



Prevalence and Patterns of Sexual Assault in the Context of Socio-demographic Dynamics in Benue State of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Sexual assault is a traumatic experience that disproportionately affects women and girls. Many victims do not report sexual violence to police because of shame or fear of being blamed, not believed, or otherwise mistreated. This study aimed to collect and construct data that provide information on the many dimensions of sexual assault. The objectives include to examine the incidence of sexual assault and identify the factors associated with sexual assault. The study adopted the Feminist theory of sexual coercion. The research used a survey design with the questionnaire and focused-group discussions forming the primary data source while the secondary source includes library sources. Research subjects were females within the study area aged 18 years and older who had never been in an intimate relationship. Two thousand and sixty (2060) copies of a structured questionnaire were administered within the sample frame. The data collected was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. It was found that there was a high prevalence of sexual assault in Benue State and that the area has a youthful population and a high proportion of single which if not checked will continue to increase the level of sexual assault in the area. The common causes of sexual assault include indecent dressing, lonely dwellings, alcoholism, and exposure to pornographic materials. The effects of sexual assault include sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancies, emotional trauma, abortion, depression, reduced productivity, stigmatization, death, physical injury, discrimination, mental instability, weak security system, and school dropout. It was suggested among others that, social groups such as religious institutions and schools should embark on reorientation regarding descent dressing to curtail the predisposition to sexual assault. Also, cluster dwellings through the deliberate design of settlements and collective provision of public amenities should be promoted to limit scenarios for lonely dwellings that predispose people to sexual assault.

Keywords: Benue State, Feminist theory, Sexual assault.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual assault encompasses a wide range of activities ranging from rape to physically less intrusive sexual contacts, whether attempted or completed. It involves lack of consent; the use of physical force, coercion, deception or threat; and/or the involvement of a victim that is asleep, unconscious, under aged, mentally incapacitated or physically impaired as a result of voluntary or involuntary alcohol or drug consumption. It is a traumatic experience that disproportionately affects women and girls. According to World Health Organization reports, one in every five women is a victim of sexual assault and globally, 35% of women globally have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence (Chisholm, et al., 2017). Sexual harassment is not just a feminist problem as seen by many scholars (Koss, 2018; Malamuth et al 2021; Grosser & Tyler, 2022). It is a social problem that affects entire segments of society-workplace, religious centres, educational institutions and neighbourhoods.

Data on sexual violence typically come from police, clinical settings, non-governmental organizations and survey research. But beneath the surface remains a substantial although unquantified component of the problem. The available data are scanty and fragmented. Police data, for instance, are often incomplete and limited. Many women do not report sexual violence to police because they are ashamed, or fear being blamed, not believed or otherwise mistreated. Data from medico-legal clinics on the other hand, may be biased towards the more violent incidents of sexual abuse. The proportion of women who seek medical services for immediate problems related to sexual violence is also relatively small.

In all its ramifications and manifestations, sexual assaults run contrary to global aspirations for gender equality. It is characteristically underreported especially in the developing countries due to a number of factors among which are the enduring culture of male dominance, female social and economic disempowerment and the arduous legal requirements needed to prove the cases as well as the associated stigma.

The global picture for sexual assault is also true for Nigeria and Benue State. In Nigeria, its high prevalence has been variously attributed to the enduring culture of male dominance, female social and economic disempowerment and poor or non-prosecution of sex offenders. Available literature chronicles the reported incidence of sexual assault in Nigeria to range from 13.8% among female students in Maiduguri (Bawa et al, 2022) to 15% among young females in Ibadan (Adebusuyi, et al., 2021).

Often, policy analysis is based on national or regional level indicators that are compared over time or across regions. Though this broad trend is useful for evaluating and monitoring the overall performance of policies and programmes, it gives the false impression that conditions within the regions or states are uniform. Studies have, however, shown some significant variations even within local communities and cultures. This study aims to collect and construct disaggregated data that provide information on the many dimensions of sexual assault. Specifically, it seeks to examine the incidence of sexual assault, identify the factors associated with sexual assault and assess the people's knowledge of and attitudes towards laws, policies and services addressing sexual assault.

