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Factors that Contribute to Gender-Based Violence of Girls and Young Women in Abia State: Social Work Implication

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ABSTRACT

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) encompasses harmful acts perpetrated against the will of an individual, based on gender norms and unequal power dynamics within society. This study explored factors contributing to sexual and gender-based violence against girls and young women in Abia State. 431 girls and young women age 18-35 years across the three senatorial districts of Abia state were selected through simple random sampling for the study. A structure questionnaire titled "Factors Contributing to Sexual and Gender Based Violence among Girls and Young Women Questionnaire (FCSGBVGYWQ) was used for data collection. Data analysis was done using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings from the study revealed that poverty, cultural practices and traditional beliefs, weak law enforcement and substance abuse contribute significantly to sexual and gender-based violence against girls and young women. These findings have serious implications for social work practice in N Poverty, Sexual and gender-based violence, social work, Traditional practice and VAPP act igeria; the most important being the need for social workers to engage in massive enlightenment campaign and engage with relevant stakeholder a safe and stable environment for girls and young women to develop.

KEYWORDS: Poverty, Sexual And Gender-Based Violence, Social Work, Traditional Practice And VAPP Act.

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) encompasses harmful acts perpetrated against the will of an individual, based on gender norms and unequal power dynamics within society. The United Nations Women [UN Women], (2020) define SGBV as any act that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women and girls, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. These acts include but are not limited to rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and trafficking. According to the World Health Organization [WHO], (2021), SGBV represents both a significant public health concern and a fundamental violation of human rights, particularly affecting women and girls across all socio-economic strata.

Sexual and gender-based violence has physical, psychological and socio-economic effects on girls and young women. Physical consequences include: immediate injuries, chronic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, gynecological complications, sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancies (WHO, 2021). Psychological effects encompass depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal thoughts, and social isolation while the socio-economic implications include: educational disruption, reduced workforce participation, and increased healthcare costs (Krug et al., 2002). Global statistics reveal that approximately one in three women worldwide has experienced physical and/or sexual violence, predominantly by an intimate partner (UN Women, 2021). In Africa, the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence is particularly high, with 45.6% of women reporting experience of intimate partner violence (Ahinkorah, 2021; Mbina et al., 2025). This statistic significantly exceeds the global average of 30% reported by Muluneh et al., (2020).

In Nigeria, SGBV remains pervasive, with the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) revealing that about 31% of women aged between 15 years and 49 years have experienced physical violence while 9% have experienced sexual violence at least once in their lifetime (National Population Commission [NPC], 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this situation, with Nigeria recording a 149% increase in reported SGBV cases during lockdown periods (Afolabi, 2024). In Abia state, SGBV against girls and young women remains persistent.

According to a study in Abia state by Odini et al., (2024), 51.2% out of 306 undergraduate students reported to have experienced intimate partner violence, 30.8% reported to have suffered sexual abuse, 42.0% reported to have suffered physical abuse, while 78.9% had suffered emotional abuse. In a newspaper report, Abia State recorded 92 incidents of gender-based violence and four fatal cases between 2020 and 2023 (Olorunfemi, 2023). However, the most worrying aspect of the problem is that there existed absence of punishment for people who extort victims and unnecessary delays in the prosecution of perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence (Odini et al., 2024).

The Nigerian government has so far demonstrated commitment to addressing sexual and gender-based violence through various legislative and policy frameworks. The Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act of 2015 for example provides comprehensive legal protection against various forms of violence. The act aims to forbid all forms of violence against persons, provides maximum protection and effective remedies for victims of violence, punishments for offenders as well as protections against offenses that affect women disproportionately, including the prohibition of female genital mutilation, forceful ejection from home, forced financial dependence or economic abuse, forced isolation, emotional, verbal, and psychological abuse, harmful widowhood practices, spousal battery amongst others. Nigeria has also ratified international agreements including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, the Maputo Protocol, and committed to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality. The National Gender Policy, 2006 further reinforces these commitments. However, implementation of these legal frameworks remains weak, particularly at state levels where domestication of national laws varies (Dipo-Salami & Ikoku, 2022). This brings to bear the important roles of social workers in promoting a just, fair and equitable society for all.

