



## THE ROLE OF NIGERIA POLICE IN UPHOLDING HUMAN RIGHTS: AN ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES AND POLICY EFFECTIVENESS

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### Abstract

*This work examines the institutional practices, policies, and historical context shaping the Nigeria Police Force's role in upholding human rights amidst pervasive challenges. Despite recent legislative reforms, including the Police Act 2020 and the Anti-Torture Act 2019, systemic issues such as corruption, impunity, resource constraints, societal norms, and political interference continue to undermine efforts at accountability, transparency, and human rights compliance. The analysis highlights persistent abuses, including extrajudicial killings, illegal detention, and excessive use of force, which are reinforced by entrenched institutional cultures and weak oversight mechanisms. While reforms have introduced new oversight bodies and community policing strategies aimed at fostering trust and accountability, their effective implementation remains hindered by deep-rooted structural and cultural barriers. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that strengthens institutional independence, enhances police training, allocates adequate resources, promotes cultural change, and ensures strict enforcement of existing laws. Only through sustained systemic reforms and political will can Nigeria realize a police force that genuinely respects and protects citizens' human rights and dignity.*

**Key words:** Police Reform, Human Rights, Nigeria, Accountability, Police Practices, Impunity.

### Introduction

The Nigeria Police Force has historically played a central role in maintaining law and order within the country, yet it remains deeply entangled in issues of human rights violations, misconduct, and systemic inefficiencies. As Nigeria continues to grapple with widespread insecurity, corruption, and impunity, the question of how effectively its police uphold human rights has garnered increasing attention from academics, policymakers, and civil society organizations. The importance of examining the institutional practices and policies that shape police conduct cannot

be overstated, especially given the critical need for police reforms to foster accountability, transparency, and respect for human dignity.

Over the years, Nigeria has been plagued by reports of extrajudicial killings, torture, unlawful detention, and abuse by police officers. The Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that police misconduct remains one of the most pressing human rights challenges in Nigeria, with allegations of abuse often going unpunished due to weak oversight and systemic corruption.<sup>1</sup> Such practices undermine public trust and hinder effective law enforcement, exacerbating insecurity and violence across various regions. Recognizing these issues, recent legislative and policy reforms have aimed to address these shortcomings and realign police practices with international human rights standards. Notably, the Police Act of 2020 was enacted to overhaul the Nigeria Police Service's regulatory framework, establishing new oversight mechanisms, discipline procedures, and community policing initiatives.<sup>2</sup> However, the extent to which these reforms have translated into tangible improvements remains a subject of debate and scrutiny.

Institutional practices within the Nigeria Police are central to understanding the persistence of human rights violations. Historically, the police have operated with limited oversight, often shielded from accountability by entrenched political interests and a culture of impunity. Internal disciplinary mechanisms have frequently been ineffective, with cases of misconduct either ignored or inadequately prosecuted. Conversely, recent reforms have introduced new oversight bodies such as the Police Service Commission and the Civilian Review Boards, intended to monitor police conduct, investigate complaints, and enforce disciplinary actions.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, challenges such as resource constraints, lack of independence, and political interference continue to undermine their effectiveness. Moreover, the practice of community policing aimed at building trust and cooperation between police and local communities has been promoted as a vital strategy for respecting human rights and reducing violence, but its implementation remains inconsistent across Nigeria's diverse regions.

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Nigeria: Police Abuse Surge Amid Insecurity*. (HRW, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Nigeria Police Force. *Police Act 2020*. (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International. *Nigeria: Police Violence and Human Rights Violations*. (Amnesty International, 2022).

Policy frameworks are equally crucial in shaping police conduct and human rights protection. In addition to the Police Act of 2020, Nigeria has enacted supplementary legislation such as the Anti-Torture Act 2017, and various human rights policies that seek to curb abuses and promote accountability. While these laws signal a positive shift towards aligning domestic practices with international standards, their implementation faces significant hurdles. Factors such as lack of political will, insufficient training, and inadequate resources hinder the enforcement of these policies.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the longstanding culture of silence surrounding police misconduct complicates efforts to hold officers accountable and foster a human rights-respecting police force. This paper examines the institutional practices and policies shaping the Nigeria Police's role in upholding human rights. It investigates whether recent reforms have been effective in transforming police conduct, explores the challenges that impede their implementation, and provides recommendations for strengthening police accountability and respect for human rights. By analyzing institutional structures, legislative frameworks, and empirical evidence, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on police reform in Nigeria, emphasizing the importance of a rights-based approach to policing that safeguards the dignity and safety of all citizens.

### **Contextual Framework**

This section of the work situates the evolution of policing in Nigeria within a broader socio-historical and legal context, examining how historical legacies, institutional practices, and contemporary reforms influence the police force's role in upholding human rights. By tracing the trajectory from indigenous community-based systems through colonial imposition to modern reforms, the analysis highlights the persistent tensions between policing as a tool for social control and a protector of citizens' rights. It critically assesses Nigeria's alignment with international human rights standards articulated through global treaties and conventions and the extent to which these principles are embedded in national laws and practices. Through this lens, the work explores the gaps between legal frameworks and actual police conduct, emphasizing the ongoing challenges of accountability, resource constraints, and cultural change necessary for transforming Nigeria's policing institutions into truly rights-respecting agencies.

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<sup>4</sup> Okechukwu, C, and Chijioke Nwachukwu. "Implementation Challenges of Police Reforms in Nigeria." *Journal of Human Rights and Policing*, (2021), vol. (4), no. (2), 45–62.