The baseline data from this study will form the basis for combating the menace as it will inform appropriate policy and programmatic responses. This is because, inadequate information has been fingered as the major cause of the lack of meaningful progress being witnessed towards combating the menace. Thus, sustainable policies and targeted interventions can be developed only if there is access to reliable information about the cause, spread and severity of sexual assault within the region.

Culture plays an important role in how people perceive and process sexual acts as well as sexual violence (Scarpati & Pina, 2017). Much of the individual personal trait is shaped by the culture in which he or she is born and lives through, acquiring values, attitudes, and behaviors. It also determines definitions and descriptions of normality. Adewole, *et. al.*, (2021) conducted a retrospective cohort study to determine the trend and pattern of sexual assaults. Case notes were retrieved from gynecological emergency units from January 2016 to December 2018. Out of 2250 cases reviewed from 42 case folders, 45 were victims of sexual assault, giving the prevalence of sexual assault to be 2.0%. A large proportion (84.4%) were noted in children less than 16 years of age. There was substantial delay in presentation of cases as only 40% did so within 24 hours of the incidence. In 84.4% of the cases, the victim had a relationship with the alleged assailant and the assault was said to have occurred mostly in the home of the assailant. In 95.5% of cases, vaginal penetration was the commonest and threat of violence was the commonest method of overcoming the victims. About 42.2% of the victims did not have a human immunodeficiency virus screening test done for various reasons.

Olawande (2017) on the other hand, studied sexual harassment in one of the universities in the cosmopolitan city of Lagos, Nigeria to determine its presence in this multi-ethnic university. Data were collected from focus group discussions, interviews, and social mapping of more than 30,000 people. The target groups were males and females from all fields of study including part-time students who had spent at least one semester in the university. Results showed that sexual harassment is a reality in Nigerian institutions and it is not peculiar to a particular ethnic group or culture.

Similarly, Ladebo (2003) conducted a study to determine the perpetrators and victims of sexual harassment in Nigeria as well as to determine the prevalence among private and state owned institutions. The higher education institutions were chosen from private and state-owned institutions in southern Nigeria. The findings showed that the perpetrators of sexual harassment were mostly male faculty members as well as male students, while female students were mostly the victims. Female students were shown to respond to sexual advances in exchange for academic

rewards or financial help. The study further showed that there was absence of policy guidelines that define what constitutes sexual harassment in the sampled institutions.

Ogunfowokan and Fajemilehin (2012) conducted the first national survey on the prevalence of violence against women in Nigeria titled "Project Alert on Women's Right". This study examined the extent of violence against young women in Nigerian universities and polytechnics. Questionnaire were administered to an average of 15 students from all Nigerian higher education institutions, ranging from first-year undergraduates to postgraduate levels. Thirty-three (33.4) % of the respondents admitted that male lecturers, heads of departments, and deans made sexual advances to them; 28.9% indicated that the perpetrators were angry when they refused to comply with their demands. Fourteen (14.4%) percent were given a failing grade in their courses following their rejection of such advances. Forty-five (45%) percent indicated that they knew of cases of rape over the past year at their institutions. Forty-four (44.5%) percent of the respondents said that female students were harassed and threatened by cult members. All the reviewed cases indicate the varied background of victims and the different dimensions and rates of abuse across the country.

