



Gender dynamics of wildlife crime: Lessons from Nigerian regulatory and enforcement contexts

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Abstract

This paper examines the intricate relationship between gender dynamics and wildlife crime by systematically analyzing the relevance of framing wildlife-related legal frameworks through a gender lens. In Nigeria, wildlife regulatory and enforcement practices lack a gender-responsive approach due to poor governance strategies, overlapping institutional frameworks, and weak enforcement powers. We conducted a systematic review and synthesis of publications on wildlife crime to examine the diverse vulnerabilities and contributions of men and women. Neglecting gender in wildlife crime generally undermines the overall goal of achieving a sustainable wildlife economy, as it hinders the understanding of the roles played by different gender and the effectiveness of regulatory and enforcement measures in achieving wildlife conservation goals. Findings reveal gender-based biases in wildlife crime, reflecting significant gaps between regulatory frameworks and enforcement on one hand, and gendered dynamics of wildlife crime on the other hand. The paper recommends integrating gender considerations in wildlife regulatory and enforcement strategies, as well as strategic community engagement and strengthening institutional capabilities to effectively account for the distinct gender vulnerabilities of men and women to achieve integrated wildlife crime management in Nigeria and similar complex wildlife contexts globally.

Keywords: Poaching, women, regulation, wildlife, gender equality, sustainable development.

Introduction

Wildlife crime includes illegal exploitation, trade, and use of wild animals and plants. These activities contravene international and national regulations designed to preserve and safeguard biodiversity. The concept of wildlife crimes is quite extensive, but the notable forms include poaching, which involves the unlawful taking, killing, or hunting of wild plants and animals to obtain their skins, body parts, or other valuable goods. Many species are seriously threatened by poaching, especially those that have a high market value in the illegal wildlife trade. Illegal wildlife trade entails unlawful purchase, selling, or trafficking of live or dead animals, and their byproducts, such as ivory, rhino horns, exotic pets, etc. This category also includes plants and traditional remedies derived from animal and plant parts (Agu & Gore, 2020). Additionally, illegal activities such as the destruction of habitats and trafficking contribute to the degradation of natural ecosystems and the movement of rare plants and animals across national

borders, including mining, illicit logging, and gathering rare flora for commerce.

Several forms of wildlife crimes, including smuggling and cybercrime, which is the unlawful wildlife trade facilitated by the use of the internet and online platforms, make it difficult for authorities to monitor such transactions to achieve regulatory enforcement. These activities occur both individually and through organized networks and are usually enabled by an inadequate law enforcement system (Agu & Gore, 2020). These illicit activities can have serious consequences for both wildlife populations and local communities. (Mozer & Prost, 2023)

Many laws and enforcement mechanisms have been established at both the national and international borders to combat these unlawful activities. However, their effectiveness remains unresolved. Wildlife crime is mostly perceived to involve male offenders, and this perception influences the laws enacted and the enforcement strategies adopted (Seager, 2020). This perception creates a bias regarding women, due to gender stereotyping that overlooks the

involvement of women and other gender identities, who are sometimes used as soft agents or camouflages to perpetrate these crimes. Although the challenges faced by men and women differ (such as defending the rights to traditional land ownership, which determines the right of access to wildlife resources, particularly in typical African communities where some form of gendered resistance against men in favor of women occur), these challenges frequently restrict the decision-making roles of women in the use and management of resources (Deere et al., 2012; Kieran et al., 2015; Doss et al., 2017; Chigbu et al., 2019). In Zambia, for example, an investigation conducted close to Kafue National Park revealed that 39% of women and 56% of men strongly agreed that elephants are important to the environment, while many respondents disagreed with the killing of elephants that pose a threat to crops and family safety (GRI/IFAW, 2017). This example suggests a gendered divergence in attitudinal orientation towards the use and protection of elephants, which can affect how men and women respond to enforcement strategies against wildlife crime in Zambia.

