

Mitigating Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) in Rural Communities: Challenges and Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) is a pressing global issue that severely hampers socioeconomic progress and deepens gender inequities, with women and girls in rural communities disproportionately impacted. This study synthesizes qualitative insights from semi-structured as well as Life history interviews conducted in Delta and Edo states of Nigeria to explore the prevalence, forms and causes of SGBV, as well as the barriers women and girls face in seeking help after experiences of violence. Key findings indicate that intimate partner violence, sexual assault by acquaintances and strangers, and other forms of gender-based violence are common. Social norms, such as the belief that men are superior to women and minimal penalties for perpetrators, contribute to the normalization of violence. Many women are reluctant to report abuse to authorities due to fear of stigma, blame and the perception that law enforcement will not act. To mitigate these challenges, the study recommends multifaceted approaches including challenging harmful gender norms through community education and engagement, strengthening law enforcement's capacity to respond appropriately to reports of violence, providing comprehensive support services for survivors, and amplifying the voices of women leaders to drive change.

1. Introduction

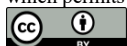
Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) remains a major global public health and human rights concern, disproportionately affecting women and girls and constraining socioeconomic development, particularly in low- and middle-income settings. The World Health Organization estimates that 35% of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by a non-partner (World Health Organization, 2021). In Sub-Saharan Africa, gender norms and structural inequities sustain risk and impede prevention and response, while underreporting remains common due to stigma, fear of retaliation, and limited institutional protection. Recent pooled analyses of demographic surveys underscore the magnitude of the problem, with lifetime prevalence

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estimates remaining substantial across the region and shaped by social, economic, and contextual factors (Nakie *et al.*, 2025).

In Nigeria, the burden of GBV is substantial and persistent. National survey evidence indicates that 28% of women aged 15–49 reported physical or sexual violence in 2008 and 2013, increasing to 31% by 2018 (NPC, 2019). Rural contexts may intensify both risk and concealment of SGBV as dense social networks reduce anonymity and raise the social costs of disclosure, while customary dispute-resolution practices may favour reconciliation over protection (WHO, 2016). Evidence from rural Nigeria shows that IPV, fear-based compliance, and coercive control are often linked to economic hardship, alcohol or substance use, and patriarchal expectations that normalize men's dominance in intimate relationships (Ajibola *et al.*, 2023, Fawole *et al.*, 2018). These dynamics contribute to cycles of violence that are difficult to interrupt where formal services are scarce, and community norms discourage help-seeking.

The consequences of SGBV are extensive, compromising health, dignity, security and autonomy and generating broader social and economic harms. SGBV has been linked to disrupted livelihoods and reduced mobility, increased mortality and morbidity, and sustained losses in quality of life (Crowne *et al.*, 2011, Jansen *et al.*, 2004). Survivors may experience injury, psychological trauma, sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancy and heightened risks of longer-term health problems (Jewkes *et al.*, 2017). Persistent abuse is also associated with depression, suicidal ideation, substance use and chronic pain (Perrin and others, 2019), while the social repercussions of violence, including stigma and isolation can undermine educational continuity, employment opportunities and social participation (Kalra *et al.*, 2010). These harms are amplified when community and institutional responses fail to protect survivors or hold perpetrators accountable.

Although Nigeria has adopted key normative and legal commitments including CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Child Rights Act and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP), meaningful protection depends on subnational domestication, resourcing and implementation capacity (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015, Ajibola *et al.*, 2023). Evidence suggests that SGBV has not declined commensurately with these commitments (Fawole *et al.*, 2018), indicating the need for multi-pronged, gender-transformative strategies that address harmful norms, strengthen institutional accountability, empowering women economically and socially, and engaging men and boys in GBV initiatives and expand survivor-centred services. (Chiadikaobi *et al.*, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the present study synthesises qualitative evidence from rural communities in Delta and Edo States to illuminate dominant forms of SGBV, perceived drivers, and barriers to reporting and support-seeking, with the goal of informing contextually grounded prevention and response strategies (Adeyemo and Nwadiuto, 2023, WHO, 2016).

2. Theoretical Frameworks

Three theories have been adopted for this paper.

Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura's theory suggests that people can learn new behaviors by observing others. In the context of gender-based violence, this theory can explain how patriarchal norms, rigid gender roles, and cycles of abuse get transmitted across generations in rural communities through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. (Nabavi and Bijandi, 2012, Firmansyah and Saepuloh, 2022).

Research Question 1

How do observed behaviours of decision makers (community leaders and elders) as well as law enforcement agents' attitudes toward SGBV shape the attitude of rural youth on SGBV?

Feminist Theory

Feminist theories emphasize the role of power imbalances, gender discrimination, and patriarchal structures in perpetuating violence against women and girl. The theory can account for how women's exclusion from rural economies, politics, and decision-making heightens their vulnerability to various forms of gender-based violence (Nkansah,2023). Feminist theory in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV) and gender-based violence (GBV) explores how societal structures, particularly patriarchal systems, facilitate and perpetuate violence against women (Becker *et al.*, 2021). It posits that IPV and GBV are rooted in unequal power dynamics and used as tools to maintain control and dominance over women. Feminist perspectives emphasize the need for an integrated approach to understand and address these forms of violence, highlighting the importance of challenging societal norms and advocating gender equality. (Wamue-ngare *et al.*, 2025).

