

# Knowledge, perception and experience of gender based violence among in-school adolescents in Lagos state, Nigeria

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## Abstract

**Background:** Gender based violence (GBV) is an increasing public health concern. Young persons are particularly at risk with an estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys affected worldwide. Majority of these children are girls in Africa. GBV is fuelled by ignorance and adverse cultural or religious beliefs and practices.

**Objective:** To assess the knowledge, perception and experience of GBV among adolescents in Lagos, Nigeria.

**Method:** A cross sectional study in randomly selected secondary schools in Lagos State. Socio-demographic characteristics, knowledge, perception and experience of GBV were obtained using semi structured questionnaires. Data were analysed using SPSS version 20.

**Results:** Of the 219 respondents, majority were females (54.3%), aged 14 to 16 years (75.3%) and lived with both parents (79.0%). While 65.3% of respondents had heard about GBV, only 1.8% could correctly define it. Majority (84%) of respondents thought girls were more likely to suffer GBV and 10% were of the opinion that sexual abuse was not a form of GBV. 28.8% had experienced GBV of a sexual nature and none of these respondents made a formal report of the incident.

**Conclusion:** The knowledge of GBV among respondents was inadequate, and a significant proportion of both sexes experienced GBV of a sexual nature. This highlights the need for public health education on GBV and as well encouragement of victims to report cases with assurance of their safety.

## Introduction

Globally an estimated 30% of ever partnered women have experienced physical and or sexual violence with a higher regional prevalence of approximately 37% in Africa, East Mediterranean and South East Asia. Also, a prevalence of exposure to violence among ever partnered women stratified by age has been recorded (29.4%) amongst the age group 15-19 years indicating that violence starts early in women relationships [1]. Reports have also shown that 7% of non-partnered women have experienced sexual violence [2].

The United Nations Secretary General's global study on Violence against children has shown that though the extent of violence against children is impossible to measure accurately as most of the assaults occur secretly, an estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys have been sexually violated [3].

Gender based violence is a worldwide phenomenon that knows no geographical, cultural, social, economic, ethnic or other boundaries. It is a form of violence that is inflicted on the basis of gender differences. Worldwide children are faced with challenges of practices such as female genital mutilation, child trafficking, forced marriage, sexual abuse, child labour, bullying and other forms of deprivations [4].

Intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence are both forms of gender based violence that adolescents are also predisposed to [2]. Both sexes are prone to these forms of sexual violence but at unequal and varying degrees. Girls are usually more prone to sexual abuse compared to boys. Violence by women against men also occurs

though it is less studied or given attention and often trivialized thus making it difficult for men to seek for help [5].

Norms and traditions especially in the African setting tend to show a preference to male children compared to females in the family setting thus fuelling gender inequality, making women have a low self worth and promoting a high rate of violence against women [6]. Substance abuse and alcohol intake are also recognized factors that can influence an individual's sense of reasoning and behaviour resulting in violent acts [7].

Violence can occur in the home, school, religious institutions and the community as a whole. Parents, siblings, foster parents, guardians, uncles, aunts, neighbours, friends as well as strangers can be responsible for violence in the home. Disadvantaged children such as orphans, children living on the streets or child refugees, disabled children tend to be more vulnerable in the community. In most cases the perpetrators are usually known to the victim and assaults are usually not reported because of ignorance or naivety, fear instilled by the assailant, threats, stigma and shame, the individual involved is a close family member or the fact that they are not aware of organizations where such cases are reported [8,9].

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Adolescence is a crucial period between childhood and adulthood in which a lot of developmental changes occur biologically, physically and mentally. Any traumatizing experience at this stage can lay a foundation for what an individual will manifest in future so efforts should be deployed to ensure good physical and psychological wellbeing in adolescence [10,11].

Consequences of violence can have short or long term devastating effects and also negatively affect an individual's mental, physical, sexual and reproductive health. Suicidal tendencies, depression, post traumatic disorders, risky sexual behaviours, drug and alcohol misuse among others are usually manifested in exposed persons [12]. Girls may be saddled with unwanted pregnancy and vulnerability to HIV infection as well as other sexually transmitted infections. Women who were sexually abused as children are likely to engage in risky sexual behaviours and have multiple sexual partners. Children who witness violence in their homes also tend to perpetrate the act and become violent to others [4,13].

