

## Beyond Carceral Responses: Intimate Partner Violence and the Structural Realities of Rural Nigeria

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### **Abstract**

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) remains pervasive in rural Nigeria, despite the existence of national legislation such as the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act and Nigeria's ratification of international treaties aimed at eliminating gender-based violence. Although research has explored the general patterns of gender-based violence, limited scholarly and policy attention has been given to the structural and spatial dynamics sustaining IPV in rural contexts. This article foregrounds critical perspectives informed by abolition feminism to advance a framework for understanding the embeddedness of IPV within Nigeria's rural socio-political fabric. We examine how histories of patriarchal control, state neglect, and familial structures produce and sustain IPV as a normalised condition of rural life. We also explore how carceral approaches to justice often fail to account for the lived realities of rural women, reinforcing cycles of silence, impunity, and harm. We argue that abolition feminist frameworks are essential for addressing the gendered and systemic nature of IPV in rural Nigeria, and for envisioning transformative alternatives rooted in community, care, and structural change.

**Keywords:** Intimate Partner Violence, rural, colonialism, structural violence, Nigeria

### **1. Introduction**

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), a pervasive form of gender-based violence, is deeply entrenched in the lived experiences of many women in rural Nigeria (Fitchett, 2024; Oloyede, 2020). Despite the passage of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act in 2015

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and Nigeria's ratification of key international treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), IPV remains widespread and normalised, particularly in communities with limited state presence and weak legal enforcement. Yet the dominant legal and policy frameworks continue to view IPV as a private matter or a criminal issue to be addressed through punitive measures, rather than a structural and systemic form of violence shaped by broader histories of patriarchal domination, rural marginalisation, and state neglect.

As feminist scholars have emphasised for decades, gender-based violence must be understood within the context of the political and economic systems that structure everyday life. In rural Nigeria, a legacy of colonial governance, combined with neoliberal underdevelopment and state disinvestment in rural social infrastructure, has produced conditions in which women are especially vulnerable to IPV (Rivera-Williams, 2025; Johnson, 2022). Discussions around gender equality, development, and legal reform rarely integrate the perspectives of those most affected by IPV, particularly rural women who face multiple and intersecting forms of oppression. This disconnect contributes to an incomplete and often myopic understanding of how violence is produced and sustained within specific socio-spatial contexts. As scholars like Ogbaa (2021) have noted, failing to localise and historicise gendered oppression obscures its structural causes and impedes meaningful intervention.

The structures that uphold IPV in rural Nigeria are not isolated or merely cultural—they are deeply embedded in political, legal, and economic arrangements that reproduce gendered harm. Customary family systems, land tenure regimes, and community hierarchies often prioritise male authority, while state institutions reproduce this authority through selective enforcement, limited service provision, and the marginalisation of rural populations in development planning. Much like the climate crisis intensifies existing vulnerabilities in food systems, the structural pressures in rural Nigeria, poverty, landlessness, insecurity, amplify women's exposure to IPV while undermining their ability to resist or escape. As Amnesty International (2006) and Isika (2021) have documented, rural women who attempt to report IPV are often silenced by local authorities or redirected back into abusive relationships under the guise of preserving family unity.

And yet, despite the pervasiveness of IPV in rural Nigeria, academic and policy scholarship has largely failed to address its full complexity. While there is growing research on gender-based violence in urban contexts and conflict zones, limited attention has been paid to how IPV is sustained by structural inequalities specific to rural areas. As Epochi-Olise & Monye, (2021) and Nazneen & Okech, (2021) have recently pointed out, this lack of attention reflects a broader tendency to devalue rural experiences and knowledge in mainstream feminist and development discourses. Moreover, efforts to address IPV through legal reform alone often rest on assumptions of access to justice, safety, and autonomy that do not align with the realities of rural life. As such, IPV in rural Nigeria continues to operate in the shadows - underreported, under-theorised, and under-addressed in both scholarship and practice.