Amadasun (2021) noted that the goal of social work profession is to advance social cohesion and stability, promote social change development through empowerment and liberation of people as well as restoring social functioning while championing respect for the sanctity of life and drawing on the ideals of social justice and human dignity. With sexual and gender based violence, girls and young women have to come to terms with its often harsh consequences such immediate injuries, chronic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, gynecological complications, sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal thoughts, social isolation, educational disruption, reduced workforce participation, long term health effects, impacts on sexuality, increased healthcare costs and often course a sense of no longer fitting with socially and culturally-shaped ideas that are inimical to the growth and development of girls and young women (WHO, 2021; Krug et al., 2002). These challenges mean that social workers can improve the care of these women by acknowledging potential distress, and recognizing that the impact of the condition can extend to women's social identities, relationships, work, other growing demands and consequently need to help them balance life roles (Parast & Allaii, 2014; Seng et al., 2021).

All over the world, several interconnected factors have been identified as contributing to the persistence of sexual and gender-based violence against girls and young women. These factors include: cultural factors such as patriarchal systems that normalize violence against women, harmful traditional practices, and gender-discriminatory customs; social factors such as gender inequality, limited educational opportunities for girls, male preference and societal attitudes that stigmatize victims; economic factors such as poverty, financial dependency, and limited access to resources and legal factors such weak enforcement of existing laws, limited access to justice, and gaps in legislative frameworks (Izzi & Umunna, 2020; Oladepo et al., 2011). So, this study is aimed at exploring how these factors contribute to gender-based violence of girls and young women in Abia State, Nigeria.

MATERIAL AND PROCEDURE

Participants

450 girls and young women age 18-35 years across the three senatorial districts of Abia state were selected through simple random sampling for the study. The rationale behind the use of these set of people is because it is believed that they will better under factors contributing to sexual and domestic violence.

Material and procedures

A structured questionnaire titled "Factors Contributing to Sexual and Gender Based Violence among Girls and Young Women Questionnaire (FCSGBVGYWQ) was used for data collection. The Questionnaire items were structured on a four-point rating scale of Strongly Disagree (SD) with a score of 1 to Strong Agree (SA) with a score of 4 Three research assistants (one each from the three senatorial district) were trained on the on the objectives and methods of the study helped the researcher in administering the questionnaire. The internal consistency reliability of the instrument was achieved by distributing 20 copies to 20 respondents

who are not part of the study but within the population frame of the study. Data obtained from this step was subjected to Cronbach Alpha for internal consistency reliability calculation. This is in compliance with Nwankwo and Macdonald (2019) submission that Cronbach Alpha is used for reliability calculation when the instrument for a study is in form of a likert scale having more than two option for response. Data analysis was done using both descriptive and inferential statistics. A total of 450 copies of the instrument were administered and a total of 431 with 144 from Abia Central, 146 from Abia North and 141 from Abia South were duly completed, returned and used for analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1: Factors that Contribute to Gender-based Violence

S/N	Statement	Abia Central (n=144)			Abia North (n=146)			Abia South (n=141)		
		M	S.D.	RMK	M	S.D.	RMK	M	S.D.	RMK
1	Poverty contributes significantly to GBV against girls and young women.	3.24	0.78	A	3.09	0.91	A	3.06	0.95	A
2	Cultural practices and traditional beliefs encourage GBV.	3.45	0.62	A	3.42	0.58	A	3.46	0.63	A
3	Lack of awareness of human rights exposes girls and young women to GBV.	1.74	0.84	D	1.92	0.96	D	1.76	0.93	D
4	Weak law enforcement increases GBV prevalence.	3.45	0.55	A	3.45	0.60	A	3.48	0.56	A
5	Substance abuse (alcohol/drugs) contributes to GBV.	3.43	0.52	A	3.52	0.51	A	3.50	0.52	A
6	Peer influence makes young women more vulnerable to GBV.	1.71	0.82	D	1.86	1.01	D	1.94	0.98	D
7	Inadequate parental guidance contributes to GBV against girls and young women.	3.56	0.56	A	3.47	0.55	A	3.45	0.57	A
	Grand Mean	2.94	0.67	A	2.96	0.73	A	2.95	0.73	A

