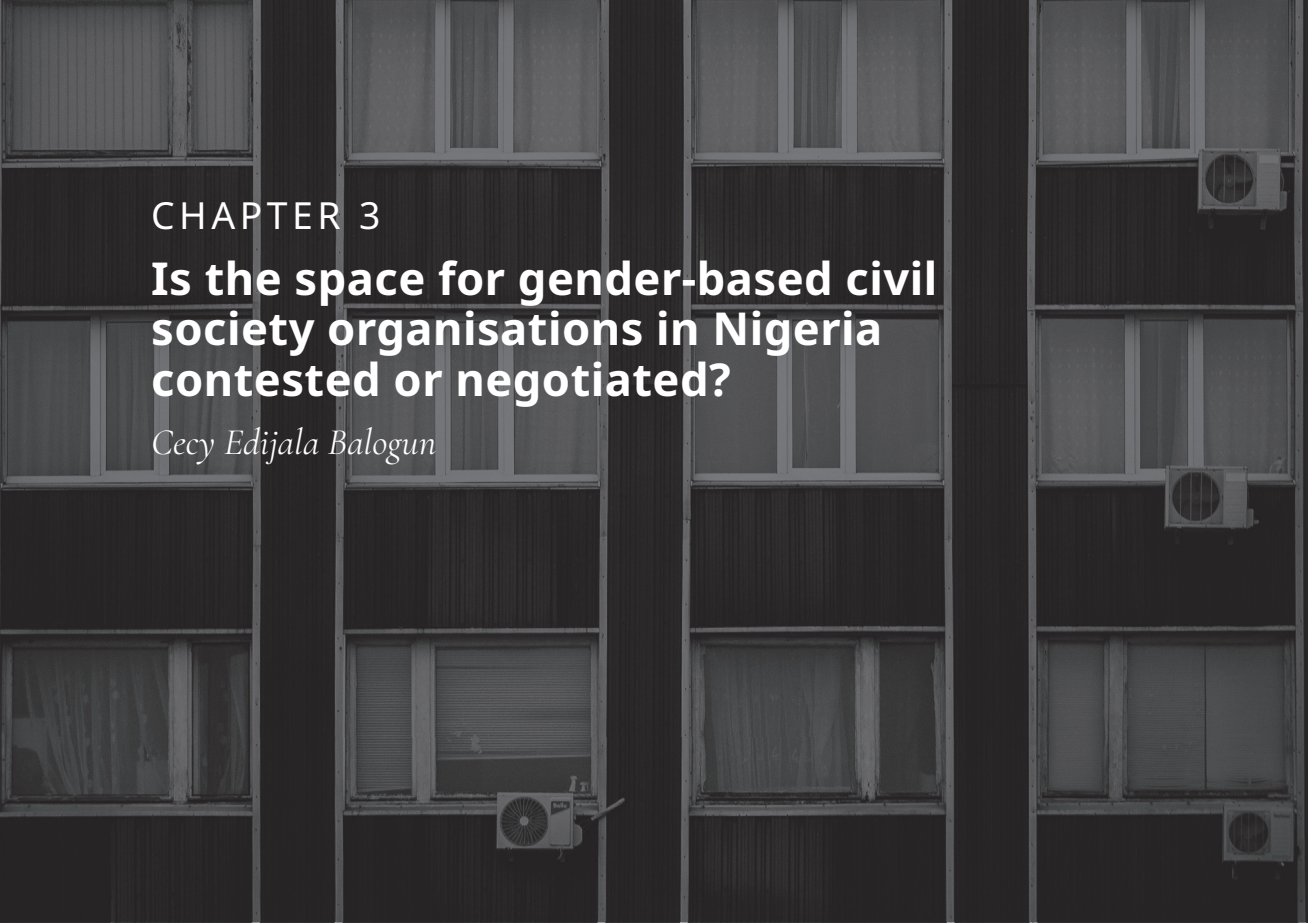




CHAPTER 3

Is the space for gender-based civil society organisations in Nigeria contested or negotiated?

