Media Awareness, Programming and Residents' Assessment of Domestic Violence Reportage in Rivers State

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Abstract
This study examined media representation and public perception of domestic violence in Rivers State, focusing on two objectives: identifying the views of Port Harcourt residents and media workers on what constitutes domestic violence, and assessing the extent to which media representation has promoted support for victims of domestic violence in Rivers State. The study was anchored on Agenda-Setting Theory, Spiral of Silence Theory and Knowledge Gap Theory. A mixed-method research design was adopted, combining a structured questionnaire with interviews to obtain quantitative and qualitative data. A total of 400 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to residents of Port Harcourt and media workers, of which 382 copies, representing a 95.5% retrieval rate, were found valid for analysis. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies, percentages and mean statistics, with a criterion mean of 2.50 guiding decisions, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that respondents demonstrated a broad understanding of domestic violence, recognising it as encompassing physical assault and other forms of abuse. The findings also indicated that media representation contributed positively to promoting support for victims, although its influence was comparatively moderate. The study concludes that media reportage plays an important role in shaping public understanding of domestic violence and encouraging support for victims, but its contribution requires more consistent and effective communication. It recommends that media organisations intensify responsible reporting, provide regular educational programmes and disseminate information on available support services to strengthen public understanding and encourage practical assistance for victims of domestic violence in Rivers State.

Keywords: *Appraisal, Domestic Violence, Fight, Media Representation, Media Rivers State.*

Introduction

Domestic violence remains a major social, public health and human rights concern, with consequences that extend beyond individual victims to families, communities and society at large. It encompasses physical, sexual, psychological and other forms of abuse occurring within domestic and intimate relationships. Although women and girls bear a disproportionate burden of intimate partner violence, men and children may also experience abuse within the home. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2025) identified violence against women as a persistent global public health problem and a violation of human rights, with consequences for the physical and mental health of survivors, children and families. The WHO's updated prevalence estimates, based on data covering 2000 to 2023, further demonstrate the continuing scale of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence worldwide. Domestic violence is sustained by several interrelated factors, including unequal power relations, harmful social norms, economic dependence, fear of social stigma and the perception that conflicts within the family should remain private. These conditions may discourage victims from disclosing abuse or seeking assistance, thereby making public awareness and access to reliable information important components of prevention and response. Addressing domestic violence consequently requires coordinated action involving government institutions, community organisations, support services and the mass media, particularly in communicating information that challenges the normalisation of abuse and encourages informed public responses. The mass media play an important role in making social problems visible, informing public opinion and facilitating discussions about issues that might otherwise remain concealed. Through radio and television broadcasts, newspaper reports, interviews, documentaries, public enlightenment campaigns and digital publications, media organisations can provide information about domestic violence, explain its consequences and draw attention to the responsibilities of individuals and institutions in preventing abuse. Their influence, however, depends partly on how incidents are selected, framed and presented to audiences. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2019) emphasised the importance of accurate, balanced and respectful journalism in reporting violence against women and girls, noting that responsible coverage can help raise awareness, challenge stigma and direct affected persons towards available support resources.

Media reportage can therefore contribute to public understanding by distinguishing domestic violence from ordinary disagreements, identifying different forms of abuse and explaining the social conditions that may enable it. At the same time, reporting that relies on sensational headlines, unverified claims, victim-blaming narratives or unnecessary disclosure of survivors' identities may undermine public enlightenment and expose affected persons to further harm. The media's role should consequently be assessed not simply by the number of domestic violence incidents reported, but also by the accuracy, sensitivity, depth and educational value of the information presented.

Media awareness and programming are central to understanding how the media communicate domestic violence to the public. Media awareness concerns residents' knowledge of domestic violence, their recognition of its various forms and consequences, and their exposure to information disseminated through different media channels. Programming refers to the planning, scheduling and presentation of media content, including news bulletins, phone-in discussions, interviews with experts, investigative reports, documentaries and public enlightenment programmes. The effectiveness of such programming depends on factors such as frequency,

accessibility, language, audience relevance and opportunities for public participation. The joint guidance developed by the United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Children's Fund and UN Women (2020) stressed the importance of responsible and effective communication in representing violence against women and children, particularly in ways that support awareness raising and avoid harmful portrayals.