This study does not in any way exclude women from wildlife trafficking

networks, as several cases involving women have been reported across Africa; however, the majority of indigenous Africans perceive wildlife trafficking as predominantly male-dominated (Ntuli et al., 2019; Lunstrum & Givá, 2020). For instance, an old Chinese woman, Yang Feng Glan (also known as the "Ivory Queen"), may not seem like the leader of an ivory trafficking organization to most people. Nevertheless, she was detained and accused by Tanzanian police of heading one of the largest ivory trafficking networks in Africa, and was responsible for trafficking the tusks of over 860 elephants valued at 13.9 billion shillings (\$5.6 million), from Tanzania to Asia. After being pursued by Tanzania's National and Transnational Serious Crimes Investigation Unit for over a year, she was apprehended in October 2015 following a fast-paced vehicle pursuit, for wildlife trafficking offences from 2000 to 2014 (BBC, 2015). In February 2019, a Tanzanian court, which tried Yang Feng Glan, found her guilty and sentenced her to 15 years' imprisonment. She was found guilty on the same counts with as two other Tanzanians, Salvius Francis Matembo and Manase Julius Philemon, who were accomplices in the wildlife trafficking operation. Although all three defendants filed an appeal (Tremblay,

2019), the appeal judge at the High Court of Tanzania, Judge Edwin Kakolaki, transferred the case to the Magistrate Court for retrial due to the non-provision of the points of determination in the original judgment against Yang. Meanwhile, the appeal judge rejected her attorney's appeal for her release, ruling that she would remain in prison custody pending the determination of the case by the Magistrate court (Mongabay News, 2021). Following the retrial at the Kisutu Resident Magistrate Court on December 8, 2021, the judge upheld the earlier verdict, finding Yang and her two Tanzanian accomplices guilty, and maintaining the 15 years' jail term. Furthermore, the court issued an order for the confiscation of Yang's farm in Tanga City's Mheza neighbourhood, which was utilized to conceal elephant tusks intended for illicit export abroad (Ecojust, 2021). In another development, a WT suspect in Tanzania, who travelled to Bangkok from Dar es Salaam in July 2022, was first apprehended during Operation Golden Strike 2022, when Thai Customs at Suvarnabhumi International Airport discovered CITES-protected tortoise species concealed in her luggage. Although the suspect escaped Thailand before she could face full prosecution, international police cooperation enabled

her identification, location and extradition from Bulgaria to Tanzania on June 17, 2023. Investigations revealed that the suspect had collaborated with Egyptian and Tanzanian partners to commit the offences. To locate two Red Notice suspects, the INTERPOL General Secretariat organized a regional investigative analytical case meeting in Lyon, France, from February 20 to 22, 2023, involving investigators and prosecutors from Tanzania, Thailand, and Egypt. A week later, as the Ukrainian fugitive crossed the border between Bulgaria and Turkey, she was apprehended and taken into custody. Law enforcement officials at the land border were alerted to her wanted status via the INTERPOL Red Notice. For offences covered by the Economic Organized Crime Control Act and the Wildlife Conservation Act, the fugitive risks a maximum 30-year jail sentence.

This paper, therefore, aims to examine the nature of wildlife crime in Nigeria, assess the gendered dimensions of wildlife crime, and evaluate the implications of the gender-sensitivity in addressing wildlife crime. Since the perpetrators of these crimes have taken advantage of a bias in enforcing the existing wildlife laws, which is evident in the way law enforcement agencies concentrate on

male suspects in conducting intelligence and surveillance. As a result, the females are used as proxies to covertly perpetrate these crimes. The lack of effective wildlife policies and enforcement measures that address gender dynamics further constrains the ability to tackle wildlife crimes effectively. To systematically interrogate this discourse, this study is divided into five sections, including the introduction. Section two discusses wildlife crimes in Nigeria, while Section three discusses gender dynamics in wildlife crime and control. Section four focuses on balancing regulatory and enforcement priorities along gendered dimensions, while Section five presents the conclusion.

1. Wildlife crimes in Nigeria

Wildlife crime dates back to ancient civilizations, when hunting endangered species for valuable components like tusks, skins, and horns was customary. For example, the woolly mammoth's extinction is frequently attributed to early human overhunting. Furthermore, the Medieval age witnessed the creation of hunting rules designed to protect specific species for the benefit of the elite. Poaching, on the other hand, remained rampant, while those caught typically faced severe punishments. This trend persisted into the era of colonialism

and the Scramble for Africa. Wildlife crime increased throughout the Age of Exploration and colonisation as European nations exploited natural resources in their territories (Emogor, 2021). This included hunting exotic species for trophies, trading, and destroying habitats for agriculture and development. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Industrial Revolution increased the demand for wildlife products, pushing numerous species to the brink of extinction. The trade in ivory, fur, feathers, and exotic pets thrived as a result of little control or monitoring. Despite greater awareness and conservation initiatives, wildlife crime remains a major challenge in the modern era (Mohammad, 2017). Poaching, illicit logging, animal trafficking, and habitat loss continue to endanger innumerable species across the globe. Criminal syndicates frequently take advantage of lax law enforcement and corruption to profit from the illegal trade in wildlife goods (OECD, 2020).

