

# Systems Change in Action: Gender Mobile's Journey to Tackle Sexual Harassment in Nigeria



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## **Executive Summary**

Gender Mobile Initiative (GMI) has led a pioneering systems-change movement aimed at eradicating sexual harassment in Nigeria's tertiary institutions. Anchored in a robust theory of change, their work integrates policy design, institutional accountability, preventative education, and cultural transformation. By building strategic coalitions and leveraging political economy insights, GMI facilitated the development and adoption of a national model policy, now localized by 37 states and operational in over 285 institutions. This transformation holds the potential to impact over 4 million women and girls. Their journey offers practical insights into what it takes to reform deeply entrenched systems through inclusive, co-created, and intersectional strategies.

## Introduction

Sexual harassment was alarmingly pervasive in Nigeria's higher education institutions, with statistics indicating that about 70% of female students experienced some form of harassment. Despite its prevalence, the issue was often ignored, and there were no robust policies or systems to protect victims or hold perpetrators accountable. Safe reporting mechanisms were scarce, and deep-rooted institutional cultures of silence and impunity prevailed. Students, particularly women, girls, and other vulnerable groups, faced systemic barriers to safety, justice, and participation.

Gender Mobile Initiative (GMI) was established to confront this crisis head-on. The goal was to create safer, more inclusive campuses where women, girls, and marginalised groups could learn without fear. But instead of treating isolated incidents or relying on awareness campaigns alone, the organisation took on the entire system, including policies, culture, power dynamics, and accountability structures to create safer, more inclusive campuses where women, girls, and marginalised groups could learn without fear.

## The Systems Change Approach

Initially, Gender Mobile employed a siloed, programmatic model with limited stakeholder engagement. Over time, they shifted toward addressing the full scale of the problem using a systems-change lens. Key shifts included:

- Transitioning from linear scaling to working at the scale of the problem.
- Integrating Political Economy Analysis to understand power structures and align incentives.
- Grounding efforts in an intersectional feminist framework to center marginalised voices.
- Developing a strategy document articulating their theory of change, learning agenda, and outcome pathways.

## Theory of Change

Gender Mobile's systems-change work is guided by a theory of change that posits comprehensive anti-sexual harassment frameworks and preventative education programs, when co-created and embedded in institutional culture, can transform power dynamics and reduce violence.

Their model is anchored on four integrated pillars:

1. Design and implementation of policy frameworks:
2. Strengthening institutional accountability.
3. Shifting societal and institutional mindsets.
4. Transforming the norms that sustain sexual violence.

## Systems Change Strategies

- Built Broad Partnerships: Collaborated with government ministries, regulatory bodies (e.g., NBTE), student unions, CSOs and community leaders.
- Accountability Partnerships: Framed themselves as thinking partners rather than watchdogs, building trust for deeper reform.
- Developed an Integrated Model: Combined legal (policy reform), educational (preventative education), technological (reporting tools), and participatory tools.
- Co-Creation Methodology: Students and affected groups helped shape tools and policies, leading to higher ownership and relevance.
- Political Economy Analysis: Regularly assessed political and institutional shifts, adapting as needed.
- Evidence-Driven Adaptation: Employed baseline assessments and learning loops to refine approaches.

## Collaboration/Coalition:

One cannot change a system alone. Instead, system change work requires adopting a range of tactical coalitions and partnerships to facilitate working across the system. In GMI's case, they built a multi-level coalition involving Federal Ministries, government agencies (e.g., ICPC, NBTE), sub-national Ministries, student groups, CSOs and alumni networks, and mission-aligned funders. This coalition was effective due to shared values, co-ownership platforms, and inclusive practices that elevated marginalized voices, particularly of young women.

## Systemic Barriers & How They Were Navigated

- Leadership Transitions: Disrupted continuity and stalled reform. Addressed through MOUs with three-year tenures and multi-contact engagement to institutionalise commitments.
- Governance complexity: Jurisdictional overlaps between federal and state institutions. GMI partnered with regulatory agencies like the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) to ensure cross-cutting engagement.
- Institutional Resistance: Fear of reputational risk. GMI deployed data-driven advocacy, soft power influence, and demand-led engagement from within institutions.
- Informal Power Dynamics: Tackled using continuous PEA and adaptive strategy.

## Lessons and Advice for Systems Actors:

- ✓ Understand power and incentives, not just structures.
- ✓ Target foundational levers like regulatory frameworks.
- ✓ PEA must be continuous, not a one-off. Systems require continuous analysis
- ✓ Identify and nurture reform champions early.
- ✓ Combine policy/legal reform with mindset and norms change.
- ✓ Peer influence among officials is often more effective than external pressure.
- ✓ Co-creation drives relevance and sustainability. Ground everything in the experiences of those most impacted.
- ✓ Anticipate and plan for resistance.
- ✓ Address both formal and informal systems.
- ✓ Treat systems change as iterative and adaptive.

### Advice:

1. Build broad coalitions early.
2. Document everything, for learning, continuity, and legitimacy.
3. Be patient, but always strategic.
4. Keep those most affected at the center.

## Impact and Outcomes

### **System-Level Impact:**

- A national model policy was adopted by the Federal Government and localised in 37 states.
- 285 institutions operationalised anti-sexual harassment frameworks.
- Enhanced monitoring by agencies like NUC and NBTE.

### **People-Level Impact:**

- Increased safety and confidence among students.
- More women and students involved in leadership, policy development, and accountability mechanisms.
- Strengthened institutional culture of zero tolerance.

### **Organisational Shifts**

To meet the complexity of systems change, GMI:

- Expanded its team, adding a Research and Policy Department and a Learning, Measurement, and Evaluation.
- Invested in professional development and strategic hiring.
- Strengthened knowledge management and documentation practices.
- Stayed centered on strategic coherence and operational efficiency.

## Conclusion:

Gender Mobile's journey shows that real, lasting change in complex systems like education requires more than good ideas. It needs strong partnerships, deep understanding of the context, and a commitment to center those most affected. Gender Mobile's approach wasn't about scaling a programme; it was about scaling a solution to the size of the problem. Their work is helping to make Nigerian campuses safer and more inclusive for millions of students.

Their journey provides a practical blueprint for any organisation committed to making lasting change: build coalitions, understand the system, adapt as you go, and center those most impacted. Their story offers valuable insights for organisations and governments seeking to drive meaningful transformation in complex environments.

If you're working on systems change, consider:

- Are we addressing the root causes or just the visible symptoms?

## CASE STUDY

- Who holds the real power, and how can we engage them?
- How can we co-create solutions rather than impose them?
- Are marginalised voices shaping our approach?
- Do we have the capacity to monitor, adapt, and sustain our work?
- Are we building structures that will outlast individual champions?



## Africa Systems Change Community of Practice

Engage, Learn, Impact



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