The foregoing review reveal great disparity in the character and extent of sexual assault in society. In Benue State in particular, empirical data on the causes, frequency and precipitating factors has remained inadequate. Lack of such evidence may preclude the development and implementation of effective law, policy and programmatic responses. This study therefore aims to fill some of these evidence gaps by quantifying the prevalence and patterns of sexual assault in Benue State and cataloging the responses of victims in seeking help. The specific objectives include to estimate the incidence and types of sexual assault and identify the factors associated with sexual assault in Benue State.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the Feminist theory of sexual coercion developed by Brownmiller (1975). The theory asserts that, a key difference in motivation to engage in sexual activity is the lack of anestrus cycle in human females, thus leaving humans open to copulation every day of every month. Human females do not show visible signs of estrus. Instead, they have developed a "complex system of psychological signs and urges, and a complex system of pleasure." Without a biological mating system, a male can engage in sexual behavior with a female in a way that is not dependent on biological cycles, and therefore can rape (Brownmiller, 1975). Feminist theoretical perspective therefore is based on a generalized, wide-ranging system of ideas about social life and human experience developed from a feminine-centered perspective. The starting point of all its investigation is the situation(s) and experiences of women in society. Secondly, it seeks to describe the social world from the distinctive vantage point of women (Ritzer, 2015). According to Ritzer (2015), feminist theory differs from most sociological theories in that it is the work of an interdisciplinary and international community of scholars and activities. As such, its contributors are from various scholastic viewpoints.

According to Feminist school, four main themes characterize gender discrimination (inequality). Firstly, they assume that men and women are situated in not only differently but also unequally endowed environments. To them, women get less of the material resources, social status, power and opportunities for self-actualization than do men who share their social location, be it in class, race, occupation, religion and education (Ritzer, 2015). Secondly, that the discrimination results from the general organization of society, not from any significant biological or personality differences between women and men.

Thirdly, although individuals may vary somewhat from each other in their profile of potentials and traits, no significant pattern of natural variation distinguishes the sexes. Instead, all human beings are characterized by a deep sense and need for freedom to seek self-actualization and by a fundamental malleability that leads them to adapt to the constraints or opportunities of the situation in which they find themselves. To say that there is gender inequality, and thus discrimination, is to claim that women are 'situationally' less empowered than men are to realize the need they share with men for self-actualization (Ritzer, 2015). In the fourth and the final assumption, feminists contend that, both women and men will respond easily and naturally to more egalitarian social structures and situations. They affirm, in other words that it is possible to change the situation. In these beliefs, liberal feminist argues that women may claim equality with the men on the basis of an essential human capacity for reasoned moral agency, that gender discrimination is the result of a sexist patterning of the division of labour and that gender parity can be produced by

transforming the division of labour through the re-patterning of key social institutions, including law, work/occupation, family, media and education (Ritzer, 2015).

Consequently, the issue of sexual assault is based on the inequality driven by the patriarchal situation of the Nigerian society. This is further absorbed by the Nigerian social structure, as seen in the social roles and statuses that define the girl child and women in general. By implication, women get less of the resources in society, particularly those that would give them the opportunity and privilege to self-actualize like education. Hence, feminists maintain that change or reformation is only possible through the education, work and law institutions.

By way of application, feminist theory of sexual coercion holds that all men use sexual harassment as a process of intimidation by which all women are kept in a state of fear. Thus, rape and sexual coercion have hindered women's rights to choice and opportunities, sexually and otherwise with the findings that one in four women will be victims of forced sexual acts at least once in their lifetime (Koss, 2018). It is not surprising that the feminist movement has focused on sexual harassment as one of its main issues (Malamuth et al, 2021). The feminist theory also dwells on resource control as one of the causes of sexual assault in the society. The theory affirmed that, the phenomenon of sexual harassment is in two folds. Men who control resources use these resources as a stepping stone towards harassing women as the case may be. The theory maintained that, resource control is an ingredient for sexual harassment in the society (Malamuth et al, 2021). On the other hand, females also use resource control as an avenue to carry out sexual harassment in the society. For example, Female students who are from wealthy families use their resources to gain sexual gratification thereby harassing their male counterparts due to their economic position in the society (Malamuth, 2006).

Method

The study is situated in Benue State located in the North Central region of Nigeria. The major ethnic groups include *Tiv* who constitute more than half of the entire population spreading mainly over fourteen (14) Local Government Areas; the *Idomas* which are dominant in seven (7) Local Government Areas, and the *Igedes* that make up the dominant single group in two Local Government Areas. Other smaller indigenous ethnic groups include the Etulo (*Utur*), Abakpa and Nyifon in Buruku Local Government Area, Jukum in Makurdi and Guma Local Government Areas, Utonkon (Ufia) in Ado Local Government Area and Akpa in Otukpo Local Government Area. There is also a considerable number of other immigrant tribes such as the Hausas, Igbos, Igalas, Ijaws among others which are based mainly in nucleated centres of the state and are engaged in secondary activities such as trading and public service.