Cecy Edijala Balogun

Introduction

The chapter analyses the contestation of the civic space by gender-based civil society organisations (CSOs) in Nigeria and the forms of violations to which the CSOs are exposed as they engage in civic activities aimed at addressing society's social, economic, cultural, and political imbalances. According to Sommerfeldt's (2013) seminal work on social capital, CSOs play a crucial role in fostering social trust, reciprocal relationships, and civic engagement among citizens. They are essential for building networks and bridging social divides in communities (Sommerfeldt, 2013), and by bringing people together, they contribute to society's overall well-being. The concerns of CSOs vary, ranging from those that focus on gender-related issues, youth empowerment, child protection, advocacy, media campaigns, peacebuilding, and anti-corruption efforts to activities related to human rights and social justice. However, the chapter focuses on CSOs engaged in gender-related activities that span diverse sectors.

The contestation of civic space for gender-based CSOs has been a topic of concern in recent years. Kassa and Sarikakis (2022) noted that gender-based

CSOs face severe contestation of their civic space due to deep-rooted patriarchal norms and power structures within society. In Nigeria, the activities of gender-based CSOs notwithstanding, the civic space of their operations is seriously contested, posing a challenge to their ability to provide their social and humanitarian services to marginalised members of society. Contestation of civic space can reflect a situation where there is a systemic denial of access to spaces that ensure the smooth operations of CSOs. It also implies CSO resistance against unfriendly policies and government operations targeted at stalling or limiting their activities or access to opportunities that enhance their operations.

Gender-based CSOs are exposed to violations of their rights, which further narrow or close their spaces of operation. Faith (2022) noted that CSOs experience barriers such as societal resistance, legal restrictions, and discrimination, which limit their ability to operate freely and advocate for gender equality. With the introduction of new technologies, their digital spaces are also being contested, with threats of sanctions and censorship becoming commonplace in Nigeria. While contestations of their civic spaces limit their activities, one way CSOs circumvent this challenge is by negotiating their spaces to avoid a complete shutdown of their activities. While this can be seen as an alternative, it is also perceived as capitulation, especially for CSOs that challenge unfriendly policies, programmes, and government operations. This is because in negotiating their spaces of operation, compromises are made, which may contradict the tenets of the CSOs.

Studies have shown that civil society organisations use a variety of strategies to avoid limitations on their spaces, including the use of digital platforms, advocacy, and lobbying; forming coalitions and partnerships with CSOs with similar interests; building grassroots movements; investing in capacity-building and training programmes to empower individuals and communities with knowledge, skills, and tools to advocate for their rights and create change (Dunu & Uzochukwu, 2015; Buyse, 2018; Kusters et al., 2020; Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2020). Hence, the chapter focuses on understanding the contestation and negotiation of the civic spaces of gender-based CSOs in Nigeria by answering three key questions.

1. Is the civic space of gender-based CSOs contested or negotiated in Nigeria?
2. How are gender-based CSO civic rights violated in Nigeria?
3. What strategies are used by gender-based CSOs in navigating the contestations of their civic space in Nigeria?

The rest of the chapter focuses on clarifying various concepts used in the study, the methodology, the study's findings, the conclusion, and recommendations.

Conceptual clarifications

Civil society organisations (CSOs)

Civil society organisations are a broad coalition of non-state organisations that engage with society's cultural, social, economic, legal, and political structures to promote the well-being of the marginalised, deprived, or those who are legally excluded or denied their rights. CSOs include non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private voluntary organisations, community-based organisations (CBOs), trade unions, cultural and religious groups, charities, cooperatives, environmental groups, professional associations, consumer organisations, media organisations, etc. (Essia & Yearoo, 2009). CSOs serve as platforms for citizens to exercise their political agency by engaging in collective action and advocacy (Gready & Robins, 2017). They provide a space for individuals to voice their concerns, mobilise resources, and work towards social and political change. Szymańska (2022) emphasises the significance of CSO functioning in democratic societies, stating that they are crucial actors in the public sphere, a space where citizens can discuss and deliberate on matters of public interest.

Drawing from the conceptualisations of these authors, CSOs can be regarded as vital for fostering social trust and reciprocal relationships, promoting civic engagement and political agency, and ensuring the functioning of a democratic society by providing platforms for citizens to voice their concerns, participate in decision-making, and hold governments accountable.

Gender-based civil society organisations

Gender-based CSOs are entities that focus specifically on addressing issues related to gender inequality and promoting gender equality (Diprose, 2023). These organisations aim to challenge patriarchal norms and structures that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and violence (Singh, 2018). They are entities that cater to the needs and interests of women and other marginalised gender groups, providing safe spaces for these individuals to voice their concerns, access support, and collectively mobilise for change (Singh, 2018).