## Historical overview of policing in Nigeria

Policing in Nigeria has evolved significantly from the pre-colonial era through colonial rule to the present democratic dispensation. The roots of Nigerian policing can be traced back to indigenous community-based systems, where traditional leaders and local institutions-maintained order within their communities. These informal systems prioritized conflict resolution, social cohesion, and customary norms, often relying on community elders and traditional rulers.<sup>5</sup> Such structures were rooted in local customs, and their authority was derived from cultural legitimacy rather than formal law enforcement.

The colonial period marked a pivotal turn in Nigeria's policing history. The British colonial administration established formal police institutions primarily aimed at maintaining colonial order and suppressing resistance. The Nigeria Police Force was officially founded in 1861 during the British rule, modeled after the British police system, emphasizing control, surveillance, and suppression of dissent.<sup>6</sup> The colonial police were notorious for their oppressive tactics, including brutal suppression of anti-colonial protests, arbitrary arrests, and human rights abuses. Their role was largely reactive, with limited engagement in community development or service functions. The colonial police also operated under a strict hierarchy, with officers wielding significant authority, often with little accountability.

Post-independence Nigeria in 1960 did not drastically alter the structure or function of the police force. Instead, the police remained a centralized institution with limited accountability, often used as an instrument of political repression. Military regimes further entrenched repressive practices, including unlawful detention, torture, and extrajudicial killings, which persist in some respects today.<sup>7</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, Nigeria experienced several coups and political upheavals, with police forces frequently implicated in political violence and suppression of dissent.

The 1990s and early 2000s marked a period of increased attention to police reform, driven by human rights organizations and civil society advocating for accountability and community-oriented policing. Despite some reforms, the Nigeria Police continued to grapple with systemic

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<sup>5</sup> Akinyele, O. A. "Traditional Justice and Policing in Nigeria: A Historical Perspective." *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies*, (2020), vol. (14), no. (2), 122–139.

<sup>6</sup> Obi, N. "From Colonial Policing to Democratic Reforms: The Nigeria Police in Historical Perspective." *Journal of African History*, vol. (2019), (61), no. (3), 453–473.

<sup>7</sup> Omoniyi, T. "The Evolution of Police Repression in Nigeria." *African Security Review*, (2022), vol. (31), no. (1), 11–25.

issues such as corruption, impunity, arbitrary use of force, and inadequate training. The notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), established in the early 1990s, epitomized the abuses associated with policing, including torture, extortion, and extrajudicial killings, which culminated in widespread protests in 2020 under the #EndSARS movement.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, Nigeria has embarked on a series of reforms aimed at transforming its police institutions. The Police Act of 2020, for example, seeks to overhaul the legal framework governing police conduct and establish new oversight mechanisms (Nigeria Police Force, 2020). However, challenges such as entrenched corruption, political interference, lack of resources, and a culture of impunity continue to hinder meaningful change. The historical trajectory of Nigerian policing reveals a persistent tension between the institution's role as a protector of citizens' rights and its use as an instrument of repression, highlighting the urgent need for systemic reforms aligned with human rights standards.

### **Overview of human rights standards relevant to police conduct**

The conduct of police forces worldwide, including Nigeria's, is governed by a set of universal human rights principles articulated through international treaties, conventions, and standards. These standards serve as benchmarks for lawful, ethical, and humane policing and are essential in shaping national policies and practices. The core human rights standards relevant to police conduct emphasize the rights to life, liberty, security, dignity, and fair treatment under the law.<sup>9</sup>

At the international level, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948) provides a foundational framework, asserting that everyone has the right to life, freedom from torture and cruel treatment, and equal protection under the law. Building upon this, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1966) explicitly prohibits torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.<sup>10</sup> Article 7 of the ICCPR is particularly relevant for policing, emphasizing that no one shall be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, including during arrest, detention, or interrogation.

The United Nations has also established specific standards and guidelines to regulate police conduct. The Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials

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<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Nigeria: End Police Violence*. (HRW, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Human Rights Committee. General Comment No. 36: Right to Life. CCPR/C/GC/36, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

(1990) emphasizes that law enforcement officials shall, as far as possible, apply non-violent means before resorting to force, which must be proportionate and necessary. The principles specify that firearms should only be used when strictly unavoidable to protect life, and even then, with strict accountability.<sup>11</sup> The Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials underscores the duty of police officers to respect human rights, uphold the dignity of persons, and act impartially.

In Nigeria, the Constitution of the Federal Republic, 1999 (as amended) guarantees fundamental human rights, including the right to life, personal liberty, and dignity. Specifically, Section 33 of the Nigerian Constitution provides that every individual has the right to life, while Section 34 protects personal dignity and prohibits inhumane treatment. However, the challenge lies in translating these constitutional rights into practice within police conduct, especially amid reports of abuse and extrajudicial killings.

Nationally, Nigeria has enacted laws such as the Anti-Torture Act (2017), which criminalizes torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement agencies and establishes penalties for offenders. The Act aligns with international standards and represents Nigeria's commitment to ending torture and abuse. Nonetheless, enforcement remains problematic, with many police officers unaware of or unwilling to adhere to these legal provisions.<sup>12</sup>

The importance of aligning national policing standards with international human rights frameworks cannot be overstated. Effective police accountability mechanisms, proper training, and a culture of respect for human rights are integral to ensuring that police practices conform to these standards. Without a clear commitment to human rights principles, Nigeria's police force risks perpetuating a cycle of abuse and impunity, undermining the rule of law and citizens' trust in law enforcement institutions.