This article contributes to current debates by calling for the integration of critical perspectives particularly those grounded in abolition feminism to enrich understandings of IPV in rural Nigeria. Abolition feminism challenges the carceral logic that underpins most legal responses to gender-based violence and instead centers community care, historical accountability, and structural transformation (Davis et al. 2022; Kaba & Hayes, (2021). By foregrounding the systemic and interconnected forms of violence that rural women endure not only from intimate partners but also from state neglect, economic precarity, and legal exclusion - abolition feminism opens up new ways of imagining justice and safety beyond punishment. These perspectives trace the continuity of patriarchal, colonial, and neoliberal violence across time and space, revealing how IPV functions not as a standalone crisis but as part of a broader regime of gendered domination.

In this article, we draw on abolition feminist theory to examine how the lived experiences of rural women in Nigeria reveal the limits of current policy and legal frameworks for addressing IPV. We explore how deeply embedded social hierarchies, family power structures, and rural marginalisation work together to sustain intimate violence, while also investigating how state institutions reproduce impunity through inaction, neglect, or inadequate implementation of protective legislation. In line with abolitionist commitments, we argue that addressing IPV in rural Nigeria requires moving beyond carceral interventions and toward transformative frameworks rooted in care, solidarity, and community-based justice.

To this end, this article positions IPV as both a symptom of and a mechanism for maintaining broader systems of inequality, including gendered labour divisions, rural underdevelopment, and patriarchal statecraft. By centering the voices and experiences of rural women, voices often erased in mainstream policy conversations, we seek to disrupt dominant narratives and contribute to the development of more inclusive, life-affirming approaches to violence prevention and gender justice. In doing so, this article not only reveals the limits of current IPV interventions in Nigeria but also gestures toward more radical, feminist futures rooted in liberation rather than punishment.

## **2. Methodological Approach**

This article seeks to develop critical theoretical perspectives for understanding intimate partner violence (IPV) in rural Nigeria by focusing on two key themes: (1) the embeddedness of patriarchal and state violence in rural family and community structures, which normalise and sustain IPV; and (2) the carceral and institutional mechanisms that restrict access to justice for rural women, perpetuating cycles of impunity and harm.

The research design is conceptual and theoretical, adopting a critical feminist lens to analyse IPV as a systemic issue. This approach is theory-driven and literature-based rather than empirical, aiming to connect existing knowledge with broader social, political, and structural dynamics.

Data sources include scholarly articles, books, policy documents, and reports from Nigerian and international organisations that examine IPV, gender, and state institutions. These sources were selected purposively to ensure relevance to rural Nigerian contexts and to capture diverse perspectives on patriarchal and state power.

The method of data collection involved a systematic literature review and conceptual synthesis. We identified and collated studies and reports that illustrate the social, legal, and institutional dimensions of IPV, paying attention to recurring patterns, contradictions, and theoretical debates.

For analytical procedure, we employed a thematic and critical conceptual analysis. Key concepts, frameworks, and patterns from the literature were organised around abolition feminist theory, enabling us to examine how IPV is normalised, perpetuated, and constrained by institutional and patriarchal structures. This allowed for the development of a theoretically grounded argument that situates rural women's experiences within broader structural and systemic contexts.

By adopting this theoretical and conceptual methodology, the article links existing literature and feminist theory to the realities of IPV in rural Nigeria, highlighting structural barriers, social norms, and institutional failures while providing a framework for imagining transformative, non-carceral approaches.

### **3. The embeddedness of patriarchal and state violence in rural family and community structures sustaining IPV**

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in rural Nigeria is deeply entrenched in patriarchal social orders and institutional neglect, reflecting historical and ongoing patterns of gendered violence that transcend individual relationships to shape collective social realities. Much like critical gender studies situate contemporary systems within the legacy of gender and colonial violence, feminist and sociological analyses locate IPV within the enduring structures of patriarchal control, state absence, and communal sanctioning that operate together to normalise and sustain violence against women. The normalisation of IPV in rural Nigerian contexts is not accidental but rather a product of socio-political histories and cultural logics that systematically marginalise women's autonomy and bodily integrity.

