

GENDERED VIOLENCE: VULNERABILITY OF FEMALE SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS TO SEXUAL ABUSE

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Abstract

The study investigated girls' vulnerability to sexual violence among public secondary school students in Akoko South-West Local Government Area (LGA) of Ondo State, Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. A total of two hundred (200) students within the age range of nine to twenty (9-20) years were selected from four (4) secondary schools out of the fifteen in the LGA for the study, through a purposive sampling technique. Two hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. Data collected were analyzed using chi-square statistics. Findings of the study showed that there was a significant relationship between male sexual exploitation and girls' vulnerability to sexual abuse, with r -cal of 0.68 at 0.05 level of significance. Findings further revealed that there was no significant relationship between girls, aged nine to twenty (9-20) and their vulnerability to sexual abuse, with r -cal of 0.13 at 0.05 level of significance. Based on the findings, girls were advised to be committed to their studies, and live within their means so as not to fall victims of sexual exploitation. It was further recommended that girls, no matter their ages, should avoid being alone with members of the opposite sex; especially, senior boys and male teachers, when other students must have left for home or their hostels. Girls should be encouraged to speak up, report to the school authority and their parents in case they are sexually abused so that appropriate actions would be taken against perpetrators.

Keywords: Gendered-violence, vulnerability, girls, sexual abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Gendered violence is described as an unsolicited sexual act. It is observed though, that while both male and female are liable to gendered violence, majority of the victims are females. Gender based and sexual violence against the female are often used interchangeably and also acknowledged as gendered violence. Enzuladu, Umaru, Banwat, Lar, Lassa, and Zoakah (2013) stated that it is important to understand that ramification of gendered violence is not only a physical act, but also verbal or any act that forces a person to join in unwanted sexual contact or attention. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM, 2010) and Zain (2012), posited that gendered violence is deeply rooted in gender

inequality and human rights violation within all societies of the world. It is an extreme manifestation of gender inequality targeting women and girls because of their subordinate social status in society. Vulnerability of girls to gendered violence has much to do with those conditions that make it possible for girls to become easy targets of sexual violation. Perhaps, it could be right to say that the perceived weaker sex syndrome of girls in relation to boys, could be regarded as one of such conditions that make girls vulnerable. However, in the opinion of Paramilla (2019), vulnerability of girls to gendered violence is based on the social construction in gender-related issues such as the gender discriminatory norms, beliefs, and societal institutions which justify violence against girls, resulting from their being negatively valued in private and public spheres.

Recently, in Nigeria, there have been incessant reports in the daily newspapers and the social media on girls being raped, maimed and killed. The following were just a few out of the recently reported cases of sexually abused girls.

1. In *The Nation* Newspaper of January 4th, Nwokolo (2020) reported the arrest of a 23-year-old man for defiling a 3-year-old girl in Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria
2. In the *Daily Post* Newspaper of 4th of June, Adelokun (2020) reported the rape and the murder of Uwaila Omozuwa, a 22-year-old, one hundred level student of the University of Benin in Edo State Nigeria, inside the church of God where she was busy studying.
3. In the *Daily Post* Newspaper (PM, News) of 13th January, it was reported by Oyeyemi (2020), the police relation officer that a 25-year-old cobbler, Olamide Babayemi, was arrested for raping a National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) member, sharing her nude video with his friends on the social media.

Since the school is the mirror of the larger society, gender-based violence in secondary school which is the focus of this paper, is a replica of the experience being shared in the public sphere except for its delimitation to secondary school girls only, and being located in the school environment. According to Ajayi (2017) and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017), school related gender-based violence is an attempt made to obtain a sexual act directed against a girl's sexuality using coercion, by any person who could be the teacher, administrative staff, senior boy, or peer, within the school environment. It was observed by Badiri (2014), Ajayi (2017) and Dike (2017), that perpetrators of sexual violence at the secondary school level are mostly teachers, senior students and peers, who can lure any of their victims into sexual relationship irrespective of their ages or classes. In other words, sexual abuse is not limited to a particular age or class, it cuts across all classes from the Junior Secondary School (JSS) to Senior Secondary School (SSS) classes. It can also be done on either young or old students, between nine to twenty years in any of these classes (Badiri, 2014).