### **International and National Legal Frameworks**

The Nigeria police force operates within a complex legal environment shaped by both international standards and Nigeria's own constitutional and legislative frameworks. These legal structures are designed to safeguard human rights, guide police conduct, and establish accountability mechanisms. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks in practice remains a subject of ongoing debate, given widespread reports of human rights violations by police officers.

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<sup>11</sup> United Nations. Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials. (UN, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Nigeria: End Police Torture*. (HRW, 2022).

## International Legal Frameworks

At the international level, the primary standards governing police conduct and human rights are enshrined in treaties, conventions, and principles adopted by the United Nations and other international bodies. The cornerstone is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948), which articulates fundamental rights such as the right to life, liberty, security, and dignity rights that police are constitutionally and ethically obliged to uphold (United Nations, 1948). Building on this, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1966) explicitly prohibits torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment especially relevant to police interactions during arrests, detention, and interrogations.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials (1990) provide specific guidelines to ensure that law enforcement officials apply force only when strictly necessary, with proportionality and accountability. These principles emphasize non-violent means as the first response and require that firearms be used solely to protect life.<sup>14</sup> The Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials also underscores the obligation of police to respect human rights, act impartially, and uphold the dignity of individuals.<sup>15</sup>

International standards serve as benchmarks against which Nigeria's domestic laws and practices are measured. They also influence the development of national policies and training programs aimed at aligning police conduct with global human rights norms. However, adherence to these standards is often inconsistent, and violations persist, partly due to gaps in implementation and enforcement.

## National Legal Frameworks

Nigeria's domestic legal environment provides the primary legal protections for human rights within the country. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), guarantees fundamental rights, including the right to life (Section 33), personal liberty (Section 35), and dignity of the human person (Section 34).<sup>16</sup> These rights form the constitutional backbone for human rights protections and are intended to limit police abuse and impunity. The

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<sup>13</sup> United Nations Human Rights Committee. General Comment No. 36: Right to Life. CCPR/C/GC/36, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations. *Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials*. (UN, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> United Nations. *Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials*. (UN, 1979).

<sup>16</sup> Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. 1999. (as amended).

Constitution also establishes the judiciary's role in safeguarding these rights, including through the power of courts to hear cases of violations.

In addition to the Constitution, Nigeria has enacted specific legislations aimed at regulating police conduct and prohibiting abuses. Most notably, the Anti-Torture Act (2017) criminalizes acts of torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officials, establishing penalties and emphasizing the prohibition of torture in line with international standards.<sup>17</sup> The Police Act of 2020 also seeks to reform the police institution by establishing clearer disciplinary procedures, oversight bodies, and community policing strategies aimed at respecting human rights.<sup>18</sup>

However, despite these legal provisions, enforcement remains weak. Reports of extrajudicial killings, torture, illegal detention, and abuse by police officers continue to be widespread, indicating a disconnect between the legal frameworks and actual practice. Critics argue that a lack of political will, insufficient training, and resource constraints hinder the effective implementation of human rights laws.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, some police officers remain unaware of their legal obligations or operate with a culture of impunity that discourages accountability.

In summary, Nigeria's international and national legal frameworks provide a comprehensive set of standards and protections aimed at safeguarding human rights and guiding police conduct. While Nigeria has made legal commitments aligned with global standards, the persistent gap between law and practice highlights the need for stronger enforcement, institutional reforms, and a culture of accountability. Ensuring that police adhere to these frameworks is essential for protecting citizens' rights and building public trust in law enforcement agencies.

### **Institutional Structure of the Nigeria Police Force**

This analysis explores the organizational structure, mandates, oversight mechanisms, and recent reforms of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), highlighting the complexities and challenges inherent in Nigeria's law enforcement system. The NPF, as the primary agency responsible for maintaining law and order, operates within a hierarchical, paramilitary framework that is governed by statutes such as the Police Act 2020 and Nigeria's Constitution. These legal frameworks delineate its core functions, organizational hierarchy, and oversight institutions, including the Police Service

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<sup>17</sup> Okechukwu, C, and Nwachukwu, C. "Implementation Challenges of Police Reforms in Nigeria." *Journal of Human Rights and Policing*, (2021), vol. (4), no. (2), 45–62.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Nigeria: End Police Torture*. (HRW, 2022).

Commission and independent oversight bodies at the state level. Recent reforms, particularly the enactment of the Police Act 2020, aim to modernize the force by promoting transparency, accountability, community engagement, and human rights standards. However, systemic issues such as resource limitations, political interference, and entrenched impunity continue to pose significant obstacles to effective policing and oversight. This work critically examines the structure, mandates, key oversight institutions, and the impact of recent reforms, emphasizing the need for robust implementation and societal support to realize the intended improvements in Nigeria's policing system.

### **Organization and mandates of the Nigeria Police Force**

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) is the principal law enforcement agency in Nigeria, tasked with maintaining law and order, preventing and investigating crimes, and upholding the rule of law. Its organization is hierarchical, with a centralized command structure led by the Inspector-General of Police (IGP), who reports directly to the President of Nigeria, reflecting the force's subservience to political authority.<sup>20</sup> The force is divided into various departments and units, each specializing in different aspects of policing, such as Criminal Investigation Departments (CID), Traffic Management, and Special Units like the SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad).