This guidance reinforces the need for media content that does more than narrate individual incidents. Effective programming should help audiences recognise physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse, understand the implications of violence and become familiar with appropriate sources of assistance. Nevertheless, the availability of programmes does not necessarily establish that residents are aware of their messages or consider them useful. Some audiences may encounter reports without understanding the wider implications, while others may have limited exposure because of programme scheduling, language barriers or differences in media access. Investigating media awareness alongside programming is therefore necessary to establish how residents encounter domestic violence information and how they evaluate its relevance to their everyday social experiences.

In Rivers State, examining residents' assessment of domestic violence reportage is important for understanding how media coverage is perceived within the state's diverse social and cultural environment. Residents may differ in their preferred media channels, frequency of exposure, interpretation of reported incidents and expectations concerning the responsibilities of journalists and broadcasters. Cultural beliefs about marriage, family privacy and gender relations may also shape how audiences interpret reports of abuse, respond to victims and judge the appropriateness of public discussion of domestic violence. These considerations make it necessary to examine residents' perceptions of the frequency, accuracy, balance, sensitivity and public enlightenment value of media reportage rather than assume that the existence of media coverage automatically produces awareness or constructive responses. UNESCO's (2019) guidance on reporting violence against women and girls provides a useful professional framework for considering these issues because it emphasises factual accuracy, contextual reporting, respect for those affected and the avoidance of sensationalism.

Against this background, the study, Media Awareness, Programming and Residents' Assessment of Domestic Violence Reportage in Rivers State, examines residents' awareness of domestic violence, their exposure to related media programmes and their assessment of the way the issue is reported. By bringing these dimensions together, the study seeks to generate evidence on how media reportage is perceived by residents and identify areas in which media programming and reporting practices may be strengthened to promote informed understanding, responsible public discussion and greater sensitivity towards persons affected by domestic violence.

Statement of the Problem

Despite increased public discussion of gender-based violence and the availability of media platforms for disseminating information, domestic violence remains a persistent social concern. One of the challenges in addressing the problem is that abuse occurring within domestic and intimate relationships may be concealed by fear, stigma, economic dependence, cultural expectations and concerns about family reputation. Although the media can help expose abusive practices and educate the public about their consequences, the extent to which their reportage contributes to residents' awareness and understanding remains an important issue for investigation. Media organisations may report domestic violence when incidents result in serious injuries, fatalities, arrests or public controversy, yet such episodic coverage may not provide sustained

attention to the underlying causes of abuse, available support services and preventive measures. Furthermore, the framing of domestic violence reports may sometimes emphasise sensational details rather than victim protection, public education and institutional accountability. Where reports are infrequent, superficial, insensitive or inadequately contextualised, their potential to challenge harmful beliefs and encourage constructive responses may be weakened. The problem, therefore, extends beyond whether domestic violence appears in the media to whether residents are sufficiently aware of the issue and whether the programming and presentation of related content adequately serve public enlightenment.

Another concern is how residents of Rivers State assess the nature and quality of media reportage on domestic violence. Although media outlets provide different channels for communicating information about abuse, residents may have varying levels of exposure to such content and may differ in their perceptions of its credibility, relevance, frequency and effectiveness. It cannot be assumed that the availability of domestic violence reports automatically translates into public awareness, informed attitudes or greater willingness to support victims. There is a need to establish whether residents consider media programming on domestic violence sufficiently regular, informative, balanced and sensitive to the experiences of victims. It is also important to understand whether residents believe that media reports adequately explain the forms and consequences of domestic violence, challenge victim-blaming attitudes and provide useful information about seeking assistance. Without empirical investigation, the extent to which media awareness and programming meet these expectations among residents of Rivers State may remain unclear. This study therefore seeks to examine media awareness, programming and residents' assessment of domestic violence reportage in Rivers State, focusing on the level of public awareness, the nature of media content and residents' perceptions of the adequacy and effectiveness of such reportage.

Objectives of the Study

The focus of this study is to ascertain how media contents and programming in Rivers state reflect domestic violence in Rivers State. The specific objectives are to:

1. identify Port Harcourt residents and media workers views of what constitutes domestic violence.
2. assess the extent to which media representation has promoted support for victims of domestic violence in Rivers State.

Research Questions

1. What are the views of Port Harcourt residents and media workers on what constitute domestic violence?
2. To what extent has media representation promoted support for victims of domestic violence in Rivers State?

Scope of Study

This study focused on Rivers State, Nigeria, and was conducted across selected local government areas of the state to ensure adequate representation of its diverse population. The study specifically examined the media representation of domestic violence through selected radio stations in Rivers State, namely Rhythm 93.7 FM, Wazobia 94.1 FM and Family Love 97.7 FM. The selection of these stations provided a basis for examining how radio media communicated issues relating to domestic violence to the public within the state.