Research Question 2

How does patriarchal norms and the gender inequalities such as in education, income, decision making and power, experienced by women and girls contribute to their vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence?

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a critical framework that provides us with the mindset and language for examining interconnections and interdependencies between social categories and systems. This approach, recognizes that people experience multiple types of oppression and disadvantage due to their gender, race, class, ethnicity, disability status, and other social identities. Applying an intersection lens can help us understand how the combination of rural location, gender, and other identity markers shape the experiences of survivors of gender-based violence in unique ways. (Kelly *et al.*, 2021, Bastia *et al.*, 2021).

Research Question 3

In what way does intersecting identities (gender, class, ethnicity, age, disability, location) shape rural women's experiences of and responses to SGBV?

The present study seeks to address sexual and gender -based violence in rural communities, which are products of intersecting social determinants including social norms, access to economic and social resources, encounters with gender-based discrimination, and the concepts of equity and inclusion (Marmot *et al.*, 2008). By drawing upon these theoretical frameworks, this study can provide a comprehensive analysis of the complex, multilayered factors contributing to gender-based and sexual violence in rural communities, and propose evidence-based, holistic solutions to address this critical issue.

3. Method

3.1 The Study Area

The study area of the project comprises two states in Nigeria, Delta and Edo States as briefly described as follows. Delta State has a land area of 16,842 square kilometres. The location of Delta State within the Federation of Nigeria has been a major economic advantage. It is situated in the heartland of the Nigerian economy, as it is the highest producer of petroleum

amongst the oil-producing states in the country. Delta State is in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

The second state is Edo which is also located in the southern part of Nigeria. Benin city is the state capital and largest urban centre. The state is inhabited largely by the Edo people, who are linked to the historic kingdom of Benin.

3.2 Study Design

The study uses a descriptive research design to explore the prevalence, forms and factors that support perpetuation of Sexual and gender-based violence in rural communities as well as the factors that discourage victims from reporting and seeking help among rural residents in Delta and Edo state. It is based on Semi-structured and Life history interviews. The interview guides shaped the conversations and participants got the freedom to expand their ideas and provide in-depth knowledge of issues discussed. This qualitative paper using Semi-structured interviews and Life History interviews is part of a larger project titled “Gender Inequality and Rural Women’s Health in post-COVID-19 Nigeria: Working with Policymakers and non-state Actors to promote inclusive and Sustainable Rural Women’s Health in Nigeria” that was funded by the International Development Research Centre(IDRC) and implemented by the Centre for Population and Environmental Development(CPED, Nigeria).

3.3 Study Population/Settings

The research focuses on rural communities in Edo and Delta States of Nigeria. These states were selected based on three key considerations:

- The rural areas in these states exemplify the prevailing patterns of gender inequality, typical of rural Nigeria.
- The study builds upon a rapid assessment previously conducted by the Centre for Population, Environment, and Development (CPED) in these states.
- CPED has established strong working relationships with policymakers and various non-state actors in these states, developed through a decade of implementing action research projects

3.4 Sampling and Recruitment of Participants

A stratified random sampling approach was applied to achieve representative coverage of the three senatorial districts in both states namely Edo North (EN), Edo South (ES), and Edo Central (EC), for Edo state, and Delta North (DN), Delta South (DS), and Delta Central (DC), for Delta state. Convenience and purposive sampling were combined to recruit participants (Suri, 2011). Recruitment was supported through community-based channels such as town criers, social influencers, and flyers, to reach eligible participants. Prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained, after which socio-demographic information was collected to contextualize participants and confirm that they met the study criteria. The household survey targeted heads of households. Eligibility required participants to be at least 18 years old and residents of rural communities within the three senatorial districts of Edo and Delta States. The study objectives and procedures were explained to all participants, participation was entirely voluntary, and no financial or material incentives were provided.

3.4.1 Semi Structured Interview

In each state, six participants (two men and four women) were drawn from each of the three senatorial districts, resulting in 18 participants per state. To highlight women’s experiences,

the sampling strategy intentionally oversampled women while also including men to reflect their perspectives. A total 36 semi-structured Interviews comprising of adult males and females were conducted in 6 local government areas in both project states (Delta and Edo States) comprising 67 per cent females and 33 per cent males.

3.4.2 Life History Interview

Across six LGAs in Delta State and Edo State, 24 life history interviews were conducted (four per LGA): one adult male and one adult female aged 60 years and above, and one adolescent male and one adolescent female aged 18–24 years. The design ensured gender balance and intergenerational perspectives within each project community.

3.5 Data Collection Method

To guarantee clear communication and accurate representation of participants' view, interviews were conducted either in English or Nigerian Pidgin, depending on each participant's preference. All interviews were audio-recorded to enable accurate transcription and rigorous analysis. The semi-structured interview format also ensured consistency across interviews while allowing sufficient flexibility to explore participants' experiences in greater depth.

3.6 Transcription and Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis, selected for its flexibility and utility in identifying, examining, and reporting patterns within qualitative data . The analytic procedure involved:

- (i) repeated reading of transcripts to achieve familiarisation,
- (ii) initial coding,
- (iii) searching for themes,
- (iv) reviewing and refining themes,
- (v) defining and naming themes, and
- (vi) producing the final report.