Agriculture forms the backbone of the state's economy with virtually all rural households involved in one form of agriculture or the other. Though the farms are generally small and the agricultural system is largely rain-fed and un-mechanized, total crop yield is generally impressive due to the large number of small scale farmers and large expanse of arable land.

Both descriptive and inferential research methods were used for this study and research subjects for this study were males and females from the age of 18 years and older. A sample of Eight (8) Local Government Areas out of twenty-three (23) was selected for the study to reflect cultural diversity within the state. Thus, the twenty-three local government areas were first divided according to the three major ethnic groups in the state. Within the subsets, the local government areas to be studied were randomly selected based on a ratio of five for Tiv speaking LGAs, two for Idoma and one for Igede speaking area reflecting the actual population ratios. All ethical issues related to data collection were followed and respondents were informed that the information gotten from them will be used solely for this research.

A total of Eight FGDs were conducted to obtain information about the types of assault that pervades the selected communities, reasons why victims endure the practice, channels of reporting as well as cultural practices that tend to discourage reporting.

Results

This section dealt with data presentation and analysis and discussion of the findings based on the objectives of the study. Findings on the socio-demographic attributes of respondents (Table 1) reveal that the median age of

respondents was 26.5 years (18-39 years). Nearly 47% were married and over 25% were widowed. About 88% had one form of education or the other while only 12% had no formal education. Farming was not reported as an occupation because virtually all families within the study area engage in some form of agriculture. Thus, the respondents were mostly traders (30.73%) and civil servants (20.29%) accounting for over 51% of respondents. Others were artisans (18.01%), unemployed (17.18%), students (10.68%) and clerics (3.11%).

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Attributes of Respondents

Variable	Frequency (N=2060)	Percentage (%)
Age		
18-39	1220	59.22
40 and above	840	40.78
Marital Status		
Single	453	21.99
Married	964	46.80
Divorced	110	5.34
Widow	533	25.87
Educational Status		
No Formal Education	248	12.04
Primary School	632	30.68
Secondary School	882	42.82
Tertiary	298	14.46
Occupation		
Unemployed	354	17.18
Civil Servant	418	20.29
Trader	633	30.73
Cleric	64	3.11
Artisan	371	18.01
Student	220	10.68

Furthermore, data collated from the questionnaire (Table 2) indicate that 1125 respondents representing 54.61% have been assaulted sexually in one way or the other. The categories of sexual assault include unwanted touching of buttocks as the commonest form of assault accounting for 54.61% of cases while forced sex is the least, accounting for 05.68% of cases.

Table 2. Incidence of Sexual Assault by Category

Category	Frequency (N=2060)	%
Experience of sexual assault		
Yes	1125	54.61
No	935	45.39
Unwanted Touching of buttocks		
Yes	1125	54.61
No	935	45.39
Unwanted Touching of breasts		
Yes	472	22.91

No	1588	77.09
Unsolicited kiss		
Yes	355	17.23
No	1705	82.77
Attempted sex		
Yes	306	14.85
No	1754	85.15
Fondling with private part		
Yes	301	14.61
No	1759	85.39
Forced sex		
Yes	117	05.68
No	1943	94.32

Source: Field work 2021

Based on sex, 41% of females faced sexual assault compared to 17.7% of males. Prevalence of sexual assault was also disaggregated based on occupation as shown in Figure 1. The results indicate that, traders have experienced more assaults than any other category of respondents with 21.2% of cases recorded. This is followed by artisans (17.6%), cleric (16.4%), applicants (15.8%) and civil servants (15.2%) with the least reported for students at 11.1%. This is clearly not in line with expected results as students were originally anticipated to be more vulnerable than the other groups based on findings from Ajayi et al, (2023).