Patriarchal systems in rural Nigeria assign rigid gender roles that position men as heads of households and women as subordinate caretakers, expected to endure hardship and maintain family cohesion at great personal cost (Adebisi, 2019). This social contract is enforced through familial and community mechanisms that punish dissent and silence victims. Scholars such as Nqambaza, (2023) and Talabi (2025) have highlighted how indigenous cultural frameworks intertwine with colonial legacies to produce gendered power asymmetries that are deeply embedded in daily social life. The family, far from being a site of protection, often functions as a primary arena where gendered violence is reproduced and justified, cloaked in discourses of honour, obedience, and social stability.

The Nigerian state, despite progressive legislation such as the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act of 2015, remains largely absent or ineffective in rural areas where IPV is most prevalent (Onyemelukwe, 2015). Structural neglect manifests through under-resourced police forces, judicial delays, and limited access to legal aid, which collectively reinforce impunity for perpetrators and discourage women from seeking redress. State institutions frequently mirror patriarchal values, viewing IPV as a private matter rather than a criminal offense, and thus abetting cycles of violence and silence. This institutional failure is compounded by social stigma attached to reporting abuse, where survivors risk ostracisation or retaliation, further embedding IPV within rural communities as a normalised, if tragic, reality.

The interplay between patriarchal family structures and state neglect produces a social environment in which IPV is perpetuated as a structural, rather than merely interpersonal, problem. This systemic violence is upheld not only by men's control over women's bodies but also by the failure of social institutions to protect victims or hold abusers accountable. Consequently, IPV becomes a normalised feature of rural Nigerian life, justified through cultural narratives that prioritise family cohesion and male authority over women's rights and safety. As John (2023) notes, "gender is a social institution that shapes power relations in all domains of life," and in rural Nigeria, these power relations are maintained through violence, silence, and systemic disregard.

### **3.1. Patriarchal norms and state neglect as foundations of IPV normalisation in rural Nigeria**

The roots of IPV in rural Nigeria are firmly planted in patriarchal norms that define women's roles in ways that implicitly condone violence as a tool of social control. Patriarchy, as a system, operates by restricting women's agency and reinforcing men's authority within the family and community. In rural settings, these norms are often upheld through cultural expectations that valorise male dominance and female submission, which are taught from childhood and reinforced in everyday interactions. For example, the widespread belief that a "good wife" tolerates hardship including physical and emotional abuse, underpins the social acceptance of IPV (Sunmola et al., 2019; Benebo, Schumann., & Vaezghasemi, 2018).

Community elders, religious leaders, and family members often act as enforcers of these norms, discouraging women from leaving abusive relationships or seeking external help. Such actors emphasise the importance of preserving family honour and maintaining social harmony, frequently framing IPV as a private domestic issue rather than a public concern requiring intervention (Sangeetha et al., 2022). This collective enforcement of patriarchal values creates an environment in which women internalise blame and shame, contributing to their silence and isolation. The social expectation to maintain family unity above personal safety effectively sanctions ongoing violence.

Moreover, the intersections of patriarchy with other social hierarchies such as class, ethnicity, and religion further complicate women's experiences of IPV in rural Nigeria. Marginalised

women, particularly those with low socioeconomic status, face heightened vulnerabilities due to limited economic independence and social capital, which restrict their ability to resist or escape abusive relationships. Research has shown that economic dependence on male partners severely constrains women's options, reinforcing cycles of abuse and entrapment (Hing et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2024; Conner, 2013; Shah, Shah., & Kibria, 2025). These material realities are inseparable from the cultural logics that sustain patriarchal control.