To enhance reliability and validity, multiple researchers independently coded a subset of the transcripts and compared interpretations, discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. In addition, the research team engaged in ongoing reflexive practice throughout the analysis to reduce potential bias.

3.7 Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were embedded across all stages of the study. Prior to participation, all respondents provided informed consent following a detailed briefing on the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw at any point without any adverse consequences. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, identifying details were removed from the dataset and pseudonyms were used when reporting findings. Audio files and transcripts were stored in secure locations, with access restricted to members of the research team. (NITDA, 2019, Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2023). Interviewers received trauma-informed training and were sensitized on private interviewing and distress protocol to pause/end interviews, assess imminent risk, and initiate consented referrals to verified health, psychosocial and legal services (WHO, 2016). The study protocol received ethical approval from the Research and Ethics Committee, College of Medical Sciences, University of Benin

(Ethical Clearance Protocol No. CMS/REC/2023/061) and the Human Ethics REB Committee, University of Windsor (Awards File No. 41257).

4. Results

Tables 1 and 2 depict the sociodemographic characteristics of semi structured interview participants, which comprises twelve females and six males for each state. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with adult women and men across rural communities in Delta and Edo States. Participants were largely married, engaged primarily in farming, trading, artisanal work, or public service, and reported a wide income range, reflecting varied rural livelihoods. This profile provides an important context for interpreting how gendered power relations, economic dependence, and community governance shape SGBV experiences and responses.

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Semi structured Interview Participants, Delta State

ID	Gender	Age	Education	Marital Status	Ages of Children	Economic Activities	Annual Income (₦)
DC 1	Female	54	Registered Nurse	Married	29, 26, 24, 20	Nursing	2.04M
DC 2	Female	39	Secondary School	Married	10, 6	Farmer	No Response
DC 3	Female	24	National Diploma	Single	-	Trader	480,000
DC 4	Female	42	B.Sc.	Single	-	Cosmetologist	720,000
DC 5	Male	61	National Diploma	Married	34, 32, 29, 27, 27, 25, 24, 23, 20	Farming	600,000
DC 6	Male	46	M.Sc.	Married	10, 8, 6, 3	Public Servant	1.15M
DN 1	Female	52	Secondary School	Married	33, 31, 29, 26, 24, 21, 15	Farming	600,000
DN 2	Female	42	Secondary School	Married	19, 17, 14, 12, 8	Trading	540,000
DN 3	Male	58	National Certificate in Edu.	Married	28, 26, 21, 17, 13	Teaching	1.44M
DN 4	Male	69	B.Sc.	Married	36,33,31,20, 20	Retired Civil Servant & Farming	720,000
DN 5	Female	61	B.Ed.	Married	38, 36,34, 32, 30, 28	Farming	840,000
DN 6	Female	65	Teachers' Training	Married	38, 35, 33, 32	Farming	360,000
DS1	Female	21	National Diploma	Single	-	Fashion Designer	No Response
DS2	Female	33	National Certificate in Edu.	Married	7, 5, 3	Trading	No Response
DS3	Female	48	Secondary School	Separated	20, 17, 14, 11	Trading	900,000
DS4	Female	45	Higher National	Married	18, 15, 12,	L.G.A. Officer	2.4M

ID	Gender	Age	Education	Marital Status	Ages of Children	Economic Activities	Annual Income (₱)
			Diploma		8		
DS5	Male	58	B.Ed.	Married	24, 22, 18, 14	Teaching	1.74M
DS6	Male	25	B.Sc.	Single	-	Hospitality	300,000

Table 2: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Semi structured Interview Participants, Edo State

ID	Gender	Age	Education	Marital Status	Ages of Children	Economic Activities	Annual Income (₦)
EC1	Female	47	Secondary School	Married	24, 21, 19, 16, 13	Trading	2.4M
EC2	Female	47	Primary School	Married	20, 18, 16, 14, 12	Trading	120,000
EC3	Male	47	Higher National Diploma	Married	26, 22, 18, 16	Farming	360,000
EC4	Male	52	M.Sc.	Married	11,8, 6, 9	Civil servant	900,000
EC5	Female	39	National Diploma	Married	15,13, 11, 10, 6	Catering	840,000
EC6	Female	42	National Diploma	Married	20, 17	Hair Stylist	420,000
EN1	Female	49	Higher National Diploma	Married	25,23, 18, 14	Civil Servant	720,000
EN2	Male	53	B.Sc.	Married	17, 14, 12, 9, 7	Teaching	300,000
EN3	Male	47	Secondary School	Married	17, 14, 12, 9, 7	Carpentry	360,000
EN4	Female	48	Primary School	Married	31, 30, 28,26, 24, 24, 20, 15	Farming	320,000
EN5	Female	44	Secondary School	Married	9, 6, 5, 2	Farming	320,000
EN6	Female	65	Primary School	Married	42,40, 38, 36,34, 30, 26,18	Farming	320,000
ES1	Female	43	Primary School	Married	24, 21, 19, 16, 12, 11	Farming	420,000
ES2	Male	37	B.Sc.	Married	1	Farming	450,000
ES3	Female	30	B.Sc.	Single Mom	3	Farming	No Resp.
ES4	Female	28	Secondary School	Married	6, 4	Farming	120,000
ES5	Female	44	Primary School	Married	12, 8	Fashion Designer	500,000
ES6	Male	56	Secondary School	Married	18, 15, 12, 9	Court Officer	900,000

4.1 Forms of SGBV

Various forms of SGBV including Intimate partner violence, non-partner violence, and sexual violence perpetuated by relatives and strangers were reported by respondents.