Further reports from the United States for International Development (USAID, 2012) revealed that data from forty low and middle class income

countries showed that, up to 10 percent of school adolescent girls aged fifteen to nineteen (15-19) years, reported incident of forced sexual intercourse or other sexual acts in the previous year. There are more studies to establish the issue of school-based sexual abuse as a common occurrence both within and outside Nigeria. For example, UNIFEM (2010), the United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI, 2014), and Ajayi (2017), posited that there were about two thirds of government-owned secondary school girls who had experienced at least one or more forms of sexual violence. Ajayi (2017) gave a report on the empirical study carried out in one of the northern states of Nigeria which showed that among the sampled three hundred (300) girls across selected secondary schools, one hundred and seventy-one (171), that is, 58% acknowledged that they had experienced one or more forms of gender-based violence. At least 22% reported to have experienced sexual violence, while 50.8% stated that they had endured emotional and verbal violence.

USAID (2012), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2016), and Onayase (2019) reported various methods being employed by perpetrators of school based sexual violence in many African countries like South-Africa, Zambia, Sudan, Nigeria. Some of such methods are discussed as follow:

1. **Verbal abuse:** This may include talking about the girls' bodies and clothes in a sexual or seductive way. When this fails, there is a switch over to verbal violence, which includes putting down of such girls in front of others, verbal attacks, issuing of threats, humiliation and coercion
2. **Physical violence:** This includes, unsolicited touching, kissing, bullying, flogging, maiming and even killing.
3. **Seduction:** This involves the use of money, food, good grades and gifts to seduce young girls.

Scholars had employed different theories in different fields to explain the reasons and causes behind some human behaviours. This study is, therefore, hinged on one of such theories; which is the social norms theory of Becchieri.

The social norms Theory of Becchieri (2006)

According to Becchieri (2006) and Akintunde (2011), social norms refer to rules of behaviour that are part of the ideology of a group and reflect the values of the group. Social norms theory contends, that individuals prefer to conform to the conditions they believe either because most people in that group conform to it, because it is the expectation of the group. Or if most people in the group believe they "Ought to" conform to it. In other words, there are essential features, norms or Society's local and national values to guide individuals' behaviour within a particular society (Akintunde, 2011).

In the Nigerian culture, the boy-child is more preferred to the girl-child. According to Ajitoni (2016), there are some behaviours which the Nigerian society identifies as being appropriate for boys and girls, for this reason, it is mandatory for the family to ensure that the child is groomed to key into the norms so that he or she

would be able to perform the roles assigned to him or her according to the expectations of the society. Afolabi (2003) and Kats and kehn (2004) stated that, it was the attempt of the family to conform to the system norms in the socialization of the child, that makes her to typically favour the male child over the girl-child, thereby creating imbalance in power and gender relations between the two sexes.

One of the social theories by Bolton and Ockenfels (2000) in the model of equality aversion, maintains that conformity to social norms is always conditional on the expectation of what others will do. Take for example, a sexual violence perpetrator may say “I will stop indulging in sexual violence if significant others, around me will stop doing it” This type of attitude was seen in a fifty-three-year-old father, Peter Ayemoba who was reported by Asishana (2020) in *The Nation's* Newspaper of 13th June, of sleeping with his two daughters for seven (07) years after the death of his wife. While he was being interrogated by the police, he stated that anytime he felt like stopping the abuse of his daughters, a spirit within him often told him not to bother himself as he is not the first person to commit such an act.