The core mandates of the NPF are enshrined in the Police Act of 2020 and are reinforced by Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended). These mandates include crime prevention, investigation, apprehension of offenders, and the enforcement of laws. The force is also responsible for maintaining peace during elections, protecting critical infrastructure, and collaborating with other security agencies to address threats like terrorism, insurgency, and organized crime. However, the scope of these mandates often overlaps with other agencies, leading to issues of jurisdiction and accountability.

The organization of the Nigeria Police Force reflects a traditional paramilitary structure, with a hierarchical chain of command and a cadre of officers trained in law enforcement. The force's leadership includes the IGP, Deputy Inspectors-General, Commissioners of Police, and various divisional officers. Despite its extensive organizational framework, the force suffers from systemic

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<sup>20</sup> Nigeria Police Act 2020.

challenges such as inadequate training, corruption, and lack of community engagement, impacting its efficiency and public perception.<sup>21</sup>

### **Key institutions responsible for oversight and accountability**

Oversight and accountability within the Nigeria Police Force are managed through a combination of statutory bodies and independent agencies. The most prominent among these is the Police Service Commission (PSC), established under the Police Act of 2020, which is tasked with appointment, discipline, and promotion of police officers. The PSC is intended to insulate police administration from political interference, ensuring that personnel decisions are merit-based and transparent.<sup>22</sup>

Another vital oversight body is the Independent Policing Oversight Bodies (IPOBs) established at the state level, designed to monitor police conduct and address complaints from the public. These bodies aim to promote citizen engagement, investigate abuses, and recommend disciplinary actions. For example, the State Police Complaint Authorities are mandated to receive and investigate complaints of police misconduct, thereby serving as crucial mechanisms for civilian oversight.<sup>23</sup>

However, the effectiveness of these institutions is often questioned. Reports indicate that the PSC and IPOBs face persistent challenges, such as limited funding, lack of independence, and interference from political actors. These issues hinder their capacity to hold police officers accountable effectively. According to the Civil Society Legislative and Advocacy Centre (CISLAC), despite legislative frameworks, enforcement of disciplinary measures remains weak, and impunity for police misconduct continues to undermine public trust.<sup>24</sup>

### **Recent reforms and the Nigeria Police Act 2020**

The most significant recent reform in Nigeria's policing landscape is the enactment of the Police Act 2020, which replaced the 1990 legislation. This new law was designed to overhaul the legal and operational framework of the Nigeria Police Force, with particular emphasis on enhancing professionalism, transparency, and accountability. Section 4 of the Act explicitly states that the

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<sup>21</sup>Dambazau, Abdulrahman. *Criminal Justice in Nigeria*. Routledge, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Nigeria Police Act 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. n. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Okechukwu, C, and Nwachukwu, C. "Implementation Challenges of Police Reforms in Nigeria." *Journal of Human Rights and Policing*, (2021), vol. (4), no. (2), 45–62.

primary functions of the police include maintaining law and order, preventing and investigating crimes, and protecting citizens' rights, aligning with modern policing standards.

A critical feature of the Act is the establishment of an Independent Police Complaint Mechanism, aimed at providing citizens with a credible avenue to report misconduct. Section 24 establishes the Police Complaint and Intelligence Monitoring Unit, which is tasked with receiving complaints from the public, investigating allegations of misconduct, and making disciplinary recommendations. This provision directly supports the argument that the Act seeks to create mechanisms for citizen complaints that are independent of police influence, thereby promoting transparency and accountability.

The Act also introduces clearer disciplinary procedures, emphasizing the need for accountability at all levels of police conduct. Section 23 stipulates those disciplinary measures, including suspension and dismissal, must follow due process, with the Police Service Commission empowered to oversee these processes. This institutionalizes oversight and aims to curb corruption and abuse within the force, addressing longstanding concerns about impunity.

Furthermore, the Act delineates community policing roles, aiming to foster closer collaboration between police officers and local communities. Section 10 emphasizes the importance of community engagement in crime prevention and encourages police officers to work in partnership with citizens, thereby promoting trust and social cohesion. This provision supports the intended shift toward community-oriented policing. The Act also underscores the importance of training police officers in human rights standards. Section 12 mandates that officers undergo training that includes respect for human rights, use of force policies, and community engagement strategies. This provision aligns with international norms and aims to reform police conduct fundamentally. Despite these progressive provisions, critics highlight that implementation remains a challenge. As noted by Human Rights Watch, resource constraints, political interference, and entrenched cultures of impunity continue to hinder the effective realization of these reforms.<sup>25</sup> The success of the Police Act 2020 ultimately depends on political will and institutional commitment, as supported by Section 7, which emphasizes the role of the Police Service Commission in ensuring effective oversight and discipline.

In conclusion, the Police Act 2020 contains key sections that reinforce the reform objectives of transparency, accountability, community engagement, and human rights training. However, as the

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<sup>25</sup> Human Rights Watch. "*Nigeria: Reform Police or Face Further Violations.*" (HRW, 2022),

law's provisions require robust enforcement and societal commitment, their full realization remains contingent on addressing systemic challenges, underscoring the importance of political will and adequate resourcing.