Civic space

Various authors have conceptualised civic space. According to Buyse (2018), the concept of civic space originates from discussions on legal and human rights. It is typically defined based on the realisation of specific civic freedoms, such as the right to associate, assemble, and express oneself. While sometimes used interchangeably with the concept of civil society, Popplewell (2018) opined that civic space mostly aligns with the idea of creating enabling environments for civil societies, as discussed in development policies, which refer to the conditions under which civil societies operate. Anheier et al. (2019) noted that civic space encompasses not only the domain in which formal civil society organisations grapple with issues such as registration, but also the space where individuals and informal groups engage in a wide range of activities.

These conceptualisations suggest that civic space is a multidimensional concept encompassing formal and informal spaces for engagement and participation. It encompasses the legal and institutional frameworks that facilitate civic freedoms, as well as the broader social, cultural, and political context in which individuals and groups can exercise their rights and contribute to public life. In essence, the conceptualisations emphasise the essential role of civic space in promoting democracy, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

Contested spaces

A contested space refers to an area or territory that is subject to dispute, conflict, or competition between different groups or entities. It can exist at various levels, including social, political, cultural, and physical (Wardana, 2019). In a social context, contested spaces can arise from competing ideologies, value systems, or interests held by different social groups (Moerman et al., 2023). Culturally contested spaces can occur when different ethnic, religious, or linguistic groups vie for recognition and influence (Kreiss & McGregor, 2023). This may manifest as debates over language policy, religious practices, or the preservation of cultural heritage. These definitions suggest that the concept is complex and multifaceted, and its application depends on an understanding of the underlying dynamics and aspirations of the different groups involved.

In describing contested spaces of CSOs, Civicus (2019) noted that the restrictions CSOs experience vary in terms of targets, severity, and threats, such that targets could be individuals or organisations, while violations could take the form of a breach of the integrity of the individual or organisation. In the case of an organisation, these restrictions could encompass increased competition for

funding, legal restrictions or bureaucratic restrictions, revocation or suspension of existing licenses, internet or communication restrictions or censorship, raiding of offices, confiscation of equipment, public vilification, defamation or surveillance of the CSOs (Civicus, 2019). On the other hand, the individual restriction could be exposure to harassment, intimidation, travel bans or restrictive access to resources, spaces, or institutions, threats or violence, criminal defamation, surveillance, illegal detention, abduction, or kidnapping, violent physical attacks, sexual assaults, and, in the worst scenario, killing of the individual (Civicus, 2019).

Contested spaces for gender-based CSOs span social, cultural, economic, and political boundaries. Determining reasons for contesting gender-based CSO spaces, Großmann et al. (2018) argued that it could result from the marginalisation of gender issues, which may be considered secondary to other social or political issues. It could be due to backlash against gender equality by conservative or patriarchal forces (Edstrom et al., 2023), legal and policy restrictions (Yeshanew, 2016) or online harassment and cyberbullying, stigmatisation, marginalisation, and inadequate funding (Armiwulan, 2021; Annan et al., 2021).

Negotiated spaces

Negotiated spaces for civil society organisations are arenas where non-state actors engage with international governance institutions (Olajide et al., 2022). These spaces can be formal or informal and may be consultations, dialogues, or partnerships between civil society organisations and international organisations or governments. Carneiro and Costa (2022) introduced the concept of negotiated spaces for CSOs in the context of digital contention and activism. Negotiated spaces here refer to the online platforms and social media spaces where CSOs participate in public discourse and engage in mobilisation efforts. These spaces enable the negotiation of power and ideas facilitating dialogue and collaboration among different actors.

Harmonising these concepts: while space for CSO operations may often be threatened or contested by the state due to disagreements or the state's overbearing attitude, with possibilities of restrictions and other forms of violations, how the CSOs navigate the contestation of their spaces is important to the effectiveness of their activities that are tailored towards helping the marginalised and vulnerable groups in society. While negotiations offer pathways for navigating contested spaces, they should remain within boundaries that reflect the established principles of the CSOs, without aligning with the

oppressive system that may put the lives and opportunities of their target populations at risk.