4.1.1 Pervasive Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Participants across both states described various forms of intimate partner violence including economic abuse and physical violence as a common occurrence in their rural communities. One recurring theme was the use of financial control as a form of abuse, where husbands would withhold money for household expenses or the wife's personal needs as a means of punishment or dominance.

As one female participant in Edo state explained,

"In this community, what I have experienced about intimate partner violence is that when husband and wife quarrel the husband will refuse to give the wife

market/feeding money. This is what is common in this community." (EN5, Female, Married, Farming, 44 yrs, semi structured).

Physical abuse was also widely reported, with several participants describing scenarios of husbands beating or slapping their wives, often justified by the belief that the woman had done something "wrong" or "disrespectful." What's particularly concerning is how this violence is normalized and even justified within these communities. Men rationalize beating their wives by claiming women have done something "wrong" or "disrespectful," reflecting an underlying belief that husbands have the right to physically discipline their wives. One female participant noted,

"At times, men become annoyed and beat up their wives when the woman does something wrong, and she claims that what she did is right. (DN1, Female, Married, Trader and Farmer, 52yrs, semi structured).

4.1.2 Sexual Violence

In addition to IPV, participants also discussed the prevalence of sexual violence against women and girls in their communities, including rape, sexual assault, and harassment. Sexual violence affects women and girls across different relationship contexts. One female participant shared a harrowing account of her daughter being sexually assaulted.

"Women and girls' experiences violence including domestic abuse, child abuse, sexual abuse from relatives, intimate partners, and strangers..... let me give an example from my experience or scenario that happens to me. One of my daughters who was sent an errand was called by a boywho overpowered her and raped her when I heard about it, I took up the case, and the boy was jailed in prison for 3 years. Today, this case has served as a lesson to many in whole community as many are afraid to do it." (EN6, Female, Married, Farming, 65 yrs, semi structured).

While this case resulted in a three-year prison sentence for the perpetrator, the mother notes it served as a deterrent in the community, suggesting that legal consequences for sexual violence are relatively rare.

4.1.3 Traditional Gender Norms and Power Dynamics

Traditional gender norms place men as unquestioned heads of households with authority to control their wives. Multiple respondents describe how men assert dominance when women disagree with them, viewing such disagreements as challenges to their rightful authority rather than normal relationship dynamics.

Participants highlighted the role of traditional gender norms and power dynamics in enabling IPV, with some men asserting their authority and control over their wives.

"As one female participant stated, "Some men control their wives because they are the head of the house, so when the woman does not agree with them, it leads to intimate partner violence" (DN1, Female, Married, Trader and Farmer, 52yrs, semi structured).

4.2 Respondents Perception of Factors Influencing Intimate Partner Violence

4.2.1 Harmful Traditional Practices

Bride Price Customs are explicitly linked to IPV. One young female trader explains that because men pay bride price, they view women as "personal properties," creating a transactional framework that dehumanizes women and justifies controlling behaviour.

“Harmful traditional practices and payment of bride price also influence intimate partner violence because it makes the men to see the women as their personal properties.” (DN Adolescent female, married, trader 23yrs, Life History)

4.2.2 Nagging

Some respondents opined that nagging by the woman could make the man angry resulting in physical abuse of the woman as shown by the excerpt below.

“Most women nag a lot and talk when they are not supposed to, and when you are with a man who does not take nonsense, the end result could be abuse” (DS, adult male, married, Farmer, 65yrs, Life History).

4.2.3 Finance

Economic Dependence creates vulnerability. When men control all financial resources and women lack independent income, this power imbalance enables abuse. Conversely, one respondent suggests that when women earn more than their husbands, this can also trigger violence, revealing that any deviation from traditional gender hierarchies may provoke male aggression.

“There are various levels of violence against women in this community. I have witnessed such here, but this is generally due to disagreement between husband and wife in the family. Mostly because the man could not provide adequately the needs of the family, this may lead to the provocation of the woman which may degenerate to physical confrontation. But if the man is taking good care of the family there will be happiness in the home, and such there will be no violence. So, everything boils down to money”. (ES3, Female, Single Mother, Nil, 30 yrs, semi structured).

4.2.4 Education Paradox

Interesting, two contradictory views were observed in terms of the role education of women plays in the perpetuation of intimate partner violence. Some respondents believed lack of education could serve as a risk factor for gender-based violence while other respondents argue that when a woman is highly educated, it predisposes them to intimate partner violence, as being educated could make a women to become proud, disrespect her husband, eventually leading to intimate partner violence. This double bind suggests that women cannot win. They are vulnerable whether educated or not.

A respondent opined:

“Because women’s access to education is poor, most times, the men are well to do than the women, so it makes them not to value their wife and become violent towards them.” (DN, adult female, married, retired civil servant, 67, Life history).

