

Assessment of Gender-Based Violence Among Fisherfolks in Bayelsa State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study assessed gender-based violence (GBV) among fisherfolks in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, with the specific objectives of describing the sociodemographic characteristics of fisherfolks, determining the prevalence rate of GBV among respondents, and identifying the key perpetrators. A multi-stage sampling technique was used to select 216 respondents across four Local Government Areas (LGAs), with structured questionnaires, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs) serving as the primary data collection instruments. Data analysis employed descriptive statistics for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative insights. The findings revealed a balanced gender representation (50% male, 50% female), with the majority of fisherfolks aged between 30-49 years. Over 50% were married, and more than 33% had attained secondary education. A significant prevalence of GBV was reported, with intimate partners identified as the primary perpetrators, followed by male family members, community leaders, and even law enforcement officers. The study concluded that GBV is deeply entrenched within fishing communities in Bayelsa State, largely driven by patriarchal norms. Based on these findings, the study recommended community sensitization and awareness programs aimed at addressing harmful gender norms and reducing GBV.

Key words: Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Fisherfolks, Prevalence Rate, Perpetrators

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive issue globally, cutting across various sectors, including fisheries, where vulnerabilities are often exacerbated by socio-economic and environmental challenges. In the context of Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta region, fisherfolks, a significant demographic contributing to the nation's food security and economy, face multiple layers of marginalization. Among these, gender-based violence is a prominent concern, affecting the lives and livelihoods of both men and women in fishing communities. Studies by Asa and Solomon (2010) have shown that rural populations engaged in livelihood activities, including fisheries, are disproportionately affected by poverty and socio-economic challenges, which heighten their exposure to violence. Despite the integral role that both genders play in sustaining household economies, fisherfolks are often at risk of violence in their domestic and community settings, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.

Existing literature on gender-based violence in fishing communities, while extensive in certain regions, remains scant in Nigeria. However, global studies, such as those highlighted by Mangubhai et al. (2023), underscore that fisherfolk communities often face heightened

vulnerabilities due to socio-economic hardships and gendered roles that expose individuals to precarious working conditions, thus increasing their risk of violence. Patriarchal structures, as noted by Solomon and Adekoya (2006), dominate rural settings and create power imbalances that facilitate violence against vulnerable groups within these communities. These dynamics, coupled with the socio-economic marginalization experienced by fisherfolks in Bayelsa State, contribute to the normalization and perpetuation of gender-based violence. Studies like Aghoghovwia et al. (2022) point to the lack of adequate institutional frameworks to address these issues, leaving many incidents unreported and unaddressed.

Despite the growing body of research on GBV, a significant gap exists concerning the specific experiences of fisherfolks, particularly in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. While studies such as Adegbite (2020) and Agbaje et al. (2021) explore the prevalence of intimate partner and domestic violence in rural communities, there is limited focus on the violence that affects both male and female fisherfolks. Such studies highlight how power imbalances in rural households and communities foster abuse, but there is a need to explore these dynamics in the context of fishing communities. This gap calls for a deeper understanding of how GBV manifests in the lives of fisherfolks, with attention to the socio-cultural and economic factors that drive such violence.

This study seeks to fill the research gap by assessing gender-based violence among fisherfolks in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. It will not only document the rate of violence experienced by fisherfolks but also explore the identities and roles of the perpetrators within the community, offering a comprehensive picture of the socio-cultural dynamics that contribute to this issue. By focusing on these aspects, this research will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on gender-based violence in fishing communities and provide insights that can inform policies aimed at mitigating violence and supporting the victims in the Niger Delta region.

The specific objectives of this study are to;

- i. describe the sociodemographic characteristics of fisherfolks in Bayelsa State, Nigeria,
- ii. determine the prevalence rate of gender-based violence among the respondents and
- iii. ascertain the perpetrators of gender-based violence in the study area.

2. Methodology

The research was conducted in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, known for its extensive riverine environment and fishing communities. Fisherfolks, including men and women involved in fishing, processing, and marketing, were the target population. The study employed a cross-sectional design, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) and its key perpetrators.