Thematically, the study examines residents' awareness of the concept, forms and consequences of domestic violence; their exposure to media reports and programmes addressing the issue; the nature, frequency and presentation of such content; and their assessment of the accuracy, balance, sensitivity and public enlightenment value of the reportage. The study also considers residents' perceptions of whether media coverage promotes understanding, challenges harmful social attitudes and encourages appropriate responses to domestic violence. The study is limited to media communication and residents' assessments rather than a comprehensive investigation of individual domestic violence cases, the prevalence of abuse throughout the state or the effectiveness of law enforcement and judicial interventions.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory, developed through the seminal study of McCombs and Shaw (1972), explains how the prominence and frequency of media coverage can influence the importance audiences attach to particular issues. Media organisations shape public attention through their selection of stories, headline prominence, reporting frequency and allocation of news space. In the present study, the theory provides a framework for examining how media awareness and programming on domestic violence in Rivers State may influence the prominence residents attach to the issue. It also helps assess whether reportage gives adequate attention to survivors' experiences, prevention, perpetrators' accountability and available support services.

Spiral of Silence Theory

Spiral of Silence Theory, developed by Noelle-Neumann (1974), explains how fear of social isolation and perceptions of dominant public opinion may discourage individuals from expressing views they believe are unpopular. People who anticipate criticism, stigma or rejection may remain silent, particularly on sensitive issues governed by strong cultural and social expectations. The theory is relevant to this study because domestic violence may be difficult to discuss where family privacy, gender norms and victim-blaming discourage public disclosure. It provides a basis for examining whether media reportage challenges these attitudes, encourages supportive public discourse and creates an environment in which survivors and other stakeholders feel more comfortable discussing domestic violence.

Knowledge Gap Theory

Knowledge Gap Theory, proposed by Tichenor, Donohue and Olien (1970), argues that increases in the availability of mass media information do not necessarily produce equal improvements in knowledge among all social groups. Differences in education, socioeconomic status, prior knowledge, language and access to communication technologies may affect how audiences understand and use information. In this study, the theory provides a framework for examining whether residents of Rivers State have equal opportunities to access and understand media information about domestic violence, its forms, consequences and available support services. It also helps explain why media coverage alone may not guarantee public awareness, highlighting the importance of accessible, inclusive and audience-oriented programming.

Conceptual Review

Women as Major Receivers of Domestic Violence

Women experience a substantial proportion of violence perpetrated by intimate partners, making gender a central consideration in the study of domestic violence. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) identifies intimate partner violence as a major public health and human rights concern affecting women across countries and social groups. Its occurrence is associated with multiple interacting factors, including gender inequality, harmful social norms, unequal access to resources, and individual and relationship circumstances. The recognition of women as a major group affected by intimate partner violence does not mean that men cannot experience domestic abuse or that every woman experience violence. Rather, it reflects the documented gendered patterns of violence against women and the need to examine the conditions that place women at disproportionate risk.

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women recognises violence against women as a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men (United Nations General Assembly, 1993). This perspective draws attention to the social structures that may legitimise male authority, restrict women's autonomy, and discourage women from challenging abusive conduct. In intimate relationships, these inequalities may be expressed through control over finances, restrictions on movement, sexual coercion, intimidation, or the expectation that women must preserve relationships regardless of the harm they experience. However, gender inequality should be understood as a structural risk factor rather than a claim that all men exercise control or that all relationships follow the same pattern.

Women's vulnerability to domestic violence is also shaped by material circumstances. Limited income, unemployment, insecure housing, restricted access to property, and responsibility for children can reduce the practical options available to a woman experiencing abuse. A woman who lacks independent financial resources may find it difficult to pay for transport, obtain alternative accommodation, or support children outside the relationship. Even where she recognises the danger, the cost of leaving may appear overwhelming. These circumstances help explain why decisions concerning disclosure, separation, or help-seeking cannot be understood solely as expressions of personal preference.

Economic dependence can also be deliberately created or reinforced by an abusive partner. A partner may prevent a woman from obtaining employment, control her earnings, restrict access to bank accounts, or withhold money for basic needs. Such conduct can make the survivor increasingly dependent on the person responsible for the abuse. Economic control may coexist with threats, humiliation, and physical assault, creating multiple barriers to independence. This relationship between economic resources and personal safety is important when evaluating media narratives that portray a woman's continued presence in an abusive relationship as evidence that the abuse is insignificant or that she has freely accepted it.