Another participant remarked

“If a woman takes leadership role and she is more educated or she has more money than the man, it can lead to intimate partner violence because she would like to dominate the man, but not all women do that.” (EN3, Male, Married, Carpentering, 47, semi structured).

4.2.5 Lack of Submission

Women are blamed for IPV when they fail to be sufficiently submissive to their husbands, reinforcing patriarchal expectations that women must accept subordinate roles to avoid violence.

Most women experienced GBV when they come to their husband house. What comes to my mind about GBV is quarrel, fighting, beating, hatred and sometimes husband and wife separation. Women and girls are at risk of experiencing increased gender-based violence sometimes because they are not submissive, and they disrespect their husband. (EN5, Female, Married, Farming, 44, semi structured)

4.2.6 Women Send the Wrong Signal through Indecent Dressing

Several respondents blame sexual violence on how women and girls dress, claiming they "send wrong signals" through their clothing choices. This is classic victim-blaming that transfers responsibility from perpetrators to survivors.

Many girls face sexual abuse these days because of the wrong signal they send out to the public through their indecent dressings. Many of our young women, even those who are married dress almost naked these days. This can provoke sexual abuse from notorious people or even relatives (DS, Adolescent male, farmer, 18, Life History).

Women and girls experienced domestic violence in the home because of their laziness in taking care of the family. The way women/girls dress and their appearance cause them to be abused and rape by acquittance and strangers. (EN, Adolescent female, Tailoring Apprentice, married, 20, Life History).

4.3 Systemic Barriers to Reporting SGBV and Seeking Help

The study identified multiple interlocking barriers that trap women in violent situations. A key theme that emerged across interviews was the reluctance of women to report IPV or seek help from formal authorities due to social stigma and distrust of law enforcement.

4.3.1 Cultural Taboos

Taking one's husband to court or reporting him to police is considered culturally unacceptable, even described as requiring ritual sacrifice. This creates a powerful social sanction against seeking formal help. As one male participant in Edo state described,

"In this community and according to the laws and custom of this land, it is a taboo if a woman takes a man to court (her husband), report to welfare and police station, it is not acceptable. If that happens, the woman will perform a sacrifice for doing that." (EN3, Male, Married, Carpentering, 47 yrs, semi structured).

4.3.2 Stigmatization

Participants highlighted how survivors of sexual violence often face severe social stigma and ostracization within their communities, further compounding the trauma they have experienced. Survivors face severe community stigma that can affect their future marriage prospects. This social punishment effectively silences victims who fear being permanently marked by their victimization. As one male participant explained,

"If such a thing happens and many people know about it, that may affect that woman. If somebody wants to marry that woman they will say, oh, this is the person they raped some time ago. They will stigmatize that woman." (DN3, Male, Married, Civil Servant and Farmer, 58)

4.3.3. Blame/ Institutional Failure

Most times when women report incidence of SGBV to authorities, they end up being blamed for instigating it. When women report violence to elders or police, they are often blamed for not respecting their husbands or told to simply “go home and settle it.” This institutional indifference reinforces women's reluctance to report. A young female participant expressed

“The barriers women face when seeking for help after experiences of violence is that sometimes, when they report the issue to the elders, she might be blamed for not respecting the husband. When she reports it to the police, she might be told to go home and settle it with her husband” (DN, Adolescent Female, married, trader, 23, Life History).

4.3.4. Shame and Social Consequences

Multiple respondents describe women refusing to report violence because of shame or fear of community gossip. The study includes a poignant example of a woman with a swollen eye from being beaten who begged her mother not to report it to police because she didn't want “people to start talking.”

A young female participant shared

“There was a day we had a quarrel, he beats me up and my left eye was swollen. My mother wanted to go to the police station to report but I begged her not to go because I do not want any trouble or people to start talking”. (DC, Adolescent female, unmarried, 18, tailors apprentice, Life History).

Another participant noted

“Many women refuse to report cases of gender-based violence to law enforcement agents or even their family people on what is happening in their relationship because they are afraid of what people would say.” (DS4, Adolescent male, farmer, Life History).

Similarly, another respondent noted

“The women do not report their husband to police station or law enforcement because of shame.” (EN Adolescent male, married, Student, 18, Life History).

4.4 Normalizing and Trivializing Gender-Based Violence

An overarching theme that emerged from the interviews was the normalization and trivialization of gender-based violence within these rural communities. Several participants expressed a sense of resignation or acceptance towards IPV and sexual violence, viewing them as inevitable or even justified in certain circumstances.

For instance, one female participant stated,

“Most women experienced GBV when they come to their husband house what comes to my mind about GBV is quarrel, fighting, beating, hatred and sometimes husband and wife separation. Women and girls are at risk of experiencing increased gender-based violence sometimes because they are not submissive, and they disrespect their husband.” (EN5, Female, Married, Farming, 44 yrs, semi structured).

Similarly, an adolescent female participant attributed women's experiences of domestic violence and rape to their:

“laziness in taking care of the family” and “the way they dress”, reflecting a victim-blaming mindset. (EN, Adolescent female, Married, Tailoring Apprentice, 20 yrs, Life History).