## **Institutional Practices and Human Rights Compliance**

This section of the work examines the multifaceted role of Nigeria Police practices in upholding human rights, focusing on critical areas such as arrest, detention, and the use of force; the prevalence of misconduct and systemic patterns of abuse; the potential of community policing initiatives to promote human rights; and the effectiveness of internal disciplinary mechanisms. Despite recent legislative reforms, notably the Police Act 2020, significant challenges remain in translating policy into practice, with reports of excessive use of force, unlawful detention, and impunity continuing to undermine public trust and violate citizens' rights. This work explores how institutional practices, accountability frameworks, and community engagement strategies intersect, highlighting both progress and persistent deficiencies that impact human rights protection within Nigeria's policing system. Ultimately, it underscores the urgent need for strengthened oversight, cultural reforms within the police, and genuine commitment to human rights principles to foster a more accountable and rights-respecting law enforcement environment.

### **Policing practices related to arrest, detention, and use of force**

Policing practices in Nigeria, particularly regarding arrest, detention, and use of force, remain a central concern in assessing the police's role in upholding human rights. Despite legal reforms such as the Police Act 2020, which emphasizes respect for human rights, enforcement on the ground often falls short. Nigeria Police have historically employed excessive and sometimes lethal force during arrests, often without adequate justification or adherence to established protocols. For example, Amnesty International's 2021 report highlights that security forces frequently use live ammunition against suspects and protesters, resulting in unnecessary deaths and injuries.<sup>26</sup> Such practices violate international standards, including the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, which stipulate that force must be a last resort and proportionate to the threat faced.

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<sup>26</sup> Amnesty International. Nigeria, *Security Forces Use Excessive Force Against Protesters*. (Amnesty International, 2021).

Detention practices also raise significant human rights concerns. Reports indicate that detainees are often held unlawfully for prolonged periods without trial, with some subjected to torture or ill-treatment. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) documented cases where detainees experienced beatings, electric shocks, and deprivation of basic needs, often justified by police officers as necessary for obtaining confessions.<sup>27</sup> The improper use of detention, especially under the guise of "preventive detention," contravenes Nigeria's obligations under international human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Nigeria ratified in 1993. While the Police Act 2020 introduces provisions for lawful detention and oversight, implementation remains inconsistent, with reports of routine violations persisting at the operational level.<sup>28</sup>

Regarding the use of force, the recent reforms have sought to restrict the circumstances under which police officers can employ lethal force. Section 12 of the Police Act emphasizes training in the use of force and mandates that firearms should only be used when necessary, proportionate, and as a last resort. Nonetheless, enforcement of these guidelines is weak, and police officers often justify the use of excessive force during operations, especially in response to protests or suspected criminal activity. The pattern of impunity for such violations perpetuates a cycle of abuse and undermines public trust in law enforcement agencies.

### **Cases of police misconduct and patterns of abuse**

Instances of police misconduct and systemic patterns of abuse have long tarnished the reputation of the Nigeria Police Force. Cases range from extrajudicial killings and torture to extortion and harassment. The notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), in particular, has been implicated in numerous abuses, including torture, illegal detention, and extrajudicial executions. Human Rights Watch's 2020 report documented cases where SARS officers abducted individuals, subjected them to severe physical abuse, and then released or killed them without due process (Human Rights Watch 2020). These abuses are often carried out with impunity, as officers involved are rarely held accountable, fostering a culture of impunity and widespread public distrust.

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<sup>27</sup> National Human Rights Commission. *Annual Report on Police Abuses*. (NHRC, 2022).

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Nigeria, End Abuses by Police and Military*. (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Patterns of abuse are often linked to corruption and lack of accountability within the force. Dambazau notes that many police officers see misconduct as a means of personal enrichment or a way to assert authority, especially in environments where oversight mechanisms are weak.<sup>29</sup> The End SARS protests of 2017-2020 exemplified how ingrained abuse and misconduct are, with widespread reports of torture, extortion, and illegal detention. The government's response to these protests included promises of reform, yet many victims and activists argue that systemic change remains elusive.

The recurring nature of police misconduct highlights the need for robust disciplinary mechanisms and effective oversight. Despite the establishment of bodies like the Police Service Commission and State Police Complaint Authorities, their capacity to investigate and discipline officers remains limited. Many cases are either unresolved or dismissed, reinforcing a cycle of impunity. Without significant structural reforms and political will, patterns of abuse are likely to persist, further endangering human rights and eroding public confidence in policing institutions.

### **Community policing initiatives and their role in human rights promotion**

Community policing has been championed as a strategy to improve police-community relations and promote human rights in Nigeria. The Police Act 2020 emphasizes community engagement and partnership as vital components of modern policing. The goal is to foster trust, reduce violence, and enhance human rights protections by involving local residents in crime prevention and policing activities.<sup>30</sup> In practice, some community policing initiatives have shown promise. For example, in Lagos and Kaduna, neighbourhood policing programs have been established to create dialogue between police officers and community members, aiming to address local concerns collaboratively.

These initiatives are rooted in the understanding that police cannot effectively uphold human rights without community trust and cooperation. Community policing encourages transparency, accountability, and respect for residents' rights. It also offers opportunities for citizens to report misconduct and participate in decision-making processes related to safety. According to Akinwale,

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<sup>29</sup>Dambazau, A. *Criminal Justice and Human Rights in Nigeria*. (Routledge, 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Nigeria Police Act, 2020.

when properly implemented, community policing can serve as a deterrent to abuse and foster a culture of human rights respect within the police force.<sup>31</sup>

However, the actual impact of community policing initiatives remains mixed. Many programs are underfunded, poorly coordinated, or lack the necessary training for officers to engage effectively with communities. Moreover, some community policing efforts are superficial, serving more as public relations exercises than genuine attempts to empower citizens or reform institutional practices. Critics argue that without comprehensive reforms addressing systemic misconduct and accountability, community policing alone cannot resolve deep-rooted issues of abuse and rights violations. For community policing to be genuinely effective in promoting human rights, it must be supported by robust oversight, adequate resourcing, and a cultural shift within the police force towards respecting human rights standards.