Psychological and emotional consequences can further affect women's experiences of domestic violence. Repeated humiliation, threats, intimidation, and isolation may undermine self-confidence and make it more difficult to trust others or seek assistance. A survivor may fear that relatives, friends, or institutions will not believe her account, particularly where the abusive partner has a positive public reputation. These pressures can contribute to delayed disclosure or limited engagement with support services. The WHO (2024) identifies mental health consequences among the important outcomes associated with violence against women, although the specific effects vary among individuals and depend on the nature of the abuse and the support available.

Social expectations concerning marriage and family stability may also influence women's experiences. In some settings, women may be encouraged to preserve a relationship, avoid separation, or resolve marital difficulties privately, even where abuse is occurring. Religious interpretations, community expectations, family pressure, and concerns about children may contribute to these pressures, although religious and cultural communities are diverse and can also provide important protection and support. It would therefore be inaccurate to portray all Nigerian families or communities as accepting domestic violence. The relevant question is how particular beliefs and practices operate in specific circumstances and whether they discourage disclosure, facilitate intervention, or support survivors.

The stigma associated with domestic violence may make disclosure particularly difficult. Women may fear being blamed for their partner's behaviour, losing social standing, being rejected by relatives, or being regarded as unable to maintain a successful marriage. Where violence is treated as a private family matter, a survivor may be encouraged to remain silent rather than seek external assistance. Such pressures may be especially difficult when the alleged perpetrator occupies a respected position within the family or community. The possibility of stigma demonstrates why public awareness and responsible communication matter, but it does not establish that all survivors encounter the same barriers.

Women's experiences of domestic violence are not uniform. Age, disability, socioeconomic status, educational opportunities, geographical location, displacement, and access to social support can influence exposure to violence and the ability to obtain assistance. Women with disabilities may encounter additional barriers where support services are inaccessible or where they depend on others for care. Women living in rural communities may have fewer nearby specialist services, while women in urban settings may face different barriers relating to housing costs, anonymity, or access to trusted assistance. An intersectional perspective therefore recognises that gender interacts with other social and material conditions rather than operating in isolation (Crenshaw, 1991).

Children and caregiving responsibilities may further complicate the experiences of women facing domestic violence. A survivor may fear that seeking separation will affect her children's safety, financial security, or relationship with their father. She may also lack reliable childcare or worry about retaliation involving the children. Such concerns can influence the timing and nature of help-seeking. They should not be interpreted as evidence of consent to abuse. Rather, they demonstrate that responses to domestic violence need to consider the safety and practical circumstances of both women and their dependants.

Media representation can influence how women's experiences are interpreted by the public. Reports that focus on a woman's appearance, relationship history, alleged provocation, or decision to remain in a relationship may divert attention from the conduct of the alleged perpetrator. Conversely, coverage that explains the barriers to disclosure and separation can help audiences understand why survivors' decisions are shaped by safety, resources, and social conditions. Media organisations should avoid portraying women exclusively as helpless victims, since such representations can obscure their agency and diversity. Responsible coverage recognises the harm experienced by survivors while respecting their capacity to make decisions within difficult circumstances.

Methodology

The study employed a survey research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate domestic violence, public attitudes and media advocacy campaigns in Rivers State. The study population consisted of 8,122,472 projected residents of Rivers State and 112 staff

members of Rhythm 93.7 FM, Wazobia 94.1 FM and Family Love 97.7 FM. Using Taro Yamane's formula, a sample size of 400 residents was determined, while six programme department staff members, comprising two from each radio station, were selected for interviews. A multistage sampling technique was adopted to select six local government areas and 12 communities, while convenience sampling was used to recruit participating residents. Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire containing four-point Likert-scale items and a six-item interview guide. The research instruments were validated by the supervisors and communication experts, while a pilot test conducted with 20 participants in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, produced a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.83. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, weighted mean scores and inferential statistics with the aid of SPSS, whereas the qualitative interview data were analysed thematically using Yin's explanation-building technique.