Poverty is believed to be one of the major factors that could easily expose school girls to the exploitation of perpetrators of sexual abuse. Zain (2012), Badiri (2014), and UNIGEI (2014) perceived lack of economic support as having implications for girls' vulnerability to sexual abuse. It could be explained thus that, the inability of some parents to perform their legitimate duties to their children may after all, not be their fault but due to lack of access to funds. In other words, the parents may know they “ought to” make provision for the needs of their school-going girls, however conditional situation like poverty makes it impossible. Onoyase (2019) expressed the feeling that, this might be the reason why the promise of money can make a big difference to some female students especially those from poor homes, to engage in sexual relationship with their male teachers. Badiri (2014) submitted further too, that poverty is also the underlying factor for parents to marry off their under-age girls to older adults. This exposes girls to a great deal of sexual abuse and violation of human rights (Onoyase, 2019).

Based on the foregoing, UNESCO (2016) described the family as a site for gender-based violence, which prepares her members for gender stereotyping and with negative perception of division of labour. It is also the place where the father practises incest, forced marriage, threat, neglect, and the occurrence of a host of sexual violence.

Sexual abuse could be perceived as one of the most stressful life event that could have devastating effect on the victim. In the words of Eze (2013), sexual abuse apart from being responsible for emotional and psychological trauma, could increase the risk of unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), HIV and AIDS infection. Sexual violence is also found to be responsible for students' under achievement in schools (Badiri, 2014).

Considering the devastating effects of gendered violence on secondary school girls therefore, this study seek to find out if:

- 1) Gendered violence such as; male sexual exploitation, unwanted sexual touch, physically forced sex, seduction through the awards of good grades, gifts, or money, could make students vulnerable to sexual abuse.
- 2) Gendered violence has no exception for secondary school girls aged, nine to twenty (09-20) in either the junior or senior secondary school classes 1-3.

Hypotheses

Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between male sexual exploitation and secondary school girls' vulnerability to sexual abuse.

Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between secondary school girls aged nine to twenty (09-20) and their vulnerability to sexual abuse.

METHOD

The research design adopted for study was the descriptive design of the survey type. The population of the study consisted of fifteen public secondary schools in Akoko South West Local Government Area of Ondo State. It was observed that, it is still very difficult to get the victims of sexual abuse to talk about their experiences. Observations further show that attempts made by few of the abused girls or their family members were often met with mixed reactions. For these reasons therefore data collected for the study were based on the perception, or opinions of secondary school students within the age range of nine to twenty years, and who were believed to be more prone to sexual vulnerability. The chosen schools for the study were four public secondary schools which were; Oroke High School, Akungba-Akoko, Community High School, Eti-Oro, St. Patrick High School Iwaro, and Agbogbo Grammar School, Supare; all in Akoko South-West LGA of Ondo State. The sample selected were two hundred (200) girls, fifty from each of the four schools. The ages of the girls ranged between nine to twenty (09-20) years. The girls were purposively selected across all the classes from Junior to Senior Secondary School Classes 1-3.

Instrument

The instrument for the study was a self-constructed questionnaire tagged 'Girls' Vulnerability to Sexual Abuse (GVSA)'. The questionnaire was made up of two sections; A_ & B. Section 'A' elicits information on the respondent's sex, and class. Section 'B' comprised 20 items to elicit information on students' opinions about; the concept of sexual abuse, their reactions to unwanted sexual seduction from the opposite sex, what they think could cause sexual abuse and the consequences of sexual abuse on girls. A four-point Likert scale was designed and used for the purpose of collecting data for the study. The face and content validation were done by tests experts. The instrument was administered on 20 respondents who were girls, but not part of the sample for the study. The test was repeated two weeks later among the same respondents. A test-retest correlation coefficient of 0.79 was obtained. Copies of the questionnaire was administered personally by the researches in the four schools. The two hundred copies of the

questionnaire were adequately responded to, and collected immediately by the researchers after completion. The hypotheses were tested using chi-square statistical analyses at 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS

The results are as presented according to the formulated hypotheses
 Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between male sexual exploitation and girls' vulnerability to sexual abuse.