Wildlife crimes also extend to habitat destruction and deforestation, which entail the destruction, deterioration, or fragmentation of natural habitats through activities such as logging, mining, agricultural land clearing, and urban development. These actions

jeopardise the survival of numerous species and contribute to biodiversity loss. Similarly, the pollution and contamination of natural habitats, such as water bodies and the air, can severely impact wildlife populations through illegal dumping of hazardous waste, oil spills, and chemical pollution, which undoubtedly have devastating consequences for ecosystems and the species that live there. Wildlife crimes also include illicit fishing activities, such as the use of dynamite, cyanide, or illicit nets. These practices contribute to overfishing, deplete marine resources, disrupt marine ecosystem structure, and endanger the livelihoods of coastal communities (Mozer & Prost, 2023). Despite the unlawful hunt and consumption of wild animals for nourishment, bushmeat hunting is still prevalent in many Nigerian communities. While subsistence hunting is a cultural practice in many areas, uncontrolled hunting as a result of the bushmeat trade can pose an existential threat to endangered species and alter ecosystem structure. Also popular is the illegal logging and timber trade, which entails the harvesting, transportation, and sale of timber in violation of national or international laws. It contributes to deforestation, habitat loss, and

biodiversity reduction, which degrade wildlife populations and indigenous groups that rely on forests for a living, which can have far-reaching consequences across food webs (Okiwelu et al., 2009)

Wildlife crimes also have severe economic consequences for local communities, governments, and industry (Lawson & Vines, 2014). For instance, loss of biodiversity can lower ecosystem production, reduce opportunities for ecotourism and recreation, and threaten the long-term viability of natural resource-based enterprises like fisheries and forestry. Furthermore, illegal wildlife trading and consumption can pose major public health risks as they can contribute to the spread of zoonotic illnesses (those passed from animals to humans). For example, the illegal wildlife trade has been linked to the spread of diseases including Ebola, SARS, and COVID-19 (Onyekuru et al., 2020). Several conflicts and social tensions have been linked to wildlife crimes, particularly in locations where residents rely on natural resources for a living. Illegal resource extraction can result in land disputes, displacement of indigenous peoples, and exploitation of vulnerable communities.

Many indigenous and local groups have strong cultural and spiritual ties to wildlife and the natural environment (Taringa, 2014). While wildlife crimes degrade or destroy these ecosystems, they endanger biodiversity and also undermine traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and community identities. It is also important to note that the illicit wildlife trade frequently overlaps with other types of organized crime, such as drug, weapon, and people trafficking (Gumo et al., 2012). Wildlife crime revenues can feed corruption, damage governance, and lead to regional instability. These impacts affect diverse gender groups in distinct ways. For example, while some men die during poaching activities, their wives become widows and are forced to take care of their children alone. Also, when they are imprisoned for wildlife-related offences, their wives may be compelled to migrate in search of livelihoods. Although men often migrate, women involved in forced migration frequently face various forms of violence and exploitation (Mavhunga, 2021).

The concept of wildlife crimes in Nigeria cannot adequately be discussed without referring to the cultural and traditional dimension of wildlife hunting in Nigeria over centuries. Even before the regulation

of exploitation of wild fauna and flora at the national and international levels, many communities survived on derivatives from the wild, both for clothing, medicine, ornaments or even for ego or titles. In the Eastern part of Nigeria, people killed several leopards and tigers just to be conferred with the title of 'Ogbu-agu', meaning 'the killer of leopards or tigers', others killed elephants just to be addressed as 'Ogbu-enyi'. Others hunted for trophies, while some communities used wildlife derivatives for dowries (Arts & Culture, 2020).

Historically, men are traditionally assigned the gender role of hunting and women the role of homemaking. However, this dynamic is evolving as women increasingly engage in wildlife crimes. In the early days, hunting practices were controlled, enabling wildlife populations to flourish. However, contemporary globalisation has resulted in significant overexploitation, endangering numerous species and driving them towards extinction. Women currently act as intermediaries in the illegal wildlife trade, facilitating the transfer of wildlife from rural regions to urban areas and frequently collaborating with men in these activities (Mbete et al., 2011; Cooney et al., 2017). For instance, presently, women have shifted from being

homemakers to becoming actively involved in several aspects of wildlife crimes (Agu & Gore, 2020).