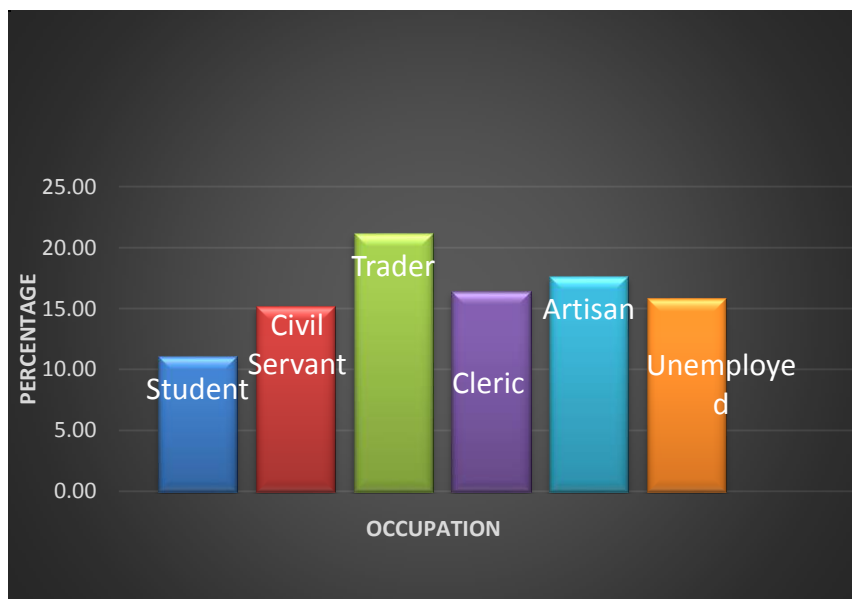


Fig. 1 Incidence of Sexual Assault by Occupation

In order to interrogate the correlates of sexual assault, bivariate analyses were conducted. The results (Table 3) showed that, religion, educational attainment and marital status showed significant association with sexual assault.

However, no significant relationship was found between sexual assault and ethnicity as calculated Chi-square value for one degree of freedom (0.24) was less than the p-value (7.8) at 5% confidence level.

Table 3. Sexual Assault by other Socio-demographic Variables

Variable	IPV experience N=2060		Df	x ²	p-value
	Yes	No			
Religion					
Christianity	829	1035	2	8.00	3.8
Islam	68	99			
Others	20	09			
Ethnicity					
Tiv	338	666	3	0.24	7.8
Idoma	206	426			
Igede	107	215			
Others	33	69			
Educational attainment					
No formal education	148	100	3	167.8	7.8
Primary	239	393			
Secondary	184	698			
Tertiary	61	237			
Marital Status					
Single	128	325	3	73.1	7.8
Married	286	678			
Widowed	210	488			
Divorced	73	37			

Df = degree of freedom, x² = Chi-square

As high as 45.4% of respondents (Table 4) reported to have suffered some form of sexual assault. The commonest reported category was threat of financial hardship for refusing to have sex (48.6%). Others include promise for academic favours/marks (44.6), denial of a job offer (30.1), threat to be denied admission (30%) and denial of business opportunities (10.2). These findings were well corroborated by focus group discussions in Mbagbaka, Aliade and Mbatierev communities in Vandeikya, Gwer and Gboko Local Government Areas respectively. In Mbatierev for instance, women in the that community reported sexual assault in the hands of their husbands who from time to time threatened to send them packing out of the house at the late hours of the night, especially when their husbands’ sexual desires arouse and women refused to have sex due to one reason or the other.

However, the situation is different in Iga-Okpaya and Ogengen communities of Apa and Oju Local Government Areas respectively, where incidences of sexual assault were not reported from the focus group discussions. The findings of this study substantially agrees with the works of Adewole, et. al. (2021) who revealed a similar pattern of sexual assault with exceptionally low incidences (2%) reported from Lagos and Sokoto States.