A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted, starting with the random selection of four Local Government Areas (LGAs) based on their high levels of fishing activity: Southern Ijaw, Nembe, Ogbia, and Sagbama. From each LGA, three communities were purposively selected for their active engagement in fishing, resulting in 12 communities in total. Within these communities, the study used stratified random sampling to select respondents, ensuring gender representation to account for differences in experiences of GBV.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs). The questionnaire captured demographic details, prevalence of GBV, and the identity of perpetrators, while the FGDs and KIIs provided in-depth insights into community attitudes and the socio-cultural drivers of violence. Focus groups comprised men and women separately, ensuring that gender-specific perspectives on GBV were thoroughly explored.

The data were analyzed using both descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were processed using SPSS to calculate frequencies and percentages, particularly for sociodemographic characteristics. Qualitative data from FGDs and KIIs were analyzed thematically, with key themes emerging around the prevalence rate of gender-based violence and perpetrators of gender-based violence. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings allowed for a comprehensive understanding of GBV among fisherfolks in Bayelsa State.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Fisherfolks

The results of the sociodemographic characteristics of fisherfolks in Bayelsa State, as presented in Table 1, provide important insights into the composition of this group. The equal distribution of male and female respondents (50% each for both focus group discussants and key informants) suggests that both genders are significantly engaged in the fishing industry. This gender balance is essential for analyzing gender dynamics in relation to exposure to GBV, as gender roles in rural communities can influence both the experience and reporting of violence (Solomon & Omotosho, 2004).

The age distribution of respondents, with a concentration in the 30-49 years age bracket, aligns with previous findings on the active participation of individuals in productive activities such as fishing during these years (Asa & Solomon, 2009). Older respondents (aged 50 and above) make up a significant proportion (around 40%) of the population. This age group may experience GBV differently due to traditional power structures that could either exacerbate or mitigate instances of violence. Solomon (2015) notes that older individuals in rural communities often have distinct authority that can either shield them from or expose them to violence depending on the context of gender power relations.

Marital status is also significant for understanding the context of GBV. A high proportion of married individuals (57.8% among discussants and 54.2% among key informants) suggests that intimate partner violence may be a predominant form of GBV in this context, as observed in many rural settings (Agbaje et al., 2021). Widowed individuals, constituting 15.6% of the respondents, may face different challenges related to GBV, as widowhood can result in social and economic disenfranchisement (Solomon, 2015).

The education levels of the respondents, with a majority having primary or secondary education, indicate a relatively low level of formal education among fisherfolks. This has significant implications for understanding GBV, as low educational attainment is often correlated with limited awareness of rights and reduced access to resources for addressing violence (Mshelia, 2021). Fisherfolks with no formal education, who make up 15.6% of the sample, may be particularly vulnerable to GBV due to their dependency on traditional and often patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequalities (Madubuike & Solomon, 2007).

In terms of religion, the overwhelming majority of respondents identified as Christians, with only a small fraction being Muslims. This religious composition is significant when considering cultural contexts that may either reinforce or challenge the norms surrounding GBV. Asa and Solomon (2010) posited that religious affiliations in rural Nigeria can play a role in either reinforcing patriarchal values or serving as a platform for advocating gender equity.

Regarding occupation, the majority of the respondents identified fishing as their primary occupation (56.8%), while others engaged in farming (21.9%) and trading (21.4%). The concentration of fisherfolks in these occupations highlights their economic vulnerability, which may contribute to the prevalence of GBV in this context. Vulnerability is further exacerbated by

their low monthly income, with a substantial portion earning below ₦52,600 per month. Low income and economic dependency have been identified as significant risk factors for GBV, especially in rural communities where economic power dynamics often reinforce gender disparities (O'Mullan, Sinai & Kaphle, 2024).

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Fisherfolks (n=216)

Variables	Focus Group (n=192)	Discussants (n=24)
	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	96	50.0
Female	96	50.0
Age (years)		
< 30	27	14.1
30-39	41	21.4
40-49	45	23.4
50-59	37	19.3
≥ 60	42	21.9
Marital Status		
Single	51	26.6
Married	111	57.8
Widowed	30	15.6
Education Level		
No Formal Education	30	15.6
Primary Education	63	32.8
Secondary Education	65	33.9
Tertiary Education	34	17.7
Religion		
Christianity	181	94.3
Islam	11	5.7
Primary Occupation		
Fishing	109	56.8
Farming	42	21.9
Trading	41	21.4
Monthly Income		
₦3,000 - ₦52,600	133	69.3
₦52,601 - ₦102,200	36	18.8
₦102,201 - ₦151,800	11	5.7
₦151,801 - ₦201,400	7	3.6
₦201,401 - ₦250,000	5	2.6