Methodology

The study, carried out in Nigeria, focused on gender-based CSOs. Data were collected using a mixed-methods research approach. Quantitative data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires administered through Google Forms. This approach was necessary to achieve a wider reach among gender-based CSOs across the country and to ensure that the findings could be generalised to the national population of CSOs. The study respondents were sampled using snowball sampling, and the Google Forms were distributed through the WhatsApp groups of CSOs. The study sample was drawn from the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria: South-east, South-south, South-west, North-central, North-east, and North-west to ensure national representation. Ninety-nine gender-based CSOs responded to the questionnaires. Six key informant interviews (KIIs) were also conducted with some gender-based CSOs to validate the findings from the quantitative data collected. SPSS analysed the quantitative data, and the results were presented using charts and percentages. The qualitative data were analysed using thematic content analysis, and the results were presented based on the themes covered in the study.

Findings and discussion

This section discusses the study's findings, which sought to provide insights into whether the civic spaces of gender-based CSOs are contested or negotiated in Nigeria.

The state of civic space for gender-based CSOs: Contested or negotiated?

This section analyses the contestations or negotiations of the spaces in which CSOs operate. In the context of this section, contestation of space refers to the difficulties CSOs encounter in accessing funding for their activities, obtaining information, exercising their legal rights, and utilising public spaces to implement gender-based initiatives. On the other hand, negotiation implies the alternative approaches they employ to navigate the difficulties that hinder their operations.

Findings revealed that while negotiation opportunities exist, several aspects of CSO civic space are seriously contested. Contested spaces limit their effectiveness and hinder their coverage. KIIs with CSOs indicated that gender-based CSOs are threatened, coerced, denied, or forced to align their activities with those of the government or, in worse scenarios, censored or detained, as indicated by a discussant:

Sometimes, they threaten you, especially in terms of these activities around gender-based violence, and then sometimes, they try to bribe you to change the case, so other issues give one concern. (Gender-based CSO, Bauchi State, Nigeria, 2023, April)

Access to funding

Funding was seen as the biggest issue for CSOs. The government closely monitors funding opportunities, and without government support, they must negotiate funding sources. The continuity of CSO activity depends on access to funds. This was particularly seen as crucial, especially for those engaged in rural areas. In the absence of funds, activity is constrained to urban areas, hence, limiting CSO coverage and target groups.

Well, the challenge is funding. So, the only way to overcome the challenges is to look for funding from multiple sources. The challenge is that if you have more funding, you could do more, and after you have finished a programme, you can give them a starter pack. However, sometimes, after you have finished training them with the knowledge you have, giving them the starter pack and follow-up is the problem, but if you have funding after training, and you give them a starter pack, you could follow up. (Gender-based CSO, Kaduna, Nigeria, 2023, April)

In the absence of formal access to funds and the associated difficulty in accessing formal funding, grants from donors become an alternative means of funding. However, a major challenge to benefiting from this option is the guidelines of the funding agencies, which several of the CSOs cannot easily fulfil. This problem particularly affects CSOs that are localised in a particular state and not geographically spread out in different geopolitical zones of the country. The lack of required expertise in writing grant-winning proposals was also mentioned as a limitation that stalls the possibility of accessing grants from donor agencies.

To me, there is no restriction for NGOs that are working; it is just that the guidelines are restricted; if you don't have technical expertise in proposal writing, you can't get a grant. (Gender-based CSO, Ibadan, Nigeria, 2023, April)

While donor support for CSO activities in Nigeria appears to be a means of negotiating the contestation of their access to funding, this may also present situations where CSOs are limited in their ability to work in line with guidelines for programmes supported by donor organisations. Moreover, most donors are likely to fund CSOs that support government programmes, regardless of whether such programmes do not address the aspirations or expectations of those directly affected by them or if these programmes present negative multiplier effects for the target population or their environment. Hence, CSOs that are confrontational in their operations and challenge unfavourable government programmes or policies might not easily access funding from such donor organisations. While violence is not encouraged during protests, negotiating spaces that should be contested might silence the voices of CSOs that could challenge government policies that run contrary to the welfare of specific segments of society. In such cases, oppressive governments might neglect their civic responsibilities, with implications for the marginalised or voiceless groups whose interests the CSOs work to protect.