### **Internal disciplinary mechanisms and their effectiveness**

Internal disciplinary mechanisms are intended to oversee police conduct, uphold standards, and punish misconduct. Under the Police Act 2020, the Police Service Commission is empowered to oversee discipline, including investigating allegations against officers, recommending sanctions, and ensuring adherence to operational standards.<sup>32</sup> The Act also establishes disciplinary panels and procedures intended to ensure fairness and transparency in handling misconduct cases.

Despite these provisions, the effectiveness of internal disciplinary mechanisms remains questionable. Reports from civil society organizations and watchdog agencies reveal that many disciplinary processes are either delayed, inadequately resourced, or influenced by political interference. According to the Civil Society Legislative and Advocacy Centre (CISLAC), the police often dismiss or dismiss misconduct allegations without proper investigation, and officers accused of abuse frequently face minimal or no sanctions.<sup>33</sup> The lack of independence of disciplinary bodies further hampers accountability, as officers or their superiors may influence investigations or outcomes.

Moreover, a significant challenge is the culture of impunity within the police. Many officers believe they can evade punishment for misconduct due to systemic weaknesses, including

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<sup>31</sup> Akinwale, A. "Community Policing and Human Rights in Nigeria." *Journal of Human Rights and Policing*, (2021), vol. (5), no. (2), 45-60.

<sup>32</sup> Nigeria Police Act, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> CISLAC. *Nigeria Police Impunity Report*. (Civil Society Legislative and Advocacy Centre, 2022).

inadequate oversight, lack of political will, and fear of reprisals. As a result, disciplinary mechanisms often fail to serve as effective deterrents against abuse. For reforms to be meaningful, internal disciplinary systems must be made more transparent, independent, and well-resourced. Effective internal discipline is crucial for fostering a police culture rooted in respect for human rights and accountability. Without these improvements, internal mechanisms risk remaining symbolic rather than substantive in addressing police misconduct.

## **Policy Analysis**

This section examines the key policies that underpin Nigeria's efforts to reform its law enforcement practices and uphold human rights, focusing on the Police Act 2020, the Anti-Torture Act of 2019, and various human rights policies issued by the Nigeria Police Force. While these policies represent significant strides towards aligning Nigeria's policing framework with international human rights standards—emphasizing community engagement, transparency, and the criminalization of torture—their practical effectiveness remains constrained by implementation gaps, resource limitations, and ingrained institutional cultures resistant to change. The evaluation highlights the challenges of translating policy into practice, including inadequate training, weak oversight, and persistent impunity, which undermine progress and sustain patterns of abuse. Despite promising reforms and increased awareness, the overall impact on police conduct and human rights compliance continues to be mixed, underscoring the need for sustained political will, better resource allocation, and stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure that policy intentions translate into meaningful change on the ground.

## **Evaluation of key policies**

The Nigerian government has introduced several policies aimed at reforming law enforcement practices and enhancing respect for human rights, with the Police Act 2020, the Anti-Torture Act of 2019, and various human rights policies serving as critical frameworks. The Police Act 2020 represents a comprehensive overhaul of police administration, emphasizing community engagement, transparency, and professionalism. It seeks to align Nigeria's policing standards with international human rights norms by establishing clear procedures for arrest, detention, and use of

force, and creating oversight bodies such as the Police Service Commission (PSC).<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the Anti-Torture Act 2019 criminalizes torture and ill-treatment, explicitly committing Nigeria to international anti-torture obligations under the UN Convention Against Torture, which Nigeria ratified in 2001.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, several human rights policies issued by the Nigeria Police Force emphasize respect for citizens' rights, including guidelines on the use of firearms and detention procedures.

While these policies mark significant progress, their effectiveness hinges on their implementation and enforcement. The Police Act 2020, for example, aims to curb abuses by establishing disciplinary procedures and community policing strategies. Nonetheless, critics argue that the policies remain aspirational without concrete mechanisms for compliance, often lacking the necessary clarity or resources to effect change.<sup>36</sup> The Anti-Torture Act's criminalization of torture is a positive step, but reports suggest that torture and ill-treatment continue to occur regularly, indicating gaps between policy and practice. Nigeria's human rights policies generally advocate for professionalism and respect, but enforcement remains inconsistent, hindered by ingrained institutional culture and limited oversight.

### **Policy implementation gaps and challenges**

Despite the existence of progressive policies, their implementation faces substantial hurdles. One persistent challenge is the weak enforcement of regulations at operational levels. The Police Act 2020, while comprehensive, suffers from a lack of awareness among officers and insufficient training on new procedures. A report by the Civil Society Legislative and Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) notes that many officers remain unaware of the provisions or do not adhere to them in practice.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, institutional inertia and resistance to reform impede the translation of policy into practice, especially within entrenched police culture that tolerates misconduct and abuses of power.

Resource constraints further hinder policy implementation. Underfunding limits training programs, oversight mechanisms, and the capacity of disciplinary bodies. For instance, the Police

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<sup>34</sup> Nigeria Police Act, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> United Nations. Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. United Nations, 2001.