4.5 Traditional Methods of Resolving Issues of Gender and Sexual Violence in Rural Settings

4.5.1. Local and Community Laws

In most of the communities where the study was carried out, traditional laws exist that helps to resolve issues of SGBV. A male respondent from Delta state describes a traditional community-based system that purportedly holds perpetrators accountable. He explains how customary laws in his community create public consequences for domestic violence, offering a contrasting perspective on traditional justice mechanisms.

“The traditional laws are there put in place. If you fight with your wife, especially in the evening or at night. The next morning, they will ring the local bell. They want to know what happened. After the judgment. Whoever is wrong will be told. So that thing sounds like a deterrent, to check in on those issues. They don't take sides. If a person is a man and he does something wrong, he will be told. So, the natural laws are there, in our local community. But that does not mean That they are no Quarrel between husband and wife.” (DN2, adult male, 65yrs, married, farmer)

This account presents an idealized view of traditional conflict resolution, suggesting that some rural communities have established customs for addressing IPV through collective intervention and public judgment. However, the respondent's characterization of wife-beating as mere “quarrel” reveals the persistence of normalized attitudes toward marital violence, even within communities that claim to have accountability structures in place.

Family /Elders council: Beyond formal legal systems, rural communities in the study area employ a tiered traditional approach to resolving intimate partner violence. This response from a 24-year-old male respondent in Delta State illustrates how conflict resolution follows a hierarchical structure, beginning with family-level intervention before escalating to broader community authorities when necessary. In some cases, families and elders as reported to as revealed by this respondent:

“If a thing like that is happening in my family, they will immediately summon them within the family cycle. But if it persists, they will have to meet with the elder council (DN, Adolescent male, unmarried, fuel station manager, 24yrs, Life History).

This account reveals a two-stage process, initial family mediation followed by elder council intervention for persistent cases. While this graduated approach suggests some level of community oversight, it also raises questions about the effectiveness of family-based interventions, particularly given that families may prioritize preserving marriages over protecting victims, and women may face additional pressure to remain silent when “handled” within the family circle.

4.5.2 Payment of Fine

Traditional community justice systems in rural Nigeria often employ financial penalties as a primary form of accountability for sexual violence, even in cases involving the most vulnerable victims. This account from a 52-year-old female farmer and trader in Delta State illustrates how monetary fines are imposed alongside other sanctions in response to child rape:

“A man recently raped a girl. He was summoned, the girl, five years old was taken to the hospital for treatment and the man was beaten and made to pay a fine. The man who raped the girl is the grandfather of the child” (DNI, Female, Married, farmer and trader, 52yrs, semi structured)

This case raises profound concerns about the adequacy of financial penalties for serious sexual crimes. The imposition of a fine. Essentially allowing a perpetrator to pay money to compensate for raping a five-year-old child reflects a transactional approach to justice that may inadequately address the severity of the crime, fail to provide meaningful deterrence, or protect the child from future abuse. This reliance on monetary compensation rather than formal criminal prosecution is particularly troubling in intrafamilial cases where the perpetrator remains within the family structure and may retain access to the victim despite paying a fine.

5. Discussion

The findings from this study provide critical insights into the complex and deeply rooted nature of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in rural communities of Delta and Edo states, Nigeria.

5.1 The Persistence and Pervasiveness of Intimate Partner Violence

The study reveals that intimate partner violence remains the most prevalent form of SGBV in the studied rural communities, manifesting through physical abuse, economic control, and psychological manipulation. This finding aligns with global evidence indicating that approximately 35% of women worldwide experience physical and/or sexual violence from intimate partners (World Health Organization, 2021). However, the normalization of such violence in these rural settings, where participants frequently justified abuse based on women's perceived failures or transgressions suggests a problem far deeper than statistics alone can capture.

The use of financial control as a primary mechanism of abuse is particularly notable. Husbands withholding household funds as punishment represents a powerful tool for maintaining dominance in contexts where women have limited independent income sources. This finding resonates with research by Alkan *et al.* (2021) and Pandeia *et al.* (2019), who documented how economic violence creates self-perpetuating cycles that trap women in abusive relationships. In rural areas where women's access to formal employment and independent economic opportunities is severely constrained, this form of abuse becomes especially effective in sustaining male control and female subordination.

The economic dimensions of IPV extend beyond direct financial manipulation. Multiple participants noted that men's inability to adequately provide for their families often precipitated violence, suggesting that economic stress functions simultaneously as a catalyst for abuse and a barrier to prevention. This observation supports intersectional understandings that link economic marginalization, gender inequality, and violence in mutually reinforcing patterns (Crowne *et al.*, 2011). The study reveals how poverty and limited economic opportunities in rural contexts create conditions where violence flourishes while simultaneously making it nearly impossible for women to leave abusive situation, a vicious cycle that demands multi-level intervention.

5.2 Social Learning and Intergenerational Transmission of Violence

The application of Social Learning Theory highlights how patriarchal attitudes, rigid gender roles, and acceptance of violence are transmitted across generations in these communities. Participants' accounts precisely demonstrate the mechanisms of observation, imitation, and reinforcement that Bandura's framework predicts (Nabavi and Bijandi, 2012, Firmansyah and Saepuloh, 2022). The normalization of violence is evident in statements from both male and female participants who view IPV as an inevitable consequence of marital disputes or women's perceived failures to fulfil prescribed roles.