Access to freedom of information

The study revealed that while some CSOs need to contest their rights to freedom of information due to government agency violations, others can navigate such spaces by negotiating their activities and working in partnership or collaboration with the government. This challenge was highlighted by a CSO representative who expressed distrust in how government agencies hoard information and how they are constantly manipulated to prevent them from expressing their freedom of access to information or expression. This problem is identified as particularly affecting CSOs that operate in the media space and those that are confrontational in their operations.

For me, the way they handle bureaucratic issues is challenging; yet, we work with several of them, including various agencies, such as the parliament. However, they still hoard information. (Gender-based CSO with a focus on media advocacy, Lagos State, Nigeria, 2023, April)

Where government agencies withhold information vital to CSO activities, their coverage and influence will be reduced, with implications for the effectiveness of CSOs. Moreover, the information needed determines the ease or difficulty with which it can be accessed from the relevant government agency in Nigeria. Documents that are readily available in the public domain were said to be easily accessible compared to others, as indicated by a discussant in the interview:

Well, depending on the information you want to access. Just a few days ago, I was talking about how now, if you want to access the government budget, the audit report of the state, and all of that, it is publicly available on their website. but if you want other documents, it may be difficult for you to access them.
(Representative of NNGO, Nigeria, 2023, April)

To circumvent restrictive measures that limit access to information, collaboration between the CSOs and government makes CSO engagement possible, which also ensures their spaces remain open for operations. This was attested to by a respondent during the interview, who noted thus:

I mentioned something called an open government partnership, where government and civil society would co-create actions, for instance, on access to information, all right? Civil society organisations and the government are co-creating activities to keep the government data space open. Nevertheless, again, we have seen some lack of interest in civil society organisations using these platforms to engage with the government, and again, government engagement is very tricky in our sector. Once they see you sitting down with the government, sometimes, people label you as having sold out or as a card-carrying member of the party that is ruling. (Representative of NNGO, Nigeria, 2023, April)

While these collaborations were seen as advantageous by some CSOs, as they make it easy for them to negotiate their spaces, others question the extent of the government's commitment to these collaborations, with the belief that such collaborations might silence dissenting voices that challenge the positions of the government, particularly CSOs that confront government policies and programmes. Smidt (2018) noted that situations where the government co-opts or represses CSOs could threaten democratic processes in society.

Legal rights and access to justice

Several victims of molestations, such as gender-based violence, or those individuals whose rights to services, freedom of expression, and associations are threatened, find relief through the interventions of CSOs. However, while access to social justice and other rights-based interventions depends on the credibility of the legal system and the ease of accessing justice, this space is also contested in Nigeria. Legal contestation is particularly evident among CSOs that the government perceives as challenging its authority, and in the Nigerian context, journalists were reported to be victims in this regard, as indicated:

Access to justice, I think, is shrinking. The kind of things you know that they are doing, you google online, you see journalists arrested, imprisoned or detained for a criminal label for terrorism - can you imagine? People are not happy, and we are not comfortable with them. (Gender-based CSO with focus on media advocacy, Lagos State, Nigeria, 2023, April)

Some CSOs have also found it difficult to access legal expertise, a problem that may limit their effectiveness and scope of operation. A discussant also mentioned this:

There is one commissioner of justice that we have been trying to see; it has been more than 6 months since we have been battling on that issue. (Gender-based CSO, Bauchi State, Nigeria, 2023, April)

In some instances, the judiciary's efforts to support CSOs were challenged, limiting the activities of these organisations. Access to important legal documents, like the recently passed Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, which is supposed to be available in the courts and to the CSOs vis-à-vis the general public, was reported to be very scarce. While some of the CSOs interviewed agreed that the passage of the Act is a welcome development for their target populations, most of them do not have copies of the Act. Similarly, some of the CSOs interviewed indicated that copies of the Act are not readily available in spaces where they are needed. This was viewed as an indication of the limited effort to ensure the implementation of the tenets of the Acts. This was raised by a discussant, who noted:

Now, this law has been passed. The next challenge is the judiciary. Why is it that they cannot make copies of the law available to every operator in the judiciary? When we were at the court the other day for a victim, the judge and the magistrate who were sitting on the matter told our lawyer to refer to the violence against a person's law. However, the magistrate sitting on the case had no information or access to the law then, so we quickly gave him a copy. So it was that bad. (Gender-based CSO, Delta State, Nigeria, 2023, March)

Situations where those who should interpret the Act lack copies of the very Act they are meant to interpret cast doubt on the legal system's effectiveness in ensuring the effective operations of gender-based CSOs, particularly where the rights of the marginalised are concerned.

