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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **Citizens' Gavel Urges Telegram to Strengthen its Regulatory Framework Against Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence.**

Citizens' Gavel has instituted a Fundamental Rights Enforcement action before the Federal High Court of Nigeria against messaging platform, Telegram, over the platform's lax content moderation guardrails and sustained failure to protect Nigerian users from sexual exploitation and the non-consensual distribution of intimate images.

This legal action follows a disturbing investigation by the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID), published on its fact-checking platform DUBAWA, which found 86 Telegram channels with over 16,000 active users across several Nigerian states and university communities where intimate videos of women are obtained non-consensually, used to advertise prostitution, recruit vulnerable people, and normalise exploitation and sex trafficking.

The findings of this investigation are consistent with what Citizens' Gavel has witnessed firsthand through Gbami, its sexual and gender-based abuse response arm, which has directly handled cases of women and girls whose intimate content have been obtained through deception, where perpetrators assumed false identities, cultivated trust, and manufactured emotional intimacy until victims, believing themselves in a private and caring relationship, shared images that were then sold to strangers across multiple marketplaces on the platform. The selling, however, is rarely where it ends. These images and videos are routinely weaponised to blackmail, extort, and coerce victims into prostitution, trapping them in a cycle of abuse.

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As the DUBAWA investigation shows, it is a matter of grave concern that a platform with a billion monthly active users which positions itself as secure has so permitted its privacy features to be misused that it has effectively become a fertile infrastructure for organised sexual exploitation, where reported groups and users routinely re-emerge under the same or similar identities and continue operating as before. This pattern suggests that the failure is not one of capacity, but of will. In the same vein, recent international investigations have shown that Telegram-hosted networks are increasingly used to distribute AI-generated deepfake sexual content, with Nigeria emerging as one of their primary operational markets.

Beyond the gaps of the big tech platform, existing legal frameworks in Nigeria sadly offer survivors little by way of meaningful protection or redress. The Cybercrimes Act and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act were not conceived to address the pace or complexity of today's digital harm, and while NITDA holds regulatory authority on paper, enforcement against foreign technology companies has, in practice, remained largely ineffective. So, for many survivors, there is nowhere to turn. This absence of recourse continues to cost women their privacy, dignity, safety, and lives.

We call on Telegram to immediately implement accessible and survivor-centred reporting mechanisms, strengthen content moderation systems, and cooperate fully with Nigerian authorities in cases involving sexual exploitation and trafficking.

We further call on NITDA to exercise its regulatory authority and issue formal compliance notices to Telegram regarding its failure to adequately protect Nigerian users. In the same vein, we call on NAPTIP to hasten its investigation into the activities of such groups and, in the long term, create a specialised enforcement mechanism to identify, investigate, and prosecute

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individuals who manage groups used to recruit, traffic, or exploit women for commercial sexual exploitation online.

In addition, we urge the National Assembly to prioritise the development and passage of a comprehensive Online Harm Act that establishes clear obligations and liability standards for digital platforms operating in Nigeria.

Finally, we call on the Inspector General of Police to ensure that all reports of online sexual exploitation are treated as serious criminal matters and referred promptly to appropriately trained cybercrime units for investigation and prosecution.

Digital spaces should not function as safe havens for exploitation. They must be safe, accountable, and governed by standards that place human dignity above platform profitability.

Signed,

Rita Odafe-Ofarn,

Lead, Tech-Facilitated SGBV Response Unit,

Citizens' Gavel.

**ABOUT GAVEL: Citizens' Gavel promotes the rule of law and democratic principles by accelerating the pace of justice delivery through access to justice, accountability, digital technology, and advocacy.**

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