

I YEAR AFTER #ENDSARS, YOUNG NIGERIANS STILL HOPING

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Nigeria's treatment of its young involves profiling them as criminals and even the Nigerian President publicly saying that young people are 'lazy'.¹ That statement opened young Nigerians to attacks, especially from SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad), because of their refusal to do conventional jobs like working in civil service. However, Nigerian companies built by young people between 2020 and 2021 achieved unicorn² status, having raised over \$10 billion (£7.3 billion). Nigerian talent has been better recognised internationally,³ evidenced by massive emigration⁴ being recorded. It would seem that everyone else but Nigerian officials appreciates what young Nigerians are truly capable of.

Police brutality is not new to Nigeria or to the millions of young people who make up the majority of its population, and neither is the #EndSARS tag. Nigerians first witnessed a wave of protests against police brutality in 2017 using the same tag. But when the Nigeria police's gun went off⁵ in Delta state, South-south Nigeria, again on October 3, 2020, it would be the moment that broke the tolerance for the government's abuse, leading to one of the most popular human rights protests of 2020.

Young Nigerians converged in different cities across the country, from Lagos to Abuja, until it was impossible for them to not be heard. But when the Nigerian government heard them, the infamous Lekki Massacre occurred on October 20, 2020, killing⁶ at least 12 people. The Massacre is more than a year old now, but the brutality has not stopped, and justice has not been served. But, the youth civil society in Nigeria will not rest until it does.



Nigeria's youth took it on ten toes

The innovative nature of Nigeria's youth population was tested, along with their desire to suspend biases, differences, and work together for the country's progress. To circumvent police harassment, apps were developed to inform people about places experiencing Police attacks and to also send out SOS messages. As criticisms went to the executive arm of government, young Nigerians also created mechanisms to reach out to legislators and force reactions and responses out of them.

To keep the stories of victims alive, a website was created for archival purposes, along with a public access substack library. Young women in Nigeria, in the spirit of late women activists like Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Margaret Ekpo, Nwayeruwa united under the Feminist Coalition to provide support for the protests by raising money through donations, providing security, securing medicare, and ensuring litigation support to people who were wrongly arrested.

While these activists consist of organisations and persons who have some popularity, several other individuals⁷ protested using their professional merits, some named, many unnamed. There was Nigeria's illiterate underclass⁸ who contributed in no small measure, the doctors who worked for free, the artisans who helped to build and evacuate, the lawyers who lost sleep trying to free illegally-detained people, and civic right activists who were everywhere raising voices. The support did not end even after the protests. Free legal aid, prosthetic leg crowdsourcing⁹, scholarship¹⁰ for a child born in detention, are just some of the actions taken.

Impact of the pandemic

In the first two weeks of the pandemic lockdown, the police killed¹¹ more people than the virus.¹² This caused security and resources frustration amongst Nigerian youth, which contributed to the protests.

The COVID-19 lockdown drove Nigeria into its worst¹³ economic position in over a decade, with poor citizens bearing the biggest brunt of its impact as they suffered from hunger and food scarcity. This is why food donation crowdsourced by youth activists via social media played an important role in keeping the protest alive. The far-reaching impact of the pandemic became noticeable after the protests: poor Nigerians who were no longer able to afford to feed themselves resorted to looting government warehouses where COVID-19 palliatives were being hidden, leading to more arrests.



Young protesters with different inscriptions on placards, calling for an end to police brutality with the hashtag #NigeriaYouthLivesMatter. Picture by Xultan Visuals.

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Nigerian youths lined up in front of the Kwara State Government House chanting songs and singing the Nigeria National Anthem with inscriptions #SayNOTOSARs. Picture by Xultan Visuals.

But justice has not been served

During the protests, young Nigerians demanded five things from the government: 1) immediate release of all protesters, 2) justice for victims, 3) setting up a judicial panel to investigate brutalities, 4) retraining of and psychological evaluation for police officers, and 5) police reform including better standards of living.

The government pretended to listen for a while. It set up panels across the country. The family of Kolade Johnson (who was shot while standing by the roadside after a football match) was compensated. Hannah, who was left disabled by the police, was promised justice. Some N200 million (£35 million) was shared by the Lagos judicial panel to other victims.¹⁴ Across the country, different panels tried different resolution mechanisms, but in other places, the perpetrators have faded into the darkness.

The Judicial Panel of Inquiry and Restitution at the Lagos Court of Arbitration – more than one year after the massacre – officially declared it a massacre at the hands of the Army. Despite the ruling, Nigeria's Minister of Information described it as a “phantom massacre” and the government and military still continue their silence.¹⁵ Despite the report and a public hearing that the Nigerian Army murdered peaceful protesters at Lekki,¹⁶ there has still not been justice at the national level for the thousands of people who have been killed by the police or the Army. The Lagos state government has promised to act upon the panel's recommendations and has awarded approximately 70 victims a total of 410 million naira (just over 700,000 GBP) as compensation.¹⁷

What is the future for Nigerian youth?

Nigerians who have been living through the #EndSARS protests recognise that it has been a trauma better not repeated, a pain one would never want to recall, and an eternal scar left on young people. And it is in this recognition that young Nigerians provided mental health support for people struggling to live with the consequences of the protests, through therapy and support groups.

The United States Institute of Peace said, *‘The young protesters at the vanguard of the EndSARS movement have not been dissuaded and continue to push for change. Yet if the moment of transnational attention to EndSARS is going to be translated into long-term policy change, it will likely not come through flashy celebrity endorsements and massive social media condemnation, but through lower-profile,*

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careful transnational organizing to target the pressure points of the Nigerian state in a way that is sustained and committed for the long term.’

As the one year anniversary of the protest passed, young Nigerians have again taken to advocacy using Twitter Spaces, organising a summit, and so on. Adopting lessons from the pandemic lockdown, protests and citizen education now happen in places other than on the streets, allowing young Nigerians to get more international support than before. Their resilience might have been tested, but they are not done.

This spotlight chapter is part of the State of Youth Civil Society global, youth-led publication.



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- ³ Punch Newspapers. (2021). *We shed tears of joy after receiving first pay in Saudi Arabia, UK, others – Nigerian doctors*. [online] Available at: <https://punchng.com/we-shed-tears-of-joy-after-receiving-first-pay-in-saudi-arabia-uk-others-nigerian-doctors/#:~:text=Video-> [Accessed 17 Oct. 2021].
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- ⁹ The Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News. (2020). *Nigerians raise over N7 million to buy prosthetic leg for two #EndSARS protesters*. [online] Available at: <https://guardian.ng/news/nigerians-raise-over-n7-million-to-buy-prosthetic-leg-for-two-endsars-protesters/> [Accessed 17 Oct. 2021].
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