Adolescents in our setting are prone and exposed to various forms of violence and assaults which are seldom reported because there is little or no understanding of what violence entails. Available evidence shows that most GBV acts are perpetrated by persons known to the victims. Conducting GBV studies in an environment that may be devoid of influence of perpetrator like a school may solve the challenge of under reporting. This study investigated GBV among in-school adolescents. Most studies on gender based violence in Nigeria are usually focused on the adult population and there is paucity of data on the pattern, trend and rate of gender based violence in adolescents in Nigeria. This study therefore aims to determine the knowledge and perception as well as assess experience of gender based violence among in-school adolescents.

## Methodology

### Study design

This was a cross sectional study using a semi-structured questionnaire to obtain data from respondents drawn from the senior secondary classes of randomly selected schools. The study was carried out from April to August 2017 among students aged 13-18 years. The questions on the knowledge of gender based violence were graded and scored. A score above 60% was considered good.

### Study setting and site

The study was conducted in 3 of the 6 school districts of Lagos State, located in the South western geo-political zone of Nigeria. The state has been in existence for 50 years and is essentially a melting pot of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria, being the former administrative capital, and major commercial centre of the nation. Lagos is also home to foreigners from neighbouring African countries and beyond. The country operates the 6-3-3-4 educational system which is also operational in Lagos state. The primary education spans through a period of six years while the secondary education is divided into two phases, the first three years is spent in the junior secondary school after which a student proceeds for the last three years in the senior secondary school, and thereafter proceeding for tertiary education of at least 4 years.

Lagos state has six educational districts (Districts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6) and three out of the six educational districts namely districts 2, 4 and 6 were selected. The study was conducted in six private schools, two from each of the selected district.

### Study population

Averages of 36 students per school were selected in each school to make up the sample size of 219. Students were stratified by class, sex and age. Probability proportionate to size was used to select the number of respondents from each group.

### Data management

Information from the questionnaire were entered in an excel spread sheet, cleaned and transferred and analysed using SPSS version 20. Results are presented as frequency tables.

### Ethical issues

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board, Nigerian Institute of Medical Research, Lagos Nigeria. Social permissions were obtained from the Lagos State Ministry of Education and the authorities of individual schools. Written informed consent was obtained from parents of participants aged 13 to 17 years and directly from participants aged 18 years. Assent was also obtained from the respondents aged 13-17 years.

### Results

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Majority of them were in the age group 14-16 years (75.3%), females (54.3%), Christians (92.2%), of the Yoruba ethnic group (60.7%), from a monogamous setting (94.1%), live with both parents (79.0%), have mothers and fathers with above secondary education (96.8% and 98.2%) respectively.

An assessment of the respondent's knowledge of gender based violence is shown in Table 2. 65.3% had ever heard about gender based violence while 1.8% correctly defined it. The response to identifying the various forms of gender based violence showed that majority identified

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Frequency N=219(%)
<b>Age</b>	
≤13	44 (20.1)
14-16	165(75.3)
>17	10 (4.6)
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	100 (45.7)
Female	119 (54.3)
<b>Religion</b>	
Christianity	202 (92.2)
Islam	17 (7.8)
<b>Tribe</b>	
Yoruba	133(60.7)
Hausa	4 (1.8)
Igbo	63 (28.8)
Others	19 (8.7)
<b>Family type</b>	
Monogamous	206 (94.1)
Polygamous	13 (5.9)
<b>Living with</b>	
Both parents	173(79.0)
Mother only	17 (7.8)
Father only	6 (2.7)
Others	23 (10.5)
<b>Mothers level of education</b>	
Primary	7 (3.2)
>Secondary	212(96.8)
<b>Father's level of education</b>	
Primary	4(1.8)
>Secondary	215(98.2)

verbal abuse (52.1%), physical abuse (58.9%), emotional / psychological abuse (62.1%) and sexual abuse (66.7%) as forms of GBV. Ten percent (10%) of respondents were of the opinion that sexual abuse was not a form of GBV and 23% didn't know if it was. Denial of rights to food and shelter was seen as a form of GBV by 45.7% of the respondents, contrary to the opinion 14.1% while 40.2% didn't know.