The state's role in this dynamic is characterised by both omission and active complicity. While national laws such as the VAPP Act signal political commitment to combating gender-based violence, their implementation in rural Nigeria remains inconsistent and often superficial. Police officers frequently lack training on IPV, hold patriarchal biases, and may dismiss complaints or pressure victims to reconcile with their abusers (Richards, 2020; Srigley, 2020; Ukasanya, 2025). Courts are typically inaccessible due to distance, cost, and bureaucratic hurdles, rendering formal justice unattainable for most rural women. In addition, customary legal systems, which coexist alongside formal law, often prioritise mediation and family reconciliation over punitive measures, sometimes perpetuating harmful norms (Anyieth, 2025; Akhter, Mahr., & Imtiaz, 2021; Haluska, 2023).

This institutional failure reflects broader state neglect of rural communities, where infrastructural deficits, poverty, and limited social services compound the challenges women face in seeking protection. Health facilities, shelters, and counseling services are scarce or nonexistent in many rural areas, leaving survivors without essential support. State indifference to rural IPV thus functions as an extension of patriarchal control, signaling that women's safety and rights are secondary to preserving traditional social orders and maintaining political expediency.

Together, patriarchal family and community structures and an absent or complicit state produce a "double bind" that traps rural women in cycles of violence. This embeddedness of IPV within social and institutional frameworks calls for analytical approaches that move beyond individual blame and victimisation to recognise the systemic nature of the problem. Feminist scholars have argued that understanding IPV as structurally sustained violence reveals possibilities for transformative interventions that target cultural norms, state institutions, and community power relations simultaneously (Campbell & Mannell, 2016; Kelly, 2011; Baird, 2023).

An abolition feminist framework, with its focus on dismantling structures of oppression and imagining life-affirming alternatives, offers a particularly promising lens through which to view IPV in rural Nigeria. By framing IPV as part of a broader system of patriarchal and state violence, abolition feminism challenges the reliance on carceral solutions that often fail to protect women or address root causes. Instead, it calls for community-centered strategies grounded in care, solidarity, and structural transformation that can disrupt cycles of violence and empower women within their social contexts (da Silva & Dixit, 2025; Waters, 2024).

#### **4. Carceral and institutional mechanisms that restrict access to justice for rural women, perpetuating cycles of impunity and harm**

“The institutional architecture of justice in rural communities often acts not as a safeguard but as a mechanism of control, shaping the limits of women’s freedom and sustaining systemic violence under the guise of order.”

- Adapted from Artz (1999)

In countless rural villages and remote areas across the globe, women subjected to intimate partner violence (IPV) face a legal and institutional landscape that simultaneously marginalises and criminalises them. While laws may formally exist to protect women, the everyday realities of enforcement and access reveal a system fraught with contradictions where patriarchal norms embedded in carceral and community institutions undermine justice and perpetuate cycles of violence (Weissman, 2021; Mena, 2018; Weissman, 2022). Rural women navigate a labyrinthine justice system that restricts their agency through geographic, social, and institutional barriers.

Our own engagement with rural women survivors has revealed a pattern that is both painful and familiar. These women often arrive at local police stations or community courts bearing physical and emotional wounds yet are met with skepticism or indifference. The institutions designed to protect them frequently ask for proof in ways that echo the impossible demands made on detained women, (Law, 2012; Girshick, 2002). As a result, many women leave these encounters feeling re-victimised, doubted, and ultimately silenced, their claims lost within a system that fails to acknowledge the lived complexities of rural IPV.

In rural contexts, formal justice institutions are tightly interwoven with local power relations. Law enforcement officers, judicial figures, and social service providers often live within the same communities as survivors and perpetrators, creating inherent conflicts of interest and social pressures to maintain “community harmony” (Begum, Ijaz., & Umair, 2023; Davis, 2022; Ariyibi, 2024). This proximity frequently translates into bias, where officers dismiss women’s reports as private family disputes or pressure them into reconciliation, echoing patriarchal values prioritising male authority and social stability over women’s safety (Mehnaz & Yang, 2025; Galizzi, McBride., & Siboni, 2024; Ciaffoni, Rubini., & Moscatelli, 2024). These dynamics resemble the “border imperialism” described by Walia (2013), where state institutions prioritise containment and control over justice, reinforcing structural inequalities.