Recent findings, including the World Wildlife Crime Report 2024, highlight the significant involvement of women in the processing and sale of wildlife products, especially in regions such as South America. The lack of a gendered perspective in addressing wildlife crimes in Nigeria, a significant transit point for wildlife trafficking, has impeded efforts to combat these offences (UNODC, 2022–2026). According to UNODC's World Wildlife Crime Report 2020 (United Nations, 2020), the country's role in the pangolin trade is concerning, as the report indicates that Nigerian ports accounted for 51 tons of pangolin scales seized globally in 2019, a substantial rise from just 2 tons in 2015. Nigeria constituted over fifty percent of global pangolin scale seizures in that year (UNODC, 2022–2026).

The scale of wildlife trafficking in Nigeria is highlighted by data from the UNODC's World Wildlife Crime Report 2024, indicating that more than 12,917 kg of ivory tusks were confiscated from Nigeria between 2010 and 2015, increasing to 28,296 kg from 2016 to 2021. Starting in 2011, the country commenced extensive

exports of rosewood, known locally as "kosso", to Asia, leading CITES to advocate for commercial regulation of this trade pending further sustainability assessments.

Nigeria, despite containing only 0.02% of Africa's elephant population, plays a notable role in the global ivory market, with 23% of all ivory collected worldwide trafficked through the country from 2015 to 2019 (UNODC, 2022–2026). This trend underscores the urgent requirement for a comprehensive gender-based strategy to address wildlife crime, as well as the critical need for national and international regulations to mitigate these illegal activities.

Brief on the wildlife regulatory ecosystem in the context of gender and wildlife crime

Wildlife regulation has traditionally been enacted through international legal frameworks, but the increase in illegal wildlife trade (IWT) and the shortcomings of global legal measures have led to the creation of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) in 1973 in Washington, USA. CITES is the primary global legal structure from which regional, national, and local wildlife management and conservation laws are

derived. It aims to protect species at risk of extinction, primarily found in Appendix I, from threats such as overexploitation, illegal hunting, and habitat destruction. Species in Appendix II are vulnerable and may face extinction if exploited beyond sustainable limits, while Appendix III lists rare species that require strict protection due to their limited numbers (Cirelli & Morgera, 2010). Currently, nineteen sub-Saharan countries, including Nigeria, have ratified CITES.

The Protection of Endangered Species Act (ESA) was enacted in 2011, under the authority of the Minister of Environment, Nigeria, in line with the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency Act of 2007. These regulations govern wildlife species listed in the CITES and prohibit the import and export of these species, as well as their possession, with exceptions obtainable through permits in extraordinary situations. Violations can result in severe penalties, including lengthy prison sentences, underpinned by the Endangered Species (Control of International Trade and Traffic) Act (ESA) of 1985, which aims to eliminate illegal trade of endangered species. Despite its critical role in conservation, the ESA has been criticized for its ineffectiveness in deterring poaching due to minimal

penalties that fail to address current biodiversity threats in Nigeria.

Subsequently, the 2016 Amendment Act modifies existing fines, increasing them to enhance deterrence and align with economic realities, demonstrating an effort to strengthen the legal framework for wildlife conservation. The text details various modifications to the definitions of penalties and enforcement mechanisms, specifically the substantial increase of fines for infractions, reflecting a legislative response to ongoing challenges in biodiversity preservation in the region.

The Nigerian National Gender Policy (2021–2026) establishes a framework for advancing gender equality and social inclusion, with the objective of creating a just and non-discriminatory society that fully incorporates the rights and needs of women, men, girls, boys, and other vulnerable and marginalised groups into national development processes. It emphasises the importance of addressing gender disparities, safeguarding human rights, preventing and addressing gender-based violence, promoting women's economic empowerment, enhancing women's leadership and political participation, and improving access to quality health and education services. The policy addresses harmful cultural norms

and practices, advocates gender-responsive legislation and budgeting, and emphasises the inclusion of marginalised populations. Effective implementation relies on strong inter-institutional collaboration, capacity building, ensuring that national laws and policies align with international and regional standards, and the establishment of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress nationwide.

