For the sake of this study, we shall examine Targets 16.1 and 16.3 due to their relatedness to our discourse. The Target 16.1 seeks to reduce violence everywhere. With a mission to “significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere (United Nations, 2017),” this target has four indicators of progress:

- Indicator 16.1.1 Number of victims of intentional homicide per 100,000 population, by sex and age.
- Indicator 16.1.2 Conflict-related deaths per 100,000 population by sex, age, and cause.
- Indicator 16.1.3 Proportion of population subjected to (a) physical violence, (b) psychological violence, and (c) sexual violence in the previous 12 months.
- Indicator 16.1.4 Proportion of the population that feels safe walking alone around the area they live (Ritchie & Ortiz-Ospina, 2018).

On the other hand, Target 16.3 sets out to promote the rule of law and ensure equal access to justice. With a mission to “promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all” (United Nations, 2017), this target has three indicators:

- Indicator 16.3.1: Proportion of victims of violence in the previous 12 months who reported their victimization to competent authorities or other officially recognized conflict resolution mechanisms.

- Indicator 16.3.2: Unsented detainees as a proportion of the overall prison population.
- Indicator 16.3.3: The proportion of the population that has experienced a dispute in the past two years and who accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism, by type of mechanism.

With the above Targets itemized, the possibility of achieving SDG Goal 16 in Nigeria is a far cry with stories of police molestation and extra-judicial killings. Human Rights Watch (2007) reported that the Nigerian Police have shot and killed more than 8,000 Nigerians since 2000. The figures show 785 were killed in just three months in 2007, while the true number of people killed by the police since 2000 may exceed 10,000. On November 14, 2007, the former Inspector General of Police Mike Okiro announced that 785 suspected “armed robbers” were shot and killed in gunfire exchanges with the police between June and the beginning of September 2007. According to the same set of statistics, 1,628 armed robbers were arrested during the same period. Police personnel also killed one person for every two firearms they managed to recover. Peter Takirambudde, Africa director at Human Rights Watch observed that,

It’s stunning that the police killed half as many ‘armed robbery suspects’ as they managed to arrest during Okiro’s first 90 days... And it’s scandalous that leading police officials seem to regard the routine killing of Nigerian citizens—criminal suspects or not—as a point of pride. (Human Rights Watch, 2007)

The figures suggest that the Nigerian police, its SARS unit, have routinely resorted to the disproportionate and illegal use of lethal force and may have committed multiple extrajudicial executions in the course of police operations. These signs are especially worrying in light of the numerous well-documented cases of deaths of detainees in police custody. Almost as disturbing as the numbers themselves, top police officers seem to view these grim statistics as an indication of effective policing rather than scandal. Okiro announced the statistics to the House Committee on Police Affairs in a speech recounting the “accomplishments” of his first three months in office (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

Aside from killing innocent citizens and labeling them criminals in the line of duty, Nigerian security operatives have become a tool for oppressing voices and oppositions against anti-democratic governance. Dismaying as it seems, the Nigerian government ordered an Anti-Protest Squad nationwide during the October 2020 #EndSars protest. It was on this order that 12 of the armless protesters were massacred at the Lekki Toll Gate, Lagos on October 20th, 2020 (Amnesty International, 2020). The poor handling of the incident by both the Lagos State government and federal government left much to be desired. Days after, following both national and international outcry, the president’s address to the nation did not talk of the killings let alone handling the highhandedness of the Nigerian Army during the exercise. It was as though the life of the ordinary Nigerian did not matter to the present administration.

In line with the UN 2030 Agenda, the study argues that while governments have a leading role to play, achieving SDG 16 depends on a society-wide approach. Civil society organizations are involved in various ways as implementers and advocates of underrepresented sections of the population, such as women, youths, and marginalized groups. For its part, the private sector can also make an important contribution to peace-building, inclusion, promotion of the rule of law and the eradication of corruption efforts as fundamental to creating an environment conducive and inclusive economy are the *sine qua non* to national development. Local governments, parliamentarians, and the academy are other key stakeholders in the implementation of SDG 16 and the 2030 Agenda as a whole.

Conclusion

In all, the study has investigated the brutality of the Nigerian youth by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and the use of streets as a final resort for the ordinary populace in a state. It argued that the young Nigerians do not feel safe in the country due to the unprofessional and unintelligent investigations applied by these security operatives when dealing with crime related cases. The men of the Nigerian police force and its SARS unit often rely on brutal means to extract confessions from suspects. However, this study observed that the rise of internet fraud among Nigerian youths in the country was partly responsible for the increased rate of SARS harassment in Nigeria. Due to the recent rise in scammers in the country and their unaccountable display of wealth, the SARS operatives were forced to demand the source of their wealth. Most often, the assumptions of these security operatives were accurate: that these young men engage in scamming foreigners, especially from the US and EU, as incriminating evidence is found in their iPhones and laptops. Moreover, there have been cases where SARS raided the dens of scammers in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Enugu, Abuja, and Kaduna. These scammers mostly stay in states with 4G networks like Lagos, Delta, Edo, Imo, etc. (Ogbette et al., 2018). Notwithstanding, these security operatives have blown their investigative duties out of proportion and have acted in unprofessional manners as they harass, extort, rape, and brutally murder their victims. In this way, arresting young Nigerians, including innocent youths with legitimate sources of income on the highways and in their homes. What is painful is that these illegal arrests and detentions have led to the deaths of several young Nigerians.

As Nigerians call for the end of SARS, this study concluded that fighting scammers and fraudsters in Nigeria was the original idea behind its formation. Veering into nabbing scammers and fraudsters that did not fall within the jurisdiction of SARS would have been applauded as noble. However, the highhandedness with which they exhibited their power and killing without remorse while at the same time extorting the parents of innocent youths is mind-boggling. Other agencies, such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Related Crimes Commission (ICPC), could be supported by law. Moreover, combating crimes in Nigeria can only be achieved when the government is ready to put in place an inclusive economy and decentralized power where every region can compete and develop at its own pace. In a country where one region is favored against the other, frustration can only lead to aggression, and to make ends meet, people definitely will delve into crimes. Nigeria needs an inclusive economy where talents are celebrated, and quota system and federal character jettisoned. More so, as there is an urgent need for police reform, they should also be well-remunerated and equipped to exercise their duty without fear or favor. Again, police extortion should be a criminal offense punishable by law. In this way, other anomalies should gradually be tackled in the country.

Finally, urgent action is required to return the Nigerian police to the path of legality, respectability, and public trust. Currently, there is an erosion of accountability for crimes committed by the police. The NPF is controlled at the federal level, and its officers are not accountable to local populations. The best approach to solving this dilemma of illegal arrest and detention is through intelligent and efficient legislation regarding the laws governing detention for investigative purposes. Other suggestions include proper training and retraining of security personnel, deployment of advanced forensic techniques for investigations, enhancing the capacity of the police in their investigative responsibilities, fostering professionalism within their ranks, and punishment of erring officers, which can serve as a deterrent to others.

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