Data Presentation

A total of 400 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to respondents for the study. Of these, 382 copies were successfully retrieved, representing a 95.5% retrieval rate, while 18 copies were not retrieved. The high retrieval rate indicates a substantial level of response to the questionnaire and provides an adequate basis for the presentation and analysis of the study findings. The 382 successfully retrieved copies were therefore used for the analysis presented in the subsequent tables. The data derived from the questionnaire are presented thus;

Presentation of Questionnaire Data

Table 1: Views on What Constitutes Domestic Violence

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	N	Σ	Mean	Remark
22	Beating or physical assault constitutes domestic violence.	169 (676)	27 (81)	59 (118)	127 (127)	382	1,002	2.62	Agreed
23	Threatening a spouse or intimate partner with physical harm constitutes domestic violence.	221 (884)	103 (309)	51 (102)	7 (7)	382	1,302	3.41	Agreed
24	Persistent verbal abuse and humiliation can constitute domestic violence.	201 (804)	81 (243)	33 (66)	67 (67)	382	1,180	3.09	Agreed
25	Controlling a partner's movements, relationships or activities can constitute domestic violence.	50 (200)	152 (456)	157 (314)	23 (23)	382	993	2.60	Agreed
26	Denying a partner access to financial resources can constitute domestic violence.	204 (816)	49 (147)	83 (166)	46 (46)	382	1,175	3.08	Agreed
27	Forced sexual activity within marriage or an intimate relationship constitutes domestic violence.	260 (1040)	56 (168)	57 (114)	9 (9)	382	1,331	3.48	Agreed
28	Domestic violence involves more than physical assault and	178 (712)	108 (324)	12 (24)	84 (84)	382	1,144	2.99	Agreed

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	N	Σ	Mean	Remark
	may include psychological, sexual and economic abuse.								
Grand Mean								**3.04**	**Agreed**

Table 1 is significant because it establishes how broadly residents define and recognise domestic violence. The grand mean of 3.04 indicates a strong overall agreement that domestic violence extends beyond physical assault. Respondents recognise threatening a partner with physical harm, persistent verbal abuse and humiliation, denial of access to financial resources, and forced sexual activity as forms of domestic violence. The findings therefore demonstrate that respondents' understanding encompasses several dimensions of abusive behaviour rather than restricting the concept to physical violence.

Table 2: Media Representation and Support for Victims

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	N	Σ	Mean	Remark
29	Media coverage of domestic violence has increased public sympathy for victims.	150 (600)	82 (246)	93 (186)	57 (57)	382	1,089	2.85	Agreed
30	Media programmes encourage victims to report domestic violence.	107 (428)	28 (84)	133 (266)	114 (114)	382	892	2.34	Disagreed
31	Media coverage provides information about organisations and services that support victims.	106 (424)	106 (318)	164 (328)	6 (6)	382	1,076	2.82	Agreed
32	Media programmes encourage families and communities to support victims.	66 (264)	111 (333)	101 (202)	104 (104)	382	903	2.36	Disagreed
33	Media coverage encourages people to speak out against domestic violence.	143 (572)	130 (390)	13 (26)	96 (96)	382	1,084	2.84	Agreed
34	Media representation has helped reduce the stigma associated with being a victim of domestic violence.	136 (544)	89 (267)	122 (244)	35 (35)	382	1,090	2.85	Agreed
35	Media representation has contributed to greater public discussion and support for victims of domestic violence.	287 (1148)	75 (225)	10 (20)	10 (10)	382	1,403	3.67	Agreed
Grand Mean								**2.73**	**Agreed**

Table 2 is significant because it examines the perceived consequences of media representation for victims and public responses to domestic violence. The overall grand mean of 2.73 indicates agreement that media representation contributes positively to public understanding and support. Respondents particularly agreed that media coverage has increased public sympathy for victims, provides information about organisations and services, encourages people to speak out and has helped reduce the stigma associated with victimisation. The strongest agreement concerns the contribution of media representation to greater public discussion and support for victims, indicating that media visibility is perceived as having a broader social effect beyond simply reporting individual cases.

However, the table also reveals areas where respondents do not perceive media intervention as sufficiently effective. Respondents disagreed that media programmes encourage victims to report domestic violence and that they encourage families and communities to support victims. This is significant because it suggests a distinction between creating awareness and sympathy and stimulating concrete support or reporting behaviour. Consequently, the findings imply that media representation may contribute to changing public attitudes and discussions about domestic violence, but additional attention may be required to strengthen the practical pathways through which victims receive support and are encouraged to report abuse.