Conceptualizing gender dynamics of wildlife crime

Gender is understood both in binary terms (male and female) and non-binary frameworks that include a spectrum of identities such as Lesbians, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual+ (LGBTIQA+). In Nigeria, gender is predominantly viewed through a binary lens, influenced by patriarchal norms that stigmatise non-binary identities. Social norms regarding gender differ markedly among Nigerian communities, encompassing economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions (Jhpiego, 2020). Contemporary gender studies extend beyond binary categories and emphasise the intersections between gender, sustainability, and environmental governance, particularly in contexts such as wildlife crime (Cruz-Torres & McElwee,

2012). Combating wildlife trafficking is a social issue that requires understanding gender dynamics. This can be achieved through the development of inclusive regulatory frameworks or by mainstreaming gender-responsive and inclusive approaches into wildlife regulation and management frameworks (Oldfield, 2003).

Gendered roles in resource access, control and consumption influence the dynamics of wildlife crime (Cruz-Torres & McElwee, 2012). Hunting and wildlife exploitation are traditionally perceived as male-dominated activities, while socio-economic barriers often hinder women's ability to report illegal activities. Agu and Gore (2020) and McElwee (2012) reported that women engage in wildlife trade in various capacities, including as offenders, buyers, sellers, smugglers, and facilitators. They serve as brokers, transporting wildlife products and often joining the illegal trade through personal connections (Mbeti et al., 2011). They can also transport live animals, sometimes working along with their partners to move these animals or their derivatives (Cooney et al, 2017). According to Hübschle (2014), many women join the organised crime networks through personal relationships with a

person who is actively involved, such as a partner, father, husband, sibling, or acquaintance (Hübschle & Shearing, 2018; Agu & Gore, 2020). Despite their substantive yet often overlooked roles, Nigerian women remain underrepresented in wildlife protection and enforcement efforts, unlike in countries such as South Africa, where female-led anti-poaching initiatives have been institutionalised (Seager, 2020). For instance, the Black Mambas is an all-female anti-poaching unit in South Africa, which was created by the Chief Warden of Balule Nature Reserve, and inspired by the need to strengthen community engagement with the reserve's destitute neighbouring communities (Agu & Gore, 2020).

Women also function as influencers, as they have the capacity to both protect and inhibit wildlife trafficking through a variety of social roles, relationships, and networks. Women may act as mothers, religious leaders, sisters, teachers, wives, girlfriends, or community members, and each of these positions can be an opportunity to positively or negatively impact the networks involved in wildlife crimes (Price, 2017). Women also participate as observers, as they may knowingly or unknowingly, serve as

eyewitnesses to wildlife trafficking activities and the actors involved (Kahler & Rinkus, 2021). On the other hand, they may also be victims of violence perpetrated by poachers, traffickers or law enforcement agents. Transactional relationships, such as the fish-for-sex phenomenon in East Africa, link wildlife crime to the complex forms of victimisation experienced by women, often leading to health risks and social exclusion. For instance, independent observations in the Lake Victoria region indicate that fishermen may offer women a portion of their catch in exchange for sexual relations and decision-making power over which women are permitted to unload fish (Béné & Merten, 2008; UNEP, 2016). In such arrangements, male fishers unilaterally determine the value of the fish exchanged, reinforcing gendered power imbalances. Women-owned processing businesses receive payment in the form of fish, which is fried and dried before being sold as a finished good. In practice, however, women who wish to work for the fishermen and obtain a portion of the catch for their processing companies must pay the fishermen (equivalent to US\$4) or engage in sexual relation with them for the privilege of working with them. For example, a study conducted on fish workers in Zambia

(Béné et al., 2007) found that 31 percent of female fish vendors were involved in institutionalised transactional relationships, including the exchange of fish for sex

Anti-poaching law enforcement has been linked to wildlife crime in ways that cause significant and disastrous consequences for women's personal and health security. A video of Russian police officers engaging in illicit tiger pelt trading was made public by the International Fund for Animal Welfare, implicating the smuggling gang in the trafficking of sex workers, drugs, and alcohol (IFAW, PR Newswire, 2020). Similarly, a Laotian wildlife trafficking network floated a company called Xaysavang Trading Export-Import, which they used to facilitate illicit activities in South Africa (Hübschle, 2016). The Thai representative of the company recruited Thai sex workers to accompany him and his South African intermediaries to privately owned hunting reserves and farms. The South African legislation allowed one rhino hunt per hunter per annum, and the sex workers engaged in a pseudo-hunting exercise to increase 'legal' rhino horn hunts. In exchange for the use of their passports, the sex workers would be remunerated with food, drinks, and 5000 Rands. In addition to

primary criminal victimization (i.e., direct harm brought on by crime), green criminology also includes secondary victimization (Davies, 2014). Green criminology includes secondary victimization, rooted in eco-feminism and environmental racism, and women are beneficiaries of wildlife trafficking (Visvanathan et al., 2011). When young men are killed or jailed by the police, widows who are left to care for fatherless households and aged mothers without boys may become secondary victims of abuse (Kahler & Rinkus, 2021). Research has shown that wives and mothers are deeply concerned about the economic precarity following the arrest or death of male breadwinners, the negative effects of poaching on the community, and the disproportionate vulnerability of women and children (Hübschle, 2017).