Of particular concern is how community leaders and law enforcement agents' responses to SGBV perpetuate learned behaviours among youth. When traditional authorities trivialize violence, when police dismiss reports, or when community sanctions are minimal or absent, young people observe that violence carries few meaningful consequences. This observational learning reinforces the acceptability of such behaviours, virtually ensuring their continuation into future generations. The case described by one participant, where a rapist received a three-year prison sentence that served as a deterrent to others illustrates the potential power of consequential learning in disrupting these destructive patterns.

However, the predominance of victim-blaming narratives suggests that harmful lessons are often being transmitted and reinforced. When adolescents learn that women's "indecent dressing," "nagging" or "lack of submission" justifies violence, they internalize attitudes that will shape their own future relationships and parenting practices.

Patriarchal Structures and Feminist Analysis of Power

The feminist theoretical framework provides essential insights into how patriarchal structures in rural communities perpetuate SGBV. Participants' narratives clearly illustrate the power imbalances that feminist scholars identify as central to understanding gender-based violence (Becker *et al.*, 2021, Nkansah, 2023). The widespread belief that men are "heads of household" and therefore entitled to control their wives' behaviour permeates community attitudes, providing ideological justification for violence that is deeply embedded in social structures.

The practice of bride price payment, mentioned by several participants, exemplifies how cultural traditions can reinforce women's subordination by positioning them as property rather than autonomous individuals. This finding aligns with broader research on how traditional practices in African contexts can increase women's vulnerability to violence (Ajibola *et al.*, 2023). When marriage involves financial transactions that signify women as commodities, their autonomy and rights within relationships become fundamentally compromised, creating conditions where abuse can flourish with minimal social consequence.

Women's systematic exclusion from decision-making processes at household and community levels emerged as both a cause and consequence of their vulnerability to violence. This finding supports feminist analyses of how power operates across multiple levels, from intimate relationships to political structures, to maintain gender inequality (Wamue-ngare *et al.*, 2025). The minimal representation of women in positions of authority means they lack the power to challenge harmful norms, influence community responses to violence, or shape policies that might protect them. This powerlessness is further reinforced by the fact that women who do attempt to assert themselves or report abuse face severe social sanctions.

Interestingly, the conflicting views about women's education revealed a troubling double bind faced by educated women in these settings. Some participants recognized education as potentially protective, increasing women's economic independence and awareness of their rights. Others, however, viewed educated women as problematic, as threats to male authority

whose “pride” and assertiveness could provoke violence. This tension reflects patriarchal resistance to women’s empowerment and suggests that education alone, without fundamental challenges to underlying power structures, may paradoxically increase some women’s risk of violence by threatening traditional hierarchies.

5.3. Intersectionality and Compounded Vulnerabilities

The intersectionality framework (Kelly *et al.*, 2021, Bastia *et al.*, 2022) proves invaluable for understanding how multiple identity markers shape women’s experiences of SGBV in rural communities. Rural location itself constitutes a significant vulnerability factor that compounds other marginalized identities. Women in these communities face not only gender-based discrimination but also geographic isolation from services, limited educational opportunities, severely restricted economic options, stronger adherence to harmful traditional norms than typically exists in urban areas, and reduced anonymity that makes disclosure more socially risky.

Age intersects with gender to create vulnerabilities across the life course. Young girls face heightened risks of sexual assault by strangers, acquaintances, and disturbingly, family members as evidenced by the case of the grandfather who raped his five-year-old granddaughter. Adolescent girls navigating the transition to adulthood confront intense pressures around sexuality, dress, and behaviour that make them particularly vulnerable to victim-blaming when violence occurs.

Economic class emerged as another critical intersection shaping experiences of SGBV. Women with independent income sources, whether from farming, trading, or formal employment, described somewhat different experiences than those entirely dependent on husbands. However, even economically active women faced violence, suggesting that economic empowerment alone, without addressing underlying gender norms and power dynamics, provides incomplete protection. The relatively high incomes reported by some participants (up to 2.4 million Naira annually) indicate that SGBV affects women across economic strata, though poverty clearly exacerbates vulnerability and limits options for escape.

The intersection of gender with limited literacy and education also emerged as significant. While participants in this study were relatively educated (with minimum secondary education), they described how less educated women in their communities faced greater difficulties recognizing abuse as unacceptable, knowing their rights, or accessing help. This finding aligns with research by Adeyemo and Nwadiuto (2023), demonstrating how socio-demographic factors influence SGBV differently across contexts, underscoring the need for context-specific interventions.

5.4 Formidable Barriers to Reporting and Help-Seeking

Perhaps the most troubling findings concern the multiple, reinforcing barriers preventing women from reporting violence or seeking help. The strong cultural taboo against women taking legal action against their husbands reflects how patriarchal norms operate not only to enable violence but to ensure it remains invisible and unaddressed. When reporting abuse is itself considered transgressive, women face impossible choices between enduring violence and transgressing fundamental community norms. Recent DHS-based findings show that attitudes condoning violence (e.g., justifying wife beating) are associated with higher odds of domestic violence (Nakie *et al.*, 2025).