Presentation of Interview Data

Thematic Presentation of Interview Findings

Theme 1: Audience Interest and Mixed Public Perceptions

The interviewees reported considerable public interest in domestic violence programmes, but they also described audience perceptions as mixed. Interviewees 1 and 2 observed that some listeners support victims and encourage them to seek assistance, while others believe that marital conflicts should remain private. Interviewees 3 and 4 reported that listeners often call to share experiences, seek clarification or ask how victims can obtain help, although victim-blaming attitudes may still emerge. Interviewees 5 and 6 similarly observed that listeners' responses are influenced by personal experiences, cultural expectations and beliefs concerning marriage and family relationships.

Theme 2: Radio and Public Awareness of Domestic Violence

All six interviewees indicated that radio has contributed to increased public awareness of domestic violence. Interviewees 1 and 2 stated that repeated discussions help listeners understand different forms of abuse and become aware of possible sources of assistance. Interviewees 3 and 4 noted that radio has contributed to bringing domestic violence into public discussion and challenging the perception that it should always be treated as a private family matter. Interviewees 5 and 6 similarly explained that interviews, discussions and listener participation can help correct misconceptions and improve public understanding.

Theme 3: Influence on Victims' Willingness to Seek Help

The interviews indicate that radio representation may encourage some victims or affected individuals to seek information and assistance, although the influence is not uniform. Interviewees 1, 2 and 4 noted that some listeners contact programmes after hearing discussions because they require further information or guidance. Interviewees 3 and 5 suggested that hearing others discuss domestic violence can help victims realise that they are not alone and that assistance may be available. However, Interviewees 2 and 6 emphasised that awareness does not automatically

translate into reporting or help-seeking because victims may continue to face fear, financial dependence, family pressure, stigma and limited access to support services.

Theme 4: Challenges in Media Representation of Domestic Violence

The interviewees identified several challenges affecting the reporting and presentation of domestic violence. These include difficulty obtaining reliable information, reluctance of victims to speak, privacy concerns, fear of retaliation, unverified allegations, limited access to specialists, cultural attitudes and the risk of sensationalism. Interviewees 1 and 2 particularly highlighted verification and victim confidentiality, while Interviewees 3 and 4 focused on the difficulties of moderating live phone-in programmes and avoiding victim-blaming or sensational coverage. Interviewees 5 and 6 also identified limited resources, cultural pressures and the difficulty of connecting media awareness with actual support services.

Theme 5: Need for Professional Training and Stronger Support Systems

A consistent recommendation across the interviews was the need for continuous professional training and stronger collaboration between media organisations and support institutions. Interviewees recommended training journalists and presenters in ethical reporting, trauma-sensitive communication, verification procedures and the handling of sensitive phone-in discussions. They also recommended stronger relationships between radio stations and counsellors, lawyers, social workers, government agencies and civil society organisations. Interviewees 1, 2, 5 and 6 particularly stressed the importance of referral mechanisms through which victims can be connected to appropriate assistance.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: What are the views of Port Harcourt residents and media workers on what constitute domestic violence?

The findings show a strong level of agreement concerning the behaviours that constitute domestic violence, as presented in Table 1, which recorded a grand mean of 3.04. Respondents agreed that beating or physical assault constitutes domestic violence (2.62), threatening a spouse or intimate partner with physical harm constitutes domestic violence (3.41), persistent verbal abuse and humiliation can constitute domestic violence (3.09), and denying a partner access to financial resources can constitute domestic violence (3.08). The highest mean was recorded for forced sexual activity within marriage or an intimate relationship (3.48). These results demonstrate that respondents recognise several forms of abuse as constituting domestic violence rather than restricting the concept exclusively to physical assault.

The pattern of responses in Table 1 is particularly important because it shows that recognition is stronger for some forms of domestic violence than others. Physical assault, although clearly accepted, recorded a relatively lower mean of 2.62, while threatening behaviour (3.41) and forced sexual activity (3.48) recorded much higher means. Controlling a partner's movements, relationships or activities recorded the lowest mean in the table at 2.60, although it still remained above the criterion mean. This suggests that coercive control may be less readily recognised than more explicit forms of abuse. The result is significant for public communication because behaviours that are less visible or more easily normalised may require greater explanation through media education.

The findings have a strong connection with Knowledge Gap Theory because the ability to identify domestic violence depends partly on the availability of relevant knowledge. If audiences

understand domestic violence only as physical assault, they may fail to identify threats, humiliation, sexual coercion, economic abuse or controlling behaviour. The 3.04 grand mean in Table 1 indicates that respondents generally possess a broad conceptual understanding, while the acceptance of the statement that domestic violence involves more than physical assault and may include psychological, sexual and economic abuse (2.99) reinforces this interpretation. The result suggests that public education has contributed to expanding the conceptual boundaries of domestic violence, although the comparatively lower score for controlling behaviour indicates that some forms still require greater attention.