Field Data, 2025.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to find out the factors that contribute to gender-based violence of girls and young women in Abia State. The result showed that the respondents from Abia Central, Abia North and Abia South all agreed that poverty contributes significantly to GBV against girls and young women. This finding corroborates that of Okolie et al., (2023) who found that poverty was one of the factors responsible for gender-based violence (18%) among women and girls in Maiduguri Metropolis, Borno State, North-East Nigeria. Similarly, Wanjiru (2021) in an empirical review found that poverty was one of the major causes of gender-based violence globally. This aligns with global evidence showing that economic hardship exacerbates GBV by increasing women's dependence on abusive partners and limiting their ability to seek help (Ejupi, & Arifi, 2025). In sub-Saharan Africa, poverty has been linked to higher rates of intimate partner violence (IPV), as financial stress strains relationships and reinforces male dominance (Muluneh, et al., 2021). A meta-analysis of GBV in Nigeria found that low socioeconomic status was a strong predictor of violence, particularly in regions with high unemployment rates (Akamike et al., 2019).

The respondents from the three senatorial zones strongly agreed that cultural practices and traditional beliefs encourage GBV. This result aligns with that of Ojo et al. (2023) who found that gender norms including traditional beliefs and practices, religious beliefs and practices, and the belief that males are superior to females were the major causes of GBV among students of tertiary institutions in Abuja, Nigeria. Similarly, Muluneh et al. (2021) in their systematic review and meta-analysis of associated factors of GBV against women in sub-Saharan Africa found that community and societal factors including tolerant attitudes toward violence contributed to increased GBV risk. Furthermore, Mbina et al., (2025) in their study opines that as children develop and grow in an environment in which they are exposed to IPV, they face not only a higher risk of suffering other forms of maltreatment but also the risk of significant adverse physical, psychological, and psychosocial effects from exposure to abusive events. This result is consistent with result of studies in Nigeria showing how patriarchal traditions normalize male dominance and justify violence against women. This is evident in the practice of early marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) in some communities which are most times defended and accepted on cultural and religious ground (Airaoje et al., 2022).

Interestingly, the respondents from all three senatorial zones disagreed that lack of awareness of human rights exposes girls and young women to GBV, suggesting that awareness levels may be adequate in the study area. This contrasts with some opinions expressed in some public forums where lack of awareness has been identified as a contributing factor. However, the findings of this study is in agreement with the study of Obiagu (2023) who examined the relationship between women's education, economic empowerment, and exposure to intimate partner or domestic GBV in Nigeria and found that education and economic empowerment do not directly reduce GBV victimization as women with little to no education and lower income faced the least domestic GBV, while those more educated than their husbands experienced higher rates of SGBV.

The result further showed that respondents strongly agreed that weak law enforcement increases GBV prevalence. This finding is consistent with the study of Izzi and Umunna (2020) which found that weak enforcement of existing laws, limited access to justice, and gaps in legislative frameworks are catalyst promoting gender-based violence. The findings of this study are in line with Dipo-Salami and Ikoku (2022) which argued that implementation of these legal frameworks remains weak, particularly at state levels where domestication of national laws varies.

Similarly, the respondents from the three senatorial zones strongly agreed that substance abuse (alcohol/drugs) contributes to GBV. This result corroborates that of Oladepo et al., (2011) who found that alcohol intake by male partners contributed to gender-based violence against women in selected states in Nigeria. Additionally, Ngonga (2016) found that alcohol abuse was among factors that contribute to gender-based violence in Zambia. Muluneh et al. (2021) also found that alcohol consumption elevated the odds of GBV by 2.4-fold (OR: 2.4, 95% CI: 1.94–2.85) in their meta-analysis. Similarly, Odini et al. (2024) identified male partner alcohol consumption as a key predictor of intimate partner violence among female undergraduates (aOR = 5.17, 95% CI: 2.46–10.88).