Strict anti-poaching law enforcement measures can further compromise women's safety and well-being, as they can become secondary victims when male partners face criminal repercussions (Sundstrom et al., 2019). The examination of gender dynamics in wildlife crime reveals significant insights into how these issues manifest both domestically in Nigeria and on a global scale. Addressing the gendered nature of wildlife crimes is critical for effective

conservation efforts, as women's unique perspectives and roles in sustainability must be integrated into decision-making processes. A more inclusive approach can enhance strategies for preventing wildlife crime, benefiting conservation and community resilience efforts. Recognising the interplay between gender vulnerabilities and environmental harm is essential in developing comprehensive strategies to combat wildlife crime effectively.

Rethinking gender in wildlife regulatory and enforcement priorities

To efficiently strike a balance between regulatory and enforcement priorities within the rubric of gender, there is a need for gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming is the process of incorporating gender considerations into laws, initiatives, and institutions that fight wildlife trafficking. It is seen as a logical progression of the integrationist strategy, which focuses on giving women access to bureaucracies and development activities (Kahler & Rinkus, 2021). It is therefore crucial to acknowledge and investigate how women's involvement in wildlife crime is influenced by intersecting factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, ethnic or cultural influences, and educational opportunities (Kahler & Rinkus, 2021). By bridging the

knowledge gap about women's involvement in wildlife crime and their responsibilities, both direct and indirect, the global community should ensure that law enforcement is more effective and gender-responsive and that interventions do not reinforce gender-based inequities. These regulatory and enforcement priorities necessitating a balance along gender lines include gender-sensitive training for law enforcement, inclusion of women in wildlife enforcement agencies, and community policing collaboration between law enforcement and communities. Evaluating women's roles as actors, protectors or guardians, can assist in developing innovative and community-responsive strategies, towards accelerating community awareness and resilience to wildlife crime. By bridging these information gaps about women and wildlife crime, policymakers may be better positioned to implement informed recommendations, allocate targeted resources and support, mitigate wildlife crime, and advocate for the protection of endangered and vulnerable species (Ini, *Premium Times* March, 2022).

It has long been acknowledged that one major reason why nations have failed to meet the challenge of reducing wildlife crime is the capacity of criminal elements

to take advantage of flaws and gaps in legal and enforcement frameworks, including the murky challenges associated with ambiguity in the nature of involvement of men and women in wildlife crime, as exemplified in Nigeria. Enhancing Nigeria's capacity to eliminate wildlife trafficking within and outside its borders presents enormous hurdles. The fundamental task involves the coordination of relevant agencies, who need to work together to achieve integrated strategies for dealing with offences affecting protected species (Kahler & Rinkus, 2021). For instance, the existing collaboration between the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) and the National Environmental Standards Regulatory and Enforcement Agency (NESREA) remains poorly implemented. Records show that NCS stopped reporting its seizures to NESREA since in 2018. According to NESREA, it has frequently been kept in the dark regarding wildlife trafficking problems (Ini, 2022). In response to these systematic gaps, the Nigerian government, in collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the German government, created the National Strategy to Combat Wildlife and Forest Crime in Nigeria 2022-2026, the country's first-ever comprehensive

strategic plan to tackle these issues. Nigeria's objectives for "A Nigeria Free of Wildlife Crime" were reflected in the National Strategy, which was unveiled on Monday, April 11, 2022, in Abuja, Nigeria, during a high-profile event (Ini, 2022). Regulatory and enforcement priorities, in this context, include identifying key challenges in Wildlife Crime Enforcement, reviewing the current landscape of Wildlife Crime in Nigeria, analyzing wildlife crime trends and identifying hotspots and key species targeted. It further includes priority setting in law enforcement, risk assessment and threat analysis. It also involves identifying high-priority species and habitats, assessing the risks posed by different types of wildlife crime etc. They also include strengthening existing wildlife protection laws and closing legal loopholes that promote wildlife crimes, providing specialised training for wildlife crime investigators, and developing a multi-agency collaborative approach. To balance enforcement priorities, recourse should also be made to data analytics, using a centralised database for wildlife crime intelligence and analysing data to identify patterns and trafficking routes. There is also a need for cross-border cooperation, regional collaboration through intelligence sharing with

neighbouring countries, and the coordination of joint operations to combat transboundary wildlife crime.