In addition to social pressures, geographic isolation and lack of infrastructure compound access issues. Rural women may have to travel dozens of kilometers on unreliable transportation to reach the nearest police station or courthouse - distances further complicated by limited financial resources and childcare responsibilities (Seedhouse, Johnson., & Newbery, 2016; Foley et al., 2022). Unlike urban centers, where specialised services such as legal aid, shelters, and counseling exist (however imperfectly), rural areas often lack even basic IPV support, leaving survivors with few alternatives to remain silent or return to dangerous environments

(Ragusa, 2017; Banyard et al., 2019). These spatial and economic constraints create a “carceral geography” that encloses rural women within cycles of violence and impunity.

This institutional failure is often aggravated by the very criminal justice interventions designed to promote accountability. The criminalisation of IPV has led to increased arrests and prosecutions, but for rural women, these carceral responses frequently exacerbate harm rather than alleviate it (Poor, 2023; Derr, Hattery., & Smith, 2025). Arrests of male partners can trigger economic destabilisation, given the often limited livelihood opportunities in rural settings, and provoke retaliatory violence once the abuser is released (Bowen, 2011; Sithole, 2018). Furthermore, carceral sanctions rarely address the structural drivers of IPV, such as poverty, social isolation, and entrenched gender norms, resulting in cyclical rather than transformative outcomes (Weissman, 2021; Poor, 2023; Baird, 2023).

The failure of institutional mechanisms to provide meaningful justice also reflects broader historical patterns of marginalisation affecting rural areas. These regions often bear the legacies of colonial dispossession, gendered governance, and economic neglect that shape not only material conditions but also the very frameworks of law and order (Levien, 2019; Bhandar & Bhandar, 2016). As a result, the carceral apparatus in rural spaces frequently serves to reinforce dominant power structures rather than challenge them, replicating exclusions based on gender, race, and class (Moran, 2016; Kurwa & Gurusami, 2022). In this sense, the justice system becomes another site where rural women’s suffering is normalised and invisibilised.

Feminist legal scholarship and grassroots advocacy critique these carceral and institutional mechanisms for their role in perpetuating patriarchal violence under the veneer of legitimacy (Gen, 2021; Weissman, 2021). They argue for justice approaches that move beyond punitive frameworks and center survivor agency, intersectionality, and community accountability (Weissman, 2021; Gen, 2021). This includes investing in rural justice infrastructure, enhancing legal literacy, and developing culturally and contextually responsive services that recognise the complexity of rural women’s lives (Magnus & Donohue, 2022; Yu et al., 2024). Most importantly, justice must be reconceptualised not merely as punishment but as safety, dignity, and empowerment.

#### **4.1 The Entrenched Barriers within Legal and Community Systems: Upholding Patriarchal Control and Silencing Survivors**

The persistence of patriarchal power in rural family and community structures is both profound and pervasive, shaping the ways legal and informal institutions function to silence survivors and uphold male dominance (Hegde, 1996; Ndlovu, 2015). Law enforcement, judicial authorities, and social service providers are often embedded in the same social networks that privilege men’s authority and stigmatise women who challenge it (Batton & Wright, 2019; Pease, 2016). This proximity limits impartiality and creates environments where IPV is reframed as a private or familial matter rather than a criminal offense warranting legal redress (Park, 2025; Camp, 2018).

Police officers in rural areas are often undertrained and under-resourced to handle gender-based violence effectively. They may dismiss IPV reports as trivial or encourage survivors to maintain family unity at the expense of safety (Richards, 2020; Batton & Wright, 2019). In many instances, officers may be influenced by community elders or local power brokers to downplay accusations, protect male perpetrators, or avoid initiating formal investigations (Dodier-Lemay et al., 2025). Survivors frequently report secondary victimisation through law enforcement being doubted, blamed, or pressured to withdraw complaints (Patterson, 2011; Park, 2025).