Source: Field survey (2024)

3.2.Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence

The results from the Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and key informant in-depth interviews reveal the alarming prevalence of gender-based violence among fisherfolks in Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

The widespread nature of these abuses, as narrated by respondents, underscores a deeply entrenched societal issue. As one female participant from Nembe community mentioned, *"Almost every woman I know has experienced some form of violence in their homes,"* reinforcing the assertion that this violence is not only pervasive but normalized within the community. This observation correlates with studies like Asa and Solomon (2009), who noted that gender power relations in indigenous households often leave women vulnerable to violence, with societal structures offering little recourse. Similarly, Solomon and Adekoya (2006) emphasized how rural households frequently normalize power imbalances that perpetuate such abuses, further aligning with the experiences of fisherfolk women in Bayelsa.

The participants' accounts of the visibility and frequency of physical violence in their communities also highlight the entrenched nature of gender-based violence. According to a male participant from Angiama community,

"I have seen my neighbor being beaten by her husband many times, and no one intervenes."

This non-intervention is consistent with the findings of Dery et al. (2022), who observed that in rural African communities, intimate partner violence is often ignored due to social taboos surrounding interference in domestic matters. Moreover, the fear of retaliation, as described by a women group coordinator, who stated,

"People are afraid to get involved because they fear retaliation,"

echoes the findings of Adegbite (2020), who noted similar trends in rural households in Ibadan, where community members were reluctant to intervene in cases of gender-based violence, further exacerbating the problem.

The high frequency of gender-based violence, described as a daily occurrence, adds to the grim picture. A female participant from Ebede-biri community shared,

"In our village, it's like a daily occurrence. You hear women crying out for help, but it has become part of life."

This normalization of violence correlates with Solomon's (2012) examination of women's roles in rural agricultural systems, where the burden of domestic violence is often overlooked as part of their everyday struggles. The daily occurrence of violence in the study area also reflects the findings of Agbaje et al. (2021), who observed a high prevalence of gender-based violence among university women in Enugu, Southeast Nigeria, suggesting that societal acceptance of such abuse transcends geographical and occupational boundaries, reinforcing the notion that gender-based violence is widespread across different sectors and communities.

The respondents' experiences with the lack of community intervention further complicate efforts to address gender-based violence. The remark from a Toru-Orua market leader that

"we have come to expect these incidents almost every day"

exemplifies a community desensitized to violence, which Solomon (2021) linked to the incapacity of local institutions to effectively respond to gender-related issues in rural areas. This inability to mobilize local resources to address the abuse indicates a systemic failure, much like that observed by Asanwana and colleagues (2015), who pointed to the lack of institutional responses to social and environmental challenges facing fishing communities in the Niger Delta region.

3.3. Perpetrators of Gender-Based Violence

The Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews offered profound insights into the perpetrators of gender-based violence among fisherfolks in Bayelsa State. Intimate partners were identified as a significant source of violence, with one female participant from Ogbia stating that

"most of the violence comes from our husbands,"

a sentiment that mirrors patriarchal norms common in rural and fishing communities. This aligns with the work of Asa and Solomon (2010), which discussed the entrenched gender hierarchies in rural livelihoods that perpetuate male dominance. Similar findings have been echoed in studies from other parts of Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa, where intimate partner violence is often justified as a form of control or discipline, reinforcing the cycle of violence (Adegbite, 2020; Cliffe & Akinrotimi, 2015).

Family members, particularly male relatives, also play a role in perpetrating violence. A female participant from Angiama recounted an incident where

"a girl was beaten by her brother because he felt she was being disrespectful."

This testimony sheds light on the perceived authority that male relatives exert over female family members, a dynamic that is prevalent in rural households across Nigeria. Solomon and Omotosho (2004) similarly noted that male relatives often assume control over their female counterparts, using violence as a means of asserting power. This pattern of intra-family violence is not confined to Bayelsa State; Dery et al. (2022) highlighted how family structures in many Nigerian communities reinforce male authority, creating environments where gender-based violence thrives.

Community members, especially younger males and elders, were also implicated as perpetrators of violence. One female participant from Silga mentioned,

"Some young men in the community harass women, especially when we go out in the evenings."