Use of public spaces for gender-based programme implementation

Public spaces for engagement are crucial for the activities of CSOs, whether they are government-owned or community-owned. While this space may not be considered in conventional spaces for contestation, it is important to note that the use of public spaces for their activities is becoming a concern for CSOs. This is because their activities may require physical space for their operations, such as halls or open fields which are under the purview of the government or the local communities in which they operate at specific points in time. The study's findings reveal that this space is seriously contested, either by the government, a government agency, or politically affiliated individuals, such as the spouses of political officeholders. These contestations were also attributed either to competitive reasons or a case of superior authority, which prevented CSOs from operating contrary to their expectations. The experience of a CSO in this regard is presented:

The only issue I had was that I wrote a letter and got approval from the state ministry, the ministry of education, and all the programmes in a school, only for me to see the first lady of the state having the same programme simultaneously. When I approached the organisers for us to do it together, they refused, so I now kind of allow them to hold their own at the same time as my own, which my own was like a month before; their own seemed mandatory because it was later that I was going to hold the programme in the state that triggered them to do it. (Gender-based CSOs, Kaduna State, Nigeria, 2023, April)

Another dimension to this problem is community leaders depriving CSOs space to operate, either on cultural or religious grounds, despite the benefits such activities could have on their community members. This was also mentioned by a discussant as an infringement on their civic space.

There are some communities; for instance, I have gone seeking opportunities for advocacy more than 25 times in the community on the issue of gender-based violence, but the district head rejected it. He openly rejected my advocacy there. The community has such problems. (Gender-based CSO, Bauchi State, Nigeria, 2023, April)

Where legal approval to use public spaces under the government's purview is obtained through lengthy bureaucratic processes, prolonged delays in granting such approvals pose a challenge, affecting CSO performance. Although such protocols are justifiable, especially where schools are involved (they ensure the rights of students are protected since they are minors who are not in a position to consent to information retrieval from them), undue delay in approvals that do not threaten the well-being of the target population is tantamount to contestation of such spaces. The gender-based CSOs also incur additional costs to negotiate such contested spaces, further increasing the financial burden of running their associations. Where such bottlenecks exist, the likelihood is that CSOs would prefer to work in terrains they can easily navigate, and in the process exclude certain segments of the marginalised who may be in dire need of their services. The following experience of one of the CSOs confirms this:

Well, I will say that we experience restrictions from government officials, especially concerning schools. In one of the states where we had to work, it took us 6 months to get approval from the local government chairman or the SUBEB people to attend this school. In another state, we had to be looking for who knows the chairman, and then we had to send money, transport money, phone money, all those kinds of things, so we do have some restrictions at times. (Gender-based CSO, Ibadan, Nigeria, 2023, April)

Violations of gender-based CSO civil rights

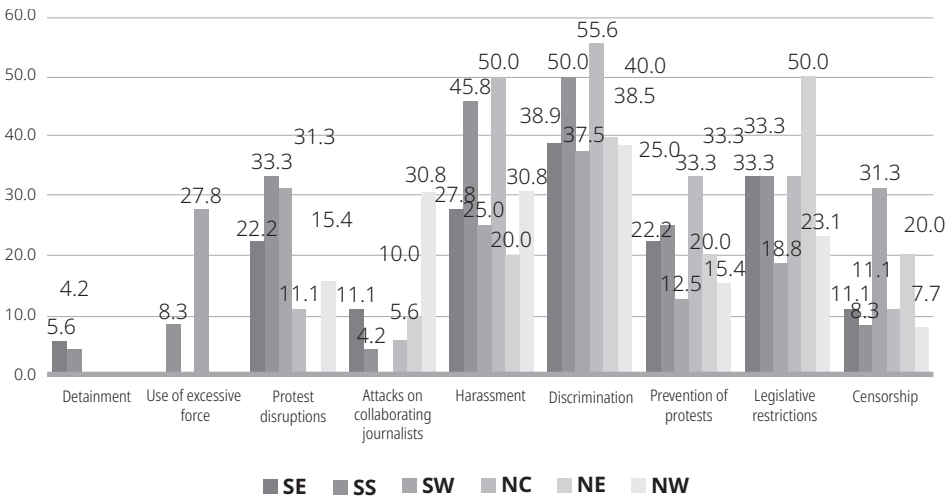
When the operating spaces of gender-based CSOs are contested, their rights are often violated. This is because such CSOs are perceived to hold dissenting views about the government's policies and operations. An analysis of the types of violations they experience showed that the violations range from detainment, use of excessive force, protest disruptions, attacks on collaborating journalists, harassment, discrimination, prevention of protests, and legislative restrictions to censorship. However, these violations are experienced to varying degrees depending on the activities of the CSOs, that is, whether they are confrontational in their approaches, based on the type of civic activities they engage in, or when they work contrary to the popular expectations of the government.