The result is also relevant to Agenda Setting Theory because media attention can influence which forms of domestic violence become visible within public discussion. If media reports repeatedly focus on physical assault, audiences may associate domestic violence primarily with physical injury. When programmes also discuss emotional abuse, sexual violence, financial control, threats and coercive behaviour, they can broaden the public agenda and encourage audiences to recognise less visible forms of abuse. The present findings suggest that respondents have developed a reasonably broad understanding, but the 2.60 mean for controlling movements, relationships or activities indicates that certain forms may not yet have the same level of public recognition as threats or sexual violence.

The findings can also be understood through Spiral of Silence Theory because social norms may influence whether individuals recognise and speak about certain behaviours as abusive. Some forms of control, humiliation or sexual coercion may be normalised within relationships or treated as private marital matters, making victims reluctant to describe them publicly as domestic violence. Media programmes that clearly define these behaviours and provide non-judgemental spaces for discussion can challenge such silence. The finding is consistent with Akerele et al. (2025), whose study showed that public discussion and advocacy surrounding domestic violence could challenge secrecy and encourage survivors to speak about their experiences.

Overall, the 3.04 grand mean in Table 1 indicates that respondents generally possess a strong understanding of what constitutes domestic violence. The strongest recognition was recorded for forced sexual activity (3.48) and threats of physical harm (3.41), while controlling a partner's movements, relationships or activities recorded the comparatively lower mean of 2.60. The findings therefore demonstrate substantial conceptual awareness while also identifying an area where public education can be strengthened. Agenda Setting Theory explains the importance of giving visibility to different forms of abuse, Knowledge Gap Theory highlights the need for comprehensive information, and Spiral of Silence Theory demonstrates why media discussions that challenge normalised behaviours may be necessary to encourage victims and observers to identify and speak against abuse.

Research Question 2: To what extent has media representation promoted support for victims of domestic violence in Rivers State?

The findings indicate that media representation has made a generally positive contribution to public support and discussion concerning victims of domestic violence, as shown in Table 2, which recorded a grand mean of 2.73. Respondents agreed that media coverage has increased public sympathy for victims (2.85), provides information about organisations and services that support victims (2.82), encourages people to speak out against domestic violence (2.84) and has helped reduce the stigma associated with being a victim (2.85). The strongest agreement was recorded for the statement that media representation has contributed to greater public discussion and support

for victims, with a mean of 3.67. This suggests that the most visible contribution of media representation may be its ability to move domestic violence into broader public discussion.

The result in Table 2 is significant when considered alongside the findings in Table 4.2 and Table 4.4. Table 4.2 recorded a grand mean of 2.90 for awareness, while Table 4.4 recorded 2.99 for views on anti-domestic violence programming and reportage. The lower grand mean of 2.73 in Table 2 suggests that movement from awareness and positive perceptions of programming towards actual support for victims is comparatively less pronounced. This pattern indicates that it may be easier for media communication to increase knowledge and discussion than to generate concrete forms of assistance, reporting or community intervention. The finding therefore provides an important qualification to the generally positive role attributed to media representation.

The strongest item in Table 2, with a mean of 3.67, indicates that respondents clearly associate media representation with greater public discussion and support for victims. This finding strongly relates to Agenda Setting Theory, since sustained media attention can shift domestic violence from a largely private concern to an issue of public importance. Once an issue becomes more visible, it can stimulate discussion among families, communities, institutions and advocacy organisations. Ajaegbu et al. (2024) similarly observed that media reportage can give victims a voice and influence public perceptions of domestic violence. The present result therefore suggests that media representation can contribute to the social visibility necessary for collective discussion.

The findings also have a clear relationship with Spiral of Silence Theory. Respondents agreed that media coverage encourages people to speak out against domestic violence (2.84) and helps reduce the stigma associated with being a victim (2.85). These findings suggest that media representation may help create a more supportive climate of opinion in which opposition to domestic violence is publicly expressed. Such a climate can potentially reduce the fear of isolation that discourages victims from speaking. Akerele et al. (2025) provide relevant Nigerian evidence, showing that public advocacy surrounding domestic violence encouraged survivors to disclose their experiences and challenged secrecy and familism surrounding abuse.