The role of customary and traditional justice systems compounds these challenges. In many rural contexts, community elders, religious leaders, or informal councils serve as primary adjudicators of disputes, including IPV cases (Adeoye, 2024; Lerman, 1984). These forums often emphasise reconciliation and social cohesion, subordinating women's safety to the preservation of family and community honour (Murithi, 2006). Remedies offered may include forced mediation or compensatory payments to the woman's family, commodifying violence and sidelining survivors' rights and voices (Murphy & Rubinson, 2005; Ndlovu, 2015). Women who resist these processes may face social ostracism or escalated violence.

Economic dependency further entrenches women's vulnerability. In many rural areas, limited job opportunities and patriarchal control over resources restrict women's ability to leave abusive relationships or seek justice (Batton & Wright, 2019; Pease, 2016). Geographic isolation exacerbates these constraints, as transportation to courts, police stations, or shelters is costly, unreliable, or simply unavailable (Magnus & Donohue, 2022; Baird, 2023). The lack of nearby support services means that many women endure violence in silence, fearful of stigma, retaliation, or losing social support networks (Sunmola et al., 2019; Shah, Shah., & Kibria, 2025).

Health and social services in rural areas often mirror these systemic failures. Limited funding and training restrict their capacity to identify IPV and provide trauma-informed care (Richards, 2020; Camp, 2022). Services may be governed by conservative social norms that emphasise family preservation and discourage intervention or prioritise mediation over survivor safety (Oloyede, 2020; Mena, 2018). The resulting lack of coordinated, survivor-centered care contributes to women's continued marginalisation.

At a policy level, legislative protections are often underenforced in rural areas due to chronic underfunding, weak political will, and corruption (Ragusa, 2017; Banyard et al., 2019). Training for law enforcement and judiciary on IPV is inconsistent, and monitoring mechanisms for accountability are limited or absent, creating an environment where perpetrators operate with impunity (Hing et al., 2021; Kelly, 2011).). Survivors' experiences of legal systems characterised by delay, dismissal, or victim-blaming discourage future help-seeking, perpetuating cycles of violence and silence (Oloyede, 2020; Sangeetha et al., 2022).

The carceral responses intended to address IPV often paradoxically amplify harm in rural settings. Arrests and incarceration may destabilise family economies reliant on male labour

and provoke retaliatory violence when perpetrators are released (Campbell & Mannell, 2016; Kurwa & Gurusami, 2022). This underlines the inadequacy of punitive measures alone and the necessity of comprehensive, context-sensitive responses that integrate legal accountability with social and economic support (Derr, Hattery, & Smith, 2025; Weissman, 2021).

Feminist and decolonial scholars advocate for transformative justice approaches that centre survivor agency and community-based accountability, challenging the patriarchal, racialised structures embedded in current justice systems (Galizzi, McBride, & Siboni, 2024). Legal literacy initiatives, mobile clinics, and safe spaces tailored to rural realities can empower women to assert their rights and access support (Poor, 2023; Weissman, 2021). Engaging men and community leaders in gender-transformative education is critical to shifting cultural norms that sustain violence (Ragusa, 2017).

Carceral and institutional systems in rural contexts often perpetuate patriarchal power, restrict women's access to justice, and normalise impunity for violence (Waters, 2024; Kurwa & Gurusami, 2022). Breaking this cycle requires intersectional, survivor-centered strategies that recognise rural women's diverse realities and promote holistic safety, dignity, and empowerment.

## 5. Conclusion: Toward abolition feminist futures in justice for rural women

Critical engagement with the carceral and institutional barriers that rural women face in accessing justice reveals how these challenges are embedded within broader systems of gendered, and class-based violence. These mechanisms do not emerge in isolation; rather, they are inseparable from legacies of settler colonialism, patriarchal control over bodies and land, and neoliberal economic orders that prioritise profit over human dignity. Such entrenched oppressions fuel cycles of impunity and harm that disproportionately impact rural women, who frequently occupy marginalised intersections of race, class, and geography. An abolition feminist framework offers a powerful lens to understand and dismantle these intersecting structures of violence while imagining alternatives that center accountability, healing, and liberation.