The perceptions of the respondents on the likely causes of GBV are projected in Table 3. More than half of the respondents felt 'the belief that males are superior to females' (54.8%) and Traditional beliefs and practices (53.9%) are likely causes. Majority didn't know if 'belief that females should obey and not argue' (59.3%), 'wearing revealing clothes' (49.8%), 'religious beliefs and practices' (53.4%), 'drunkenness' (56.2%) and 'peer pressure' (52.5%) were probable causes.

Eighty four percent (84%) of respondents had the opinion that females are more likely to suffer GBV, 65.8% did not think they were at risk of GBV and 82.2% would like to be educated on GBV. In rating the overall scores in response to the questions on knowledge and perception of GBV 58.9% scored above sixty percent.

Table 4 shows that 63 students (28.8%) had experienced a form of sexual assault majority of who were females. Four respondents (6.4%) have been raped with equal distribution between males and females. Forceful touch on the breast occurred in eight respondents (12.7%) all females; 36.5% have been touched in the private parts majority of

**Table 2.** Respondents knowledge on gender based violence

Questions /Statements	Frequency N=219 (%)		
	Correct/yes	Incorrect/no	DK
Have you heard about gender-based violence?	143(65.3)	76(34.7)	0
What is gender-based violence?	4 (1.8)	214(97.7)	1(0.5)
What forms can gender based violence take?			
Verbal abuse	114(52.1)	48(21.9)	57(26.0)
Physical abuse	129(58.9)	31(14.2)	59(26.9)
Emotional/Psychological abuse	136(62.1)	33(15.1)	50(22.8)
Discipline for wrong doing	62(28.3)	55(25.1)	102(46.6)
Sexual abuse	146(66.7)	22(10.0)	51(23.3)
Denial of rights to food and shelter	100(45.7)	31(14.1)	88(40.2)

DK=Don't Know

**Table 3.** Respondent's perception of gender-based violence

Causes of gender-based violence	Frequency N=219 (%)		
	YES	NO	DK
Belief that males are superior to females	120(54.8)	28(12.8)	71(32.4)
Playing with boys	35(16.0)	43(19.6)	141(64.4)
Females should obey and not argue	48(21.9)	41(18.7)	130(59.3)
Wearing revealing clothes	79(36.0)	31(14.2)	109(49.8)
Traditional beliefs and practices	118(53.9)	22(10.1)	79(36.1)
Religious beliefs and practices	72(32.9)	30(13.7)	117(53.4)
Drunkenness	59(26.9)	37(16.9)	123(56.2)
Peer pressure	75(34.2)	29(13.2)	115(52.5)
Do you think you are at risk of gender-based violence?	31(14.1)	144(65.8)	44(20.1)
Would you like to be educated on gender-based violence?	180(82.2)	14(6.4)	25(11.4)
Who is more likely to suffer from GBV?	<b>Number (%)</b>		
Male	3(1.4)		
Female	184(84.0)		
Don't know	32(14.6)		
Overall score on GBV Knowledge	<b>Number (%)</b>		
Above 60%	129(58.9)		
Below 60%	90(41.1)		

DK=Don't Know

**Table 4.** Response to experience of sexual assault

Experience	Frequency (%)
All forms of sexual violence	n=63 (28.8.)
Male	17 (27.0)
Female	46 (73.0)
Rape	n=4(6.4)
Male	2 (50.0)
Female	2 (50.0)
Forceful touch on the breast	n=8(12.7)
Male	0 (0.0)
Female	8 (100.0)
Forceful touch in private part	n=23 (36.5)
Male	15 (65.2)
Female	8 (34.8)
Forceful Kiss in the mouth	n=28 (44.4)
Male	0 (0.0)
Female	28 (100.0)
*Perpetrators	
Friends	29 (46.0)
Teachers	4 (6.3)
Relations	16 (25.4)
Neighbours	7 (11.1)
Strangers	7 (11.1)
Did you report it?	n = 63
Yes	9 (14.3)
No	54 (85.7)
Who did you report to?	n=9
Parents	5 (55.5)
Not stated	4 (44.4)
How was it resolved?	No response
Any formal report?	None
*Why is sexual assault not reported?	n = 63