<sup>36</sup> Amnesty International. *Nigeria: Security Forces Use Excessive Force Against Protesters*. (Amnesty International, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> CISLAC. *Nigeria Police Impunity Report*. (Civil Society Legislative and Advocacy Centre, 2022).

Service Commission's investigative functions are often hampered by inadequate staffing and political interference, reducing its ability to hold officers accountable.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, the decentralized nature of Nigeria's policing system complicates uniform policy enforcement across different states, with some jurisdictions neglecting national directives altogether. The lack of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms also means that policymakers often lack data to assess progress or identify areas needing improvement.

### **The role of training, oversight, and accountability measures**

Training is fundamental to ensuring police officers understand and uphold human rights standards. The Police Act 2020 emphasizes training in human rights and community policing; however, implementation remains inconsistent. Reports indicate that many officers have not received specialized training on the new guidelines or on de-escalation techniques, which are vital in reducing excessive force and abuse.<sup>39</sup> Without continuous professional development, officers tend to rely on traditional enforcement methods that often violate rights.

Oversight and accountability mechanisms are crucial for ensuring compliance with policies. The Police Service Commission, tasked with disciplinary oversight, has limited investigative capacity and is often influenced by political considerations, reducing its effectiveness. The Police Act 2020 also established Police Complaint Units at the federal and state levels to handle misconduct allegations. Nonetheless, cases of delayed investigations, lack of transparency, and impunity persist. Civil society organizations argue that internal disciplinary procedures are often manipulated or ignored, and that external oversight bodies lack independence or sufficient authority to enforce accountability.<sup>40</sup> These gaps reinforce a culture of impunity, discouraging officers from adhering to human rights standards.

### **Impact assessments of recent reforms on police practices**

Assessing the impact of recent reforms reveals a mixed picture. The Police Act 2020 has introduced vital legal provisions and structural changes intended to improve policing standards. Early evaluations suggest some positive developments, such as increased community engagement

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<sup>38</sup> Human Rights Watch. Nigeria, *End Abuses by Police and Military*. (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

<sup>39</sup> Amnesty International. *Nigeria: Security Forces Use Excessive Force Against Protesters*. (Amnesty International, 2021).

<sup>40</sup> CISLAC. *Nigeria Police Impunity Report*. (Civil Society Legislative and Advocacy Centre, 2022).

initiatives and clearer disciplinary procedures.<sup>41</sup> However, tangible improvements in police conduct and human rights compliance remain limited. Reports from human rights organizations continue to document violations, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and unlawful detention, indicating that the reforms have yet to fully translate into changing police behavior.

Moreover, the reforms have heightened awareness among the public and civil society, catalyzing advocacy for further accountability. The #EndSARS protests showcased the demand for systemic change, prompting the government to promise reforms and increased oversight. Yet, critics argue that without sustained political will and resource allocation, these reforms risk remaining superficial. As Ogunbameru notes, ongoing challenges include inadequate implementation, lack of institutional capacity, and deep-seated cultural norms resistant to change.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, while recent policies set a promising foundation, their actual impact depends on rigorous enforcement, continuous training, and genuine commitment to human rights.

### **Challenges and Barriers to Upholding Human Rights:**

The Nigeria Police Force faces a myriad of challenges and barriers that undermine their capacity to effectively uphold human rights. These obstacles are deeply rooted in structural and systemic issues, cultural and societal influences, as well as political interference that compromise police integrity, accountability, and operational independence.

#### **Structural and systemic issues**

One of the most significant barriers to human rights enforcement within Nigeria is the pervasive corruption endemic in the police institution. Corruption manifests in various forms, including bribery, extortion, and abuse of power, which erodes public trust and hampers accountability. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), corruption within law enforcement agencies directly correlates with human rights violations, as officers often prioritize personal gains over their duty to uphold justice.<sup>43</sup> The Nigeria Police Force has long struggled with

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<sup>41</sup>Ogunbameru, M. "Evaluating Police Reforms in Nigeria." *Journal of Human Rights and Policing*, (2023). vol. (8), no. (1), 25-40.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> UNODC. "*Corruption and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria*." (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022).

such issues, which have been exacerbated by inadequate oversight mechanisms and lack of transparency.

Impunity further compounds these systemic problems. Many police officers involved in abuses, such as extrajudicial killings, torture, and unlawful arrests, often escape punishment due to weak accountability frameworks. The #EndSARS protests of 2020, which called attention to police brutality, highlighted the prevalence of impunity within Nigerian policing.<sup>44</sup> Despite promises of reform, the failure to effectively investigate and prosecute abuses continues to undermine human rights protections.

Resource constraints are another critical systemic issue. The Nigeria Police often operate with limited funding, insufficient personnel, and inadequate training, which hampers their ability to perform professional policing aligned with human rights standards. A report by the International Crisis Group highlights that underfunding results in outdated equipment and poor infrastructure, leading officers to resort to violence or misconduct as a means of asserting authority.<sup>45</sup> These deficiencies foster a culture where abuse becomes a default response, especially in volatile environments.