A review of the existing regulatory framework in place reveals that women have not been properly engaged both in lawmaking and law enforcement towards eliminating wildlife crimes. As established earlier, wildlife crime in Nigeria has taken a gendered dimension and it would be a botched approach to have a one-sided strategy to ensure control by omitting gender dynamics in lawmaking and law enforcement. None of the existing laws highlighted the engagement and vulnerability of women in wildlife crimes. Although the National Strategy to Combat Wildlife and Forest Crime in Nigeria 2022-2026 provides for social and political inclusion, the issue of women's engagement should have been highlighted since other existing laws were mute on the subject. More so, Nigeria, like many other developing countries, has few women in law enforcement agencies, with just 19.09% of women, in the Nigerian Police Force, for example (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Any community policing endeavour must prioritise female-responsive policing that better addresses the needs of women in the community, especially in areas that have been

devastated by climate change, conflict and wildlife crimes (Strobl, 2020; Steyn, 2007).

Many researchers support the view that women are, on average, more likely than men to offer a public service orientation within law enforcement. For instance, in many societies, women are more likely to carry the feminine traits of encouraging conversation and problem-solving (probably because of stereotypic patterns of socialization). These communication skills represent one benefit of female representation in policing, particularly in countries that have experienced conflict or post conflict-recovery phases. Because they are less authoritarian than male police officers, some police leaders have expressed the opinion that female police officers are typically better able to mediate and de-escalate tense situations. Such competencies are especially valuable in contexts where women engage in wildlife exploitation as a survival strategy, as they allow enforcement actors to balance control with empathy and community engagement (Bastick, 2008). The ability of law enforcement organisations to address the needs of women in the areas they serve is referred to as gender responsiveness.

According to Strobl (2020), the meaningful engagement of women is essential for advancing organisational change in law enforcement, as it fosters a cultural ethos that better meets community and institutional needs.

Research indicates that greater female representation in law enforcement is associated with improved operational outcomes such as better decision-making regarding the use of force, a reduction in public complaints, and enhanced communication skills that aid in de-escalating police-civilian interactions (Strobl, 2020; Agu & Gore, 2020). The South African Black Mambas exemplify successful community involvement in security and anti-poaching initiatives within a private game reserve, similar to the International Anti-Poaching Foundation's "Akashinga" program in Zimbabwe, which translates to "the brave ones" in Shona (Hübschle & Shearing, 2018). Both programmes comprise mainly young rural women, including unemployed single mothers, those who have experienced trauma such as domestic abuse, and women connected to poaching through personal relationships. These all-female teams have been granted jurisdictional authority and undergo identical law enforcement training as their male counterparts

(Lindsay, 2019). The rationale behind employing these women includes a perception that they are less susceptible to corruption and exhibit superior skills in managing violent situations.

Women also occupy various roles in the criminal justice system, including judges, attorneys, magistrates, and officers within penitentiary institutions, in addition to their involvement in NGOs and military services (Lindsay, 2019). The Black Mambas have achieved significant success, evidenced by the dismantling of poachers' camps and kitchens used for bush meat preparation, along with a notable decrease in snaring and poisoning activities. Furthermore, they engage in environmental education initiatives, teaching local elementary students about conservation (Hübschle, 2016). Both organisations aim to provide alternative sources of income for marginalised rural women, reducing reliance on activities such as trophy hunting, by offering employment opportunities and conservation-linked benefits. Akashinga, in particular, seeks to collaborate with local populations rather than confront them. A key aspect of these initiatives is the acknowledgment of women as crucial contributors to their communities. Despite existing patriarchal

norms that may impede women's rights, rural women in southern Africa actively participate as influential citizens.

Following the strategy adopted by the Black Mamba in South Africa and the Akashinga in Zimbabwe, some practical ways to strike this balance are to first determine areas in Nigeria where wildlife is prevalent and where women depend solely on wildlife for survival and give such areas priority in law-making and intervention planning. It would also be necessary for the government to explore other alternative sources of livelihood and make them accessible and affordable to the people. The government can deploy agriculture and development experts and other social workers and facilitators to assist in rechanneling those communities to other sustainable means of livelihood. Areas identified as heavily dependent on wildlife should receive targeted support and intervention based on the frequency of wildlife-related crimes and/or their proximity to major ports of entry and exit from Nigeria (Lindsay, 2019).