The respondents from all three senatorial zones disagreed that peer influence makes young women more vulnerable to GBV, suggesting that peer relationships may not be a primary risk factor in this context. Finally, the respondents strongly agreed that inadequate parental guidance contributes to GBV against girls and young women. This finding is supported by Dogiso et al., (2019) who in their study found that family-related factors were associated with gender-based violence among high school female students in Ethiopia. Similarly, Odini et al. (2024) which opined that having witnessed domestic violence as a child was a key predictor of intimate partner violence (aOR = 3.55, 95% CI: 1.56–8.07), suggesting the importance of family environment and guidance in preventing GBV. The overall grand mean scores across the three senatorial zones indicate general agreement on the factors contributing to GBV, with cultural practices and traditional beliefs, weak law enforcement, substance abuse, and inadequate parental guidance emerging as the most significant contributing factors according to the respondents.

Implication for Social Work practice in Nigeria

The findings of this study have significant implications for social work practice in Nigeria. This study sought to find out the factors that contribute to gender-based violence of girls and young women in Abia State. The result showed that the respondents agreed that poverty contributes significantly to GBV against girls and young women. This finding makes case for social workers to empower young women and girls with necessary skills that will help them to be gainfully employed. It is believed that if young women and girls are engaged in viable livelihood, it will reduce their dependence on people around them which is one of the reasons that expose them to sexual and gender-based violence. As a profession, social work has always played a key role in managing risk and complexity, working with vulnerable and at-risk population (Allen, 2014). Through their enhanced social perspectives, social workers can help young women and girls to access appropriate services that will make them self-reliant. and sensitive to the needs of the individual.

Another finding of this study is that cultural practices and traditional beliefs encourage SGBV. This finding has serious implications for social work practice in Nigeria. The cultural practices and traditional beliefs which this study make reference to is rooted in the norms and culture of the people which required collaborative efforts to address. As agents of change, social workers have the onerous responsibility of engaging in massive enlightenment campaigns against sexual and gender-based violence against young women and girls. In collaboration with state actors and community gate keepers like religious and traditional leaders, social worker can help dispel deep rooted sentiments, fears, stereotypes and practices that expose young women and girls to sexual and gender-based violence.

Furthermore, results from this study showed that that weak law enforcement increases sexual and gender-based violence against young women and girls. Strong and decisive implementation of laws and policies is important to maintaining social order. What this means is that social workers can work with policy makers in advocating for policies that discourages sexual and gender-based violence against young women and girls. The fourth purpose of social work speak to “contribution to the improvement and development of social policy”. This is a macro level social work practice that commit social workers in having a critical look at policies and work with appropriate legislative bodies to promote the rights of young women and girls.

Finally, this study found that substance abuse (alcohol/drugs) contributes to SGBV prevalence against young women and girls. Working with in this kind of environment commit social workers to work with multi-agency service providers to address the substance abuse and provide care and support to young women who are victims of sexual and gender-based violence as a result of substance abuse. As part of the rehabilitative team, social workers can work with substance abusers to build their resilience against factors that predispose them to substance abuse. They are also in a better position to offer counseling and other support services to young women and girls to deal with abusive relationship that expose them to sexual and gender-based violence

CONCLUSIONS

Sexual violence and gender -based (SGBV) represents an omnipresent violation of human rights which affects individuals through various demographic data, which has a significant impact on societal structures and public health. Given the prevalence of the SGBV and its multifaceted implications, there is an urgent need to understand the underlying factors that contribute to this complex question. This in essence is the crux of the matter in this study. The findings from this study identified several deeply rooted structural and cultural factors that perpetuate gender-based violence in the state. Cultural practices and traditional beliefs, inadequate parental guidance, substance abuse, weak law enforcement, and poverty emerge as the primary drivers of violence against girls and young women. The strong agreement across all zones on these factors indicates that interventions must address these underlying causes rather than merely treating the symptoms of gender-based violence. Of significant importance is the finding that cultural and traditional practices are viewed as major contributors, suggesting that interventions must engage with community norms and belief systems to create lasting change.

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