This comment reflects the broader issue of community-level harassment, particularly in public spaces, a behavior observed in similar fishing communities. Agbaje et al. (2021) and Joseph & Doon (2021) have documented how cultural norms around masculinity contribute to such harassment, where young men often display their power through aggressive behavior. Elders, who are traditionally seen as custodians of morality, were also identified as abusing their positions of authority. A market leader in nembe waterside shared,

"Even the elders sometimes demand things from women in exchange for help, and if you refuse, they threaten you."

This sentiment resonates with Solomon's (2015) research, which highlighted the exploitation of women by respected figures in the community, further complicating the justice process for victims of GBV.

Authorities such as the police were highlighted as another group of perpetrators. A male participant from Ogbia remarked,

"The police don't help us; instead, they harass the women who go to report cases."

This testimony mirrors findings from Adegbite (2020), who reported similar abuses by law enforcement officers in Ibadan. The systemic abuse of power by law enforcement exacerbates the barriers women face in seeking justice, as police officers, instead of offering protection, often become part of the problem. This is a theme prevalent across studies on GBV in Nigeria, as noted by Chime et al. (2022), where institutional actors contribute to the cycle of violence rather than providing avenues for redress.

Women also face violence from strangers in public spaces, adding another layer of complexity to the issue. One female participant from Sagbama shared,

"When we go to the market or fetch water, we are sometimes attacked or harassed by men we don't know."

This testimony highlights the vulnerability of women in everyday activities, a finding consistent with Aghoghovwia et al. (2022), who reported similar incidents in public spaces around fishing

communities in Bayelsa. The lack of adequate security and social infrastructure exacerbates this vulnerability, limiting women's freedom and safety in public spaces, as echoed in Ajagbe et al.'s (2020) study of rural fishing settings.

Finally, GBV in professional and educational settings was also highlighted, with teachers and employers identified as perpetrators. One male participant from Otuoke remarked,

"Some of the female students are taken advantage of by their teachers, who threaten them with bad grades if they don't comply."

This testimony reflects the broader issue of institutional abuse, where power dynamics in professional and academic settings enable GBV. Agbaje et al. (2021) reported similar findings in Enugu, where female staff and students were frequently harassed by their superiors. This pattern of abuse extends beyond community-level interactions and into formal institutions, highlighting the pervasive nature of GBV across different domains of life.

Conclusion

This study assessed gender-based violence (GBV) among fisherfolks in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, and revealed that GBV is a deeply entrenched issue in these communities. Both men and women fisherfolks are affected, with violence manifesting in various forms such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Key findings identified intimate partners, family members, community leaders, and law enforcement officers as the main perpetrators. The study also found that patriarchal norms and socio-economic vulnerabilities significantly contribute to the perpetuation of GBV among fisherfolks.

The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to address these systemic issues. Sensitization programs aimed at shifting harmful gender norms, alongside the strengthening of institutional responses, are crucial for reducing GBV and supporting affected fisherfolks. Additionally, improving access to justice and establishing community-based support structures, such as counseling and legal aid, will be critical in protecting vulnerable individuals and fostering safer fishing communities.

Recommendations

1. **Awareness Programs Targeted at High-Risk Groups:** Based on the study's finding that intimate partners are the primary perpetrators of GBV, there is a need for targeted awareness programs that focus on married couples and intimate partners. These programs should aim to reshape perceptions around gender roles and reduce the normalization of violence within marriages, especially in communities where marriage is prevalent and patriarchal norms are strong. These initiatives can help mitigate intimate partner violence by promoting gender equality and healthy relationships among fisherfolks.
2. **Strengthening Community-Based Reporting Mechanisms:** Given that law enforcement officers and community leaders are also identified as perpetrators or enablers of GBV, it is crucial to establish alternative community-based reporting mechanisms. These systems should empower victims to report GBV incidents without fear of retribution from community leaders or the police. Training local volunteers and creating anonymous reporting channels could foster an environment where victims feel safer and more supported in reporting violence.
3. **Perpetrator Accountability Programs:** The involvement of male family members and community elders as key perpetrators, as identified in the study, suggests a need for programs that hold perpetrators accountable. Developing community-led accountability

frameworks, where male leaders and elders are trained to recognize, prevent, and address GBV in their communities, would help reduce incidents of violence. Additionally, creating dialogue spaces for men to challenge harmful masculinity norms could be effective in decreasing violence perpetrated by male family members.

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