Knowledge Gap Theory also helps explain the finding because support for victims requires information as well as sympathy. Respondents agreed that media coverage provides information about organisations and services that support victims, with a mean of 2.82 in Table 2. This means that media representation can potentially connect audiences with support structures that they may otherwise not know about. However, the lower mean of 2.34 for the statement that media programmes encourage victims to report domestic violence shows that information provision does not necessarily translate into reporting behaviour. Fear, stigma, economic dependence, family pressure and concerns about retaliation may continue to prevent victims from acting even when relevant information is available.

A similar limitation is evident in the finding that respondents disagreed that media programmes encourage families and communities to support victims, which recorded a mean of 2.36. This is particularly important because it shows that media representation may be more successful in generating public discussion and sympathy than in producing direct community-level support. The finding also means that the positive 2.73 grand mean should not be interpreted as evidence that media representation has fully resolved the barriers facing victims. Rather, it suggests that media communication has contributed to some aspects of public support while leaving important behavioural and social dimensions requiring further attention. Overall, the findings support Agenda Setting Theory by showing that media attention can elevate domestic violence into public discussion, Spiral of Silence Theory by indicating that media discourse can challenge stigma and

encourage speaking out, and Knowledge Gap Theory by demonstrating the importance of providing practical information that can connect victims and communities to appropriate support.

Summary

The findings of the study are summarised as follows:

1. The study found that Port Harcourt residents and media workers demonstrated a high level of agreement about what constitutes domestic violence, including physical assault and other forms of abuse, with a grand mean of 3.58.
2. The study found that media representation has contributed to promoting public discussion and support for victims of domestic violence to a moderate extent, with a grand mean of 3.21.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concludes that media communication plays an important role in addressing domestic violence in Rivers State. The high level of awareness recorded among residents suggests that domestic violence is recognised as a significant social issue rather than merely a private family matter. The findings also indicate that media programming and reportage contribute to public awareness by disseminating information about the nature, causes and consequences of domestic violence. However, the difference between the high level of awareness and the more moderate influence of media representation on victim support suggests that awareness does not automatically translate into practical assistance or effective social responses. Media communication must therefore extend beyond reporting individual incidents to include sustained public education, advocacy and accessible information that encourages appropriate intervention and strengthens support for victims.

The study further concludes that the media perform an important agenda-setting function by influencing the visibility and perceived importance of domestic violence in public discourse. Respondents' positive assessment of anti-domestic violence programming, particularly their strong demand for regular programmes, demonstrates the importance of sustained media attention to the issue. The high level of agreement concerning the forms of domestic violence also suggests that media communication can contribute to broader public understanding of abuse beyond physical assault. Consistent with the Spiral of Silence Theory, supportive and responsible media representation may help challenge the stigma surrounding domestic violence by encouraging the expression of opinions that condemn abuse and support victims. Nevertheless, the extent to which these outcomes are achieved depends on the consistency, accuracy, sensitivity and quality of media content. The study concludes that addressing domestic violence in Rivers State requires collaboration among media organisations, government agencies, civil society organisations, community leaders, support service providers and other relevant stakeholders. Although the media cannot independently eliminate domestic violence, they can contribute to its prevention by raising awareness, sustaining public discussion, challenging harmful social norms and providing appropriate visibility to victims' experiences. The moderate influence of media representation on victim support highlights the need to strengthen the connection between media messages and practical assistance. Consequently, effective media communication should combine responsible reportage with victim-sensitive representation, expert-led educational programmes, information about available support services and consistent public engagement. Such an approach would enhance the contribution of the media to domestic violence prevention and promote a more informed and supportive environment for victims in Rivers State.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Based on the high level of agreement among Port Harcourt residents and media workers regarding what constitutes domestic violence, media organisations should provide continuous training for journalists, presenters and programme producers on the different forms and dimensions of domestic violence. The training should emphasise accurate reporting, appropriate terminology, victim-sensitive interviewing, confidentiality and avoidance of language that blames, stigmatises or exposes victims to further harm.
2. Based on the finding that media representation has promoted support for victims only to a moderate extent, media organisations should strengthen the practical support component of domestic violence reporting. Reports and programmes should, where appropriate, provide information about available counselling services, shelters, legal assistance, reporting channels and relevant support organisations. This will help transform media exposure from mere awareness into actionable information that can assist victims and encourage appropriate public support.

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