### **Cultural and societal factors influencing police behavior**

Cultural and societal norms significantly influence police conduct in Nigeria. Deeply ingrained attitudes that equate authority with fear and control often justify abusive practices. For instance, societal acceptance of police brutality as a means to maintain order can perpetuate a cycle of abuse. A recent study by Okechukwu and colleagues notes that societal perceptions of police as enforcers rather than protectors hinder community trust and cooperation.<sup>46</sup>

Additionally, societal factors such as ethnicity and religion can influence police behavior, sometimes resulting in discriminatory practices. Reports have documented instances where police disproportionately target members of minority groups or specific ethnic communities, exacerbating social divisions and undermining rights to fair treatment.<sup>47</sup> The normalization of

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<sup>44</sup> ICG (International Crisis Group). "Reforming Nigeria's Police: Challenges and Opportunities." Africa Report No. 297, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Okechukwu, C, "Societal Perceptions of Police Violence in Nigeria." *Journal of African Studies*, (2022), vol. (45), no. (2), 134-150.

<sup>47</sup> Human Rights Watch. "*Nigeria: Police Abuses During Protests*." (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

violence and corruption within societal contexts further discourages police from adhering to human rights principles.

Furthermore, the widespread prevalence of societal acceptance of impunity diminishes the pressure on police authorities to reform. When communities perceive abuses as routine or inevitable, there is less demand for accountability, allowing systemic issues to persist unchallenged. This cultural normalization of misconduct significantly impairs efforts to promote human rights within policing practices.

### **Political interference and lack of independence in oversight institutions**

Political interference remains a formidable obstacle to police accountability and human rights enforcement in Nigeria. Political actors often exert influence over police appointments, investigations, and operations, compromising their independence and neutrality. The Nigeria Police Service Commission, tasked with oversight, frequently faces undue political pressure, undermining its capacity to hold officers accountable.<sup>48</sup>

The lack of independent oversight institutions hampers efforts to address police misconduct effectively. Courts and investigative bodies are often influenced by political interests, leading to delays, dismissals, or cover-ups of abuses. This environment of impunity discourages police reform and emboldens officers to engage in rights violations without fear of repercussions.

Moreover, political interference can be used strategically to suppress dissent or control marginalized groups. During the #EndSARS protests, security agencies were accused of deploying excessive force, with allegations that political authorities indirectly sanctioned such actions to disperse protests and intimidate opposition.<sup>49</sup> This politicization erodes public confidence in law enforcement and deters efforts to align policing with human rights standards. In addition, the absence of robust legal frameworks ensuring police independence weakens accountability mechanisms. Without genuine autonomy, police agencies are vulnerable to manipulation by political elites, hindering their capacity to serve as impartial enforcers of the law committed to human rights.

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<sup>48</sup> Transparency International. “*Corruption and Police Accountability in Nigeria*.” (Transparency International Report, 2023).

<sup>49</sup> Amnesty International. “*Nigeria: #EndSARS Protests and Police Brutality*.” (Amnesty International, 2020).

In summary, the challenges faced by the Nigeria Police in upholding human rights are multifaceted and deeply embedded within systemic, cultural, and political structures. Corruption, impunity, resource limitations, societal norms, and political interference collectively create an environment where human rights violations can flourish. Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive reforms that enhance transparency, strengthen oversight, foster cultural change, and insulate policing institutions from political manipulation. Only through such multidimensional efforts can Nigeria hope to realize a policing system that genuinely respects and upholds human rights.

## **Conclusion**

In light of the comprehensive analysis of Nigeria's police institutional practices and policies, it is evident that despite notable legislative reforms, significant challenges remain in ensuring the police uphold human rights effectively. The persistent issues of corruption, impunity, resource limitations, and systemic inefficiencies continue to undermine efforts towards accountability and transparency. These systemic barriers are further reinforced by cultural and societal factors that normalize misconduct and discrimination, as well as political interference that compromises the independence of oversight institutions. As a result, police abuses such as extrajudicial killings, torture, unlawful detention, and excessive use of force still regularly occur, eroding public trust and impeding the development of a rights-respecting law enforcement culture.

However, recent legislative initiatives like the Police Act 2020 and the Anti-Torture Act 2019 demonstrate Nigeria's commitment to aligning its policing practices with international human rights standards. The success of these reforms, nonetheless, hinges on effective implementation, political will, and societal support. Addressing deeply rooted cultural norms, strengthening oversight bodies, ensuring adequate resources, and fostering a culture of accountability are paramount. Only through sustained, systemic reforms and a genuine commitment to human rights can Nigeria transform its police force into an institution that not only maintains law and order but also safeguards the dignity and rights of all citizens. The study proffers the following recommendations:

1. **Strengthen Oversight and Accountability Mechanisms:** Establish independent, well-resourced oversight bodies with legal autonomy to investigate police misconduct, enforce disciplinary actions, and ensure transparency, thereby reducing political interference and impunity.

2. Enhance Police Training and Capacity Building: Implement comprehensive, ongoing training programs for police officers on human rights, use of force, community policing, and ethical conduct to foster a rights-based approach to policing.
3. Increase Funding and Resources for the Police: Allocate adequate financial and infrastructural resources to modernize equipment, improve working conditions, and support community policing initiatives, enabling police to operate professionally and humanely.
4. Promote Cultural and Institutional Reforms: Foster a police culture that prioritizes integrity, professionalism, and respect for human rights through leadership commitment, internal discipline, and community engagement strategies.
5. Legal and Policy Enforcement: Ensure strict adherence to existing laws such as the Anti-Torture Act and Police Act 2020 by establishing clear enforcement protocols, monitoring compliance, and swiftly prosecuting violations to serve as deterrents against abuse.