Table 1: Showing Chi-square on Relationship between Male Sexual Exploitation and Girls

Vulnerability to Sexual abuse							
Variable	No	X	SD	p	df	r-cal	r-tab
Male Sexual exploitation	200	13.31	3.50	0.05	198	0.68(**)	0.20
Girls' vulnerability to sexual abuse		58.15	9.67				

*Significant $p > 0.05$

Table 1 showed that the calculated r of 0.68 at a degree of freedom of 198 was greater than the critical r of 0.20 at 0.05 level of significance. This implies that male sexual exploitation has a significant relationship with girls' vulnerability to sexual abuse. In other words, female secondary school students could fall easy preys to any form of sexual exploitation such as; sexual harassment, unsolicited touching of breast, buttocks, unwanted kisses, and attempts to rape by using drugs from the opposite sex, including their teachers, administrative staff, and peers at school. The null hypothesis which stated that there was no significant relationship between male sexual exploitation and girls' vulnerability to sexual abuse was rejected and the alternate hypothesis was upheld.

Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between secondary school girls aged nine to twenty and their vulnerability to sexual abuse.

Table 2: Showing whether there is a relationship between girls aged 9-20, and their vulnerability to sexual abuse

Variables	No	X	SD	p	df	r-cal	r-tab
Secondary School girls, aged 9-20.	200	11.37	2.08	0.05	198	0.13	0.58
Girls' Vulnerability to sexual abuse		28.31	6.40				

Not Significant $p < 0.05$

Table 2 showed that the calculated r of 0.13 at a degree of freedom of 198 was less than the critical r of 0.58 at 0.05 level of significance. The null hypothesis was therefore not rejected. This implied that sexual violence can happen irrespective of one's age. Perpetrators of school-based sexual abuse would not hesitate to engage in the act with any category of students in terms of the age or class. In other words, whether the girls are in the junior or senior class, whether they are young or old between the age of nine to twenty, they are all liable to sexual abuse.

DISCUSSION

The result of the study revealed that in the data there was a significant relationship between male sexual exploitation and girls' vulnerability to sexual abuse. This finding corroborated Zain (2012), Ajayi (2017) and Dike (2017) who confirmed vulnerability of girls to male sexual exploitation. Ajayi (2017) quoted the finding of an empirical study, carried out in one of the Northern states of Nigeria, which revealed that out of three hundred (300) students sampled across selected secondary schools, one hundred and seventy –one girls acknowledged that they had experienced one or more forms of gender-based violence. Also, USAID (2012) revealed that data from forty low and middle class income countries showed that up to ten percent of school adolescent girls aged fifteen to nineteen years, reported incidents of forced sexual intercourse or other sexual acts in the previous year. Further, the study revealed that there was no significant relationship between girls aged nine to twenty (09-20) and their vulnerability to sexual abuse. This finding is in line with Badiri (2014) and Zain (2012) who both submitted that gendered violence has nothing to do with the ages of students either in junior or senior classes. Finally, it might be necessary to state that the findings of this study align with the findings of Nwokolo (2020), who reported the sexual violation of a 3-old girl by a 23-year old man. Even though this issue was outside the school system, it is still very relevant to establish that perpetrators of sexual abuse have no regards for the ages of their victims.

CONCLUSION

It is observed that some of the underlying factors motivating gendered violence, are deeply rooted in the family as well as the school. This is because it is the family that encourages stereotypical practices in division of labour. It is in the family too that a father commits incest with his daughter. In addition, it is at school that teachers who are to be role models to students, indulge in carnal knowledge of girls. It is concluded therefore, that if the family socializes their children on a level playing ground without attaching any preferential treatment to a particular gender, and if the school does not treat reported cases of sexual abuse with levity, the school would be a better place for the promotion of the physical, mental, emotional and psychological development of all children, no matter their gender difference.

Recommendations

- 1) Girls should be committed to their studies and learn to live within their limits. This would help them to avoid being tempted to take money or awards of good grades in exchange for sexual relationship from their male teachers.
- 2) No matter the ages of the girls, they should avoid staying alone with their peers, senior boys or teachers, especially in hidden places when other students must have gone home or back to the hostel. They should also be encouraged to speak up, telling the school authority or their parents in case they are sexually abused so that appropriate actions would be taken against perpetrators.

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