Addressing the immediate and urgent realities faced by rural women ranging from gender-based violence, legal disenfranchisement, and economic exclusion, to climate vulnerability and food insecurity requires collective, intersectional, and systemic approaches. Patriarchy, colonialism, and carceral logics. Rural women's struggles to access justice cannot be disentangled from these histories, nor from the contemporary institutions that reproduce them through policing, surveillance, and legal exclusion. At the same time, justice-centered epistemologies must be nurtured from and with the knowledge of rural women themselves, whose lived experiences and resistance illuminate pathways toward emancipation and repair. This demands a thorough reckoning with the oppressive histories and present realities shaping rural women's lives, coupled with courageous commitments to build new, life-affirming systems.

A justice framework rooted in abolition feminism envisions a transformative agenda for research, advocacy, and community engagement that centres accountability and solidarity.

This agenda insists on moving beyond performative gestures of support to concrete political and material commitments that improve the wellbeing of rural women. Drawing from the example of solidarity networks, such work must prioritize co-creation of knowledge, interdisciplinary collaboration, and activist strategies that challenge state violence and systemic neglect. For rural women, this means developing legal and social resources grounded in their realities, amplifying their voices as co-thinkers and leaders, and mobilizing institutional and grassroots power to dismantle barriers to justice access. Universities, NGOs, and policymakers must be accountable partners in this work, sharing resources and platforms while respecting rural women's autonomy and leadership.

Importantly, abolition feminist praxis rejects reformist strategies that ultimately entrench the very systems that perpetuate harm. This includes the reliance on carceral responses such as punitive policing, restrictive legal procedures, and the imposition of state-controlled "solutions" that reproduce hierarchies of power and exclusion. In the context of rural justice, this entails critiquing legal institutions that criminalise rural women's survival strategies whether in land stewardship, food production, or family care while ignoring systemic violence and structural inequalities. Similarly, the expansion of bureaucratic control and surveillance, under the guise of "protection," often deepens the precarity of rural women and reinforces cycles of impunity for abusers. Abolition feminism calls for dismantling these institutional arrangements and instead investing in transformative justice models, community-based support, and reparative mechanisms that center healing and accountability outside carceral frameworks.

Moreover, this transformative vision demands reimagining governance structures that regulate justice and social order, including the role of state institutions in rural spaces. The intersection of rural marginalisation and institutional neglect highlights how borders whether geographic, legal, or social function to isolate rural women from resources, rights, and political power. Dismantling these "border imperialist" regimes means more than reform; it requires fundamentally rethinking how justice is conceptualised and administered, particularly in contexts where state presence is minimal or harmful. Achieving justice for rural women is thus inseparable from broader struggles against settler colonialism, extractive capitalism, and patriarchal governance that uphold these borders and limit rural women's self-determination and mobility.

The patterns of dispossession and exclusion that shape rural women's access to justice are neither accidental nor new. Rather, they echo historical violences rooted in land dispossession, racialised labour exploitation, and the gendered control of bodies and resources. These continuities amplify the structural barriers that rural women face today from inadequate legal protections and restricted mobility to social stigmatisation and economic marginalisation. Yet, despite these daunting challenges, rural women continue to resist, organise, and assert their rights in ways that disrupt dominant narratives and systems of power. Their lived experiences offer vital insights into the kinds of justice and futures that abolition feminism seeks to cultivate: futures where justice is participatory, restorative, and transformative, rooted in collective care and liberation.

Grappling with the carceral and institutional mechanisms restricting rural women's access to justice reveals a deeply intertwined web of oppression that demands abolition feminist responses. While these problems are complex and entrenched, the possibilities for change emerge when we commit to dismantling systems of violence and building alternatives that affirm the dignity, autonomy, and rights of rural women. Such futures demand that we not only challenge the structures of injustice but also centre the voices and leadership of those most affected recognising rural women as agents of their own liberation and vital contributors to collective justice movements. Through abolition feminist praxis, we can chart a course toward justice systems and social orders that nurture healing, equity, and flourishing for all.

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