Furthermore, no enforcement agency in Nigeria should be dominated by one gender. Achieving gender equity and balance in wildlife-based institutions can also contribute to achieving regulatory and enforcement priorities, especially in

eliminating wildlife crimes involving female offenders. For instance, increasing employment opportunities for women in such agencies as the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA), the Nigerian Ports Authority, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Nigerian Customs Service, etc., can strengthen enforcement efforts such as arrests, sanctions, prosecution, and conviction of offenders of wildlife crime irrespective of their gender.

There's also a significant gap in the prosecution of wildlife offences by Nigerian authorities. In an investigation carried out by Premium Times (A leading Nigerian Newspaper) in 2022, many prosecutors admitted that they have never prosecuted wildlife crimes at the state or federal levels. Many also admitted that they have almost no knowledge of the relevant state and federal wildlife laws. In the context of wildlife crime, coordination among key enforcement actors like the Police, National Parks Service (NPS), Customs, NESREA, or state-level reserve personnel has been largely inadequate. Until 2019, the customs officials, who were in charge of a considerable number of wildlife detections at the Nigeria's ports and borders, had not undertaken any internal

prosecution. Instead, they had turned over the case to the NESREA without any supervision, investigation, or additional involvement (Ini, 2022).

Regarding sentencing, the limited number of wildlife crime prosecutions in Nigeria has resulted in an absence of clear sentencing guidelines for wildlife offenders. Even the few that have been sentenced are predominantly men. Nonetheless, Nigeria is one of the few African countries with prescriptive sentencing standards, having enacted federal-level practice directions on sentencing in 2016. Nigeria also boasts of having a robust sentencing structure, but this is only applicable within the FCT and to a small class of offenders. In 2015, an additional practice directive was released that addressed corruption and associated offences for all High Courts. Although the 2016 practice direction allows for "offences against the State," which may include crimes involving wildlife, and "environmental impact" when determining the sentence, it would be preferable to explicitly state how sentencing works concerning crimes involving wildlife (and forestry) and how they apply to both genders (Ini, 2022).

The lack of comprehensive and gender-sensitive data further undermines efforts

to achieve a balanced enforcement, as existing records disproportionately focus on male offenders, reflecting a legal and enforcement framework historically targeted at men. There is a need to redefine our data gathering and ensure an adequate capturing of data on offenders, convictions and sentencing (Ini, 2022).

Conclusion

Nigeria's example suggests the significance of tackling the underlying socioeconomic conditions that fuel wildlife crime within the prism of gender. Sustainable development initiatives that empower local people, encourage economic diversification, and enhance access to education and healthcare can assist in addressing the gender underpinnings of wildlife crime while fostering gender equity and social justice.

Consequently, our recommendations include:

- a) Engaging traditional authorities in the process of changing harmful, long-held norms and beliefs that affect women and girls' involvement in conservation initiatives through consultation engagement.
- b) Formulating gender-balanced policies and legal instruments that recognise

- and codify women's role in wildlife protection, including integrating into the constitution and other legal documents such as the latest Endangered Species Conservation and Protection Bill 2024. Even though the Bill has passed the third reading and is awaiting Senate concurrence, it could be strengthened through amendments to explicitly incorporate women's participation.
- c) Sensitisation of the locals, government and communities on the role and contribution of women in combating illegal wildlife trafficking and placement in other leadership positions.
 - d) Actively recruiting women into wildlife law enforcement agencies, wildlife boards, policy-making bodies and conservative non-governmental organizations (NGOs).
 - e) The voice of women advocates for wildlife protection and combating wildlife crimes should not be silenced; their ideas and suggestions should be given a thought.
 - f) Since women in rural areas often interact with wildlife for diverse purposes, they should be actively involved in policy and decision-making and not sidelined. Women in Zimbabwe are burdened with the task of walking long miles to school and risk encounters with wild animals, making them more exposed to wildlife, alongside having a unique knowledge and experience in coexisting with wildlife.
 - g) Education and training of women on the impact of overharvesting and the loss of endangered species, providing them with soft loans for an alternative source of livelihood, to discourage them from wildlife crime.

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