Violations of civil societies, yes. I have told you they can bring in new regulations or new legislation, you know, to constrain the activities of civil society, like the NGO or civil society bill that civil society campaigns very seriously against. (Gender-based CSO with a focus on media advocacy, Lagos State, Nigeria, 2023, April)

The study revealed that harassment, discrimination, and legislative restrictions are the most common types of violations of the rights of gender-based CSOs in Nigeria. Analysis of these violations across geopolitical zones revealed that the proportions of CSOs experiencing discrimination are higher in the North-central (55.6%), South-south (50%), and North-east (40%) regions (Figure 1). The percentage of gender-based CSOs that experience harassment is higher in the North-central (50%), South-south (45.8%) and South-west (30.8%) regions (Figure 1). However, the proportions that suffer legislative restrictions are higher in the North-east (50%) compared to other regions (Figure 1). Censorship was more prevalent in the South-west (31.3%), protest disruptions in the South-south (33.3%), and the use of excessive force in the North-central (27.8%) (Figure 1).

Where these violations persist, they hinder the CSOs from engaging in their civic responsibilities towards the marginalised and downtrodden in society. Thus, their rights to association and expression are infringed upon in the process.

Figure 1 Violations of the civic rights of CSOs



Source: Author's field survey (2023)

Strategies for negotiating contested spaces

Where CSO spaces are contested, circumventing such spaces is often possible. To keep abreast and ensure their CSOs are not phased out, some CSOs in Nigeria negotiate their spaces rather than contest for their survival. The study identified several ways of negotiating their contested civic spaces, which are highlighted.

Funding

Although seen as a highly contested space for some CSOs due to funding sources and the challenge of accessing funds for their activities, several alternatives are available.

We engage extensively in local resource mobilisation for our work, and we have been privileged to have discerning people supporting our efforts. Our board includes philanthropists. So, we use the board's support for most of our work. Then, the other source of our income is our own; we are a membership organisation. So, members do pay their dues, yes. So those are the ways we source our funds locally. We are not a government-funded gender-based CSO. (Gender-based CSO, Delta State, Nigeria, 2023, March)

Another way CSOs navigate the challenge of limited funds is by engaging the services of trained and co-opted volunteers. These individuals may not have any affiliations with other CSOs or those who work with other CSOs with similar interests.

I have volunteers, and then we build our capacity. Then, there is the National NGO, and NNGO is a national body. They do training; at least I have attended 2 or 3 training sessions. They build our capacity, and we work together when we call for support staff from another sister NGO. Well, that is how I work, but you know, regular funding is needed to pay salaries because there is no funding. I only have one programme; let me say I only have two paid staff, one admin person and one programmer. So, mostly the people I use are volunteers who are either in other NGOs, or we collaborate when we want to do capacity building, or we want to do sensitisation and advocacy work. (Gender-based CSO, Ibadan, Nigeria, 2023, April)

Collaboration with other CSOs

Some CSOs navigate their contested spaces by collaborating with counterparts who engage in related activities, a practice that is becoming popular in Nigeria. Such collaboration makes it easy for CSOs to associate and expand their networks and explore expertise that may not be within their immediate organisation or community of outreach. Umbrella bodies of CSOs were reported to be effective in providing the support needed to explore emerging opportunities that would have been individually difficult, and in some instances, providing the necessary legitimacy, especially for small CSOs. This approach was reported to be useful for gender-based CSOs as it provides the necessary buffer to negotiate and circumvent challenges stemming from contestations of their spaces. The gains of such collaborations were shared by a respondent from Bauchi, who stated thus:

I find it easy because we have FIDA, the Federation of Women Lawyers. We are in the same group; we know each other; we have a gender person, civil defence, and human rights. There is a committee, a management committee, that is formed from different organisations, about 20 of us. In most cases around gender in Bauchi State, it has been easier with the help of that committee. Most of the time, handling cases of gender issues is no longer difficult, except if you do not go to the right channel, but once you follow the right procedures, you have it. (Gender-based CSO, Bauchi State, Nigeria, 2023, April)

A CSO in Delta State shared a similar view, noting that due to collaborations with several CSOs and governmental agencies directly concerned with the challenges, it is becoming easier for them to navigate their previously contested spaces. Technological advancements, particularly the use of social media platforms like WhatsApp, have contributed significantly to the ease of navigating their spaces. They were able to reach a wide range of CSOs with similar interests, especially through WhatsApp groups, with many CSOs spread across the country's six geopolitical zones. This study benefited from such collaboration because, as indicated earlier, the gender-based CSOs that were interviewed and those who responded to the questionnaires were accessed through WhatsApp groups of several CSOs.

Faith (2022) noted that technological advancements have both positive and negative implications for these organisations. On the one hand, digital platforms offer new avenues for advocacy and networking, thereby expanding their reach and impact. On the other hand, this has increased the avenues for online harassment, surveillance, and censorship faced by gender-based CSOs.

Taking advantage of the institutional provisions of the government

The provisions of government laws and procedures have also made it easy for CSOs to negotiate spaces that were previously contested in Nigeria. Although this does not necessarily mean that the contestations are over, there are increased opportunities for accessing these spaces due to the passage of certain laws and procedures for engagement by relevant government institutions. Two examples are the Freedom of Information Act, passed into law on 28 May 2011, and the ease of bottlenecks associated with registering CSOs and other businesses in Nigeria. The experiences of the CSOs are revealed by the discussants:

... but again, most organisations now have freedom of expression domesticated, so with the use of freedom of expression, we anticipate that access to information will become more and more open, but for budget or procurement-related data, I think we are seeing progress in that area. However, for another aspect of information, I am not immediately sure of how to open that. However, many states now have freedom of information laws in place. Civil society organisations and citizens must now try to see how easy it is for them to access government information. (Representative of NNGO, Nigeria, 2023, April)

Conclusion and recommendations

The civic space for the operations of gender-based CSOs is crucial for achieving a system where good governance, the rule of law, and inclusive citizen participation are sustained and for ensuring a society where the marginalised and those who protect their rights and socio-economic well-being can operate freely. The study found that the civic space for the operations of gender-based CSOs in Nigeria is contested, as evidenced by their difficulties in accessing funding, barriers to accessing important information, the constrained use of public infrastructures or spaces for their activities, and access to justice. Attempts by CSOs to contest their spaces led to instances where their rights were violated, including cases of harassment, discrimination, detention, disruptions of protests against unfavourable government policies, legislative restrictions, censorship and others.

However, spaces for negotiation also abound, on which several CSOs capitalise to ensure that their operations are freely and effectively carried out. In this regard, CSOs exploit grant opportunities and use volunteers to navigate their funding challenges. They also collaborate with other CSOs with similar interests as a way of negotiating their spaces. Nevertheless, drawing a line between the negotiation of spaces that does not malign the integrity of the CSOs while exploring negotiation approaches in alliance with the government is crucial. This is because while overcoming the contestation of their spaces is important for the successful implementation of their programmes, the CSOs must ensure that the interests of those for whom they advocate are prioritised. Social media platforms hold huge potential for driving social change in how CSOs interact and navigate the contestation of their spaces for effective community outreach in Nigeria, which should be thoroughly explored for developmental purposes.

Hence, the following recommendations are proffered:

- Barriers that expose the civic space of gender-based CSOs to contestation need to be removed, as this will help to expand their spaces of operation, which are geared towards addressing the social, cultural, economic, and political biases faced by the marginalised in society.
- In negotiating their civic space, gender-based CSOs need to ensure that their tenets are not compromised, as this could have far-reaching implications for the well-being of their target populations.
- Social media platforms, especially those for CSOs, are crucial for changing the narrative of contested spaces that limit CSO activities, and all concerned stakeholders should explore this to strengthen the activities of CSOs in Nigeria and other places with similar challenges.

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