The fear of stigmatization emerged as perhaps the most powerful deterrent to reporting. Participants described how disclosure of rape or abuse could permanently damage a woman’s

reputation and marriage prospects, effectively punishing victims rather than perpetrators. This finding resonates with research by Palermo *et al.* (2014) on systematic underreporting of gender-based violence in developing countries, where shame and social consequences silence survivors.

Profound distrust of law enforcement and formal institutions constitutes another significant barrier. Participants described how police might dismiss reports, advise women to “go home and settle it,” or fail to take meaningful action against perpetrators. When police and judicial systems reflect rather than challenge community norms around SGBV, they become part of the problem rather than the solution, reinforcing women’s sense that formal help-seeking is futile or even dangerous.

The fear of blame when seeking help compounds these barriers. Women described being told by elders that they provoked abuse by not respecting their husbands or being advised by police to reconcile with abusive partners. This victim-blaming response from potential sources of support effectively silences women while protecting perpetrators, creating a climate of impunity that allows violence to continue unchecked.

The traditional justice systems described by participants involving local bells, elder councils, and fines represent community-based response mechanisms that could potentially be leveraged for prevention and accountability. However, these mechanisms appear grossly inadequate to address serious violence. The case of the grandfather who raped his granddaughter being merely “beaten and made to pay a fine” illustrates how traditional justice may trivialize even severe offenses, particularly when perpetrators hold positions of authority or respect within families and communities.

5.5 Normalization, Trivialization, and Victim-Blaming

The extent to which SGBV has been normalized in these rural communities represents a fundamental challenge to prevention efforts. When violence is viewed as an inevitable part of marriage, or as an understandable response to women’s failures, the motivation to prevent or intervene is substantially diminished.

Victim-blaming emerged as a pervasive and deeply troubling theme. Participants attributed violence to women’s dress, behaviour, education level, earning power, failure to submit, or “laziness.” This phenomenon, extensively documented in SGBV literature (Russo and Pirlott, 2006, Perrin *et al.*, 2019), serves multiple destructive functions: it provides justification for violence, shifts responsibility from perpetrators to victims, and creates the dangerous illusion that women can prevent violence by modifying their behaviour. The reality, however, is that no behaviour makes violence acceptable or justified, and responsibility for violence always lies with those who choose to commit it.

6. Conclusion

Sexual and gender-based violence remains a pervasive and deeply entrenched issue in rural Nigerian communities, promoted by patriarchal norms, economic dependencies, harmful traditional practices, and the systematic normalization of abuse. This study has highlighted the multifaceted nature of SGBV and the complex web of factors that perpetuate violence while simultaneously preventing survivors from seeking help or accessing justice. The findings reveal a disturbing reality. The normalization of violence is evident in the casual acceptance of abuse as an inevitable part of marriage, the pervasive victim-blaming that attributes violence to women's dress, behaviour, or perceived failures, and the minimal consequences faced by perpetrators. The barriers preventing women from reporting violence

are formidable and multi-layered. Cultural taboos against taking legal action against husbands, fear of stigmatization and social ostracization, profound distrust of law enforcement and formal institutions, concerns about being blamed rather than supported, and shame about what people might say, all combine to create a culture of silence that protects perpetrators while isolating survivors. Even when traditional justice mechanisms exist, they often prove inadequate, trivializing serious offenses through minimal penalties that fail to reflect the gravity of the harm caused. To address these challenges, a holistic, community-based approach is required, encompassing educational campaigns, institutional reforms, economic empowerment initiatives, and trauma-informed support services. Engaging men and boys as allies in transforming harmful masculinities is also critical for driving sustainable change. By centering the voices and experiences of rural community members, this study contributes to the growing body of research on addressing Sexual and gender-based violence in rural underserved communities.

7. Recommendations

To effectively mitigate gender-based and sexual violence in rural communities, a multi-pronged approach is necessary, addressing both the immediate needs of survivors and the underlying sociocultural factors that perpetuate these issues.

7.1. Community Education and Awareness Campaigns

Implement targeted awareness campaigns to challenge harmful gender norms, educate community members on the unacceptability of GBV, and promote positive masculinity. Engage influential local leaders, such as traditional rulers and religious figures, to amplify these messages.

7.2 Strengthening Trust and Responsiveness of Formal Institutions

Collaborate with law enforcement and social service providers to improve their sensitivity, responsiveness, and accountability in addressing GBV cases. Enhance community-level trust and confidence in these systems through transparent processes and survivor-centered approaches.

7.3 Economic Empowerment Initiatives

Provide women and girls with increased access to economic resources, education, and livelihood opportunities to reduce their financial dependence on abusive partners and expand their decision-making power within households and communities.

7.4 Comprehensive support for Survivors

Establish community-based support services, including counseling, legal aid, and rehabilitation programs, to address the immediate and long-term needs of GBV survivors. Ensure a trauma-informed, non-judgmental approach that facilitates the reintegration of survivors into their communities.

7.5 Engaging Men and Boys as Allies

Involve men and boys as active partners in transforming harmful masculinities and promoting gender equality. Encourage their participation in awareness-raising activities, parenting programs, and peer-to-peer initiatives that challenge patriarchal attitudes and promote healthy, non-violent relationships.

7.6 Amplifying the Voices of Women Leaders to Drive Change

There is need to build the capacity of women leaders in rural communities to act as agents of change on issues of SGBV.

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