Table 4 – Incidence of Sexual Assault

Variable	Yes		No	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Ever assaulted	935	45.4.	1125	54.6
inancial hardship for refusing sex	1001	48.6	1029	51.4
igher marks for sex	918	44.6	1142	55.4
Denial of job offer	619	30.1	2060	69.9
Denied admission	618	30.0	1442	70.0
Denial of business opportunities	209	10.2	1851	89.8

***Multiple Responses**

Sexual assault was also interrogated based on the relationship between the victim and abuser. Most abusers were persons with some familiarity with the victim, with fiancées accounting for 46.1%, neighbours, 36.5% and teachers 36.1%. Abuses were also recorded within immediate family cycles which accounted for 2.0% of reported cases (Table 5). Findings from the FGDs showed that the abuses occur predominantly by late evenings and the effects of sexual assault include sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancy, moral decadence, emotional trauma, abortion, depression, reduced productivity, stigmatization, death, physical injury, mental instability and school dropout.

Table 5 – Relationship between the Victim and the Abuser

Variable	Frequency	%
Fiance'	524	46.6
Neighbour	411	36.5
Teacher/Lecturer	406	36.1
Course mate	381	33.9
Casual friend	335	29.8
Church/Fellowship member	270	22.0
Clergy	210	18.7
Extended family member	148	13.2
Stranger	92	08.2
Immediate family member	23	02.0

*Multiple responses

Overall reportage of the cases of sexual assault in the study area was 49.1% (Table 6). For those reported, 23.2% were made to friends, 18.2% to family members while 15.4% and 15.2% were reported to clergy and colleagues respectively. Only 1.1% reported to law enforcement agents.

Table 6 – Reports of Sexual Assault

Variable	Frequency (N=935)			
	Yes	%	No	%
Ever assaulted	459	49.1	476	50.9
Friend	217	23.7	718	76.3
Family member	168	18.0	767	82.0
Clergy	143	15.4	792	84.6
Colleague	142	15.2	793	84.8
School authority	53	5.7	882	94.3
Law enforcement agent	10	1.1	925	98.9

*Multiple responses

Reasons for non-reportage of cases as obtained through the focused group discussions include shame, lack of knowledge of where to report, lack of trust in the law enforcement mechanism, poor response from previous reported cases and shock from the incidence of the abuse. These factors jointly and severally caused delays or outright non-reportage of cases of sexual assault.

Table 7 Contributory Factors to Sexual Assault

Variable	Frequency (N=2060)			
	Yes	%	No	%
Dresses that expose the body	804	71.5	321	28.5
Dwelling in a lonely place	748	66.4	380	33.6
watching pornography	718	63.8	407	36.2
Visit to a male friend alone	471	41.9	654	58.1
Alcoholism	449	39.9	676	60.1
Living in the midst of people of opposite sex alone	201	17.9	1125	82.1

*Multiple responses

Factors associated with sexual assault revealed by a majority of the respondents (Table 7) include dressing to expose the body (71.5%), dwelling in a lonely place (66.4%) and watching pornography (63.8%). Other causes such as visit to male friend alone, living in the midst of people and alcoholism were also reported among the respondents. These findings were also in line with Ajayi, et. al. (2023), who found that alcohol use increases the odds of exposure to sexual violence and adequate family support is protective against sexual violence. Similarly, Chinta and Akpenpuun (2019) found a relationship between indecent dressing and sexual assault.

3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study empirically examined the prevalence and patterns of sexual assault and found a high prevalence in Benue State. The high youthful population and high proportion of singles naturally predisposes the study area to sexual assault. The combine effects of sexual assault such as sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancy, moral decadence, emotional trauma, abortion, depression, stigmatization, death, physical injury, phobia, mental instability and school dropout are capable affecting the overall health of the population.

It is therefore recommended that social institutions such as schools and religious bodies should focus on reorientation regarding descent dressing and moral values in order to curtail the predisposition to sexual assault. Also, there should be deliberate efforts to promote cluster dwellings through deliberate design of settlements and collective provision of public amenities. Such situations will limit the scenarios for lonely dwellings that predispose people to sexual assault. Finally, adequate punitive measures should be institutionalized and enforced to serve as deterrent to potential abusers. These measures should be targeted at restoring the confidence of the public towards reporting sexual assault and to reinforce redress mechanisms that are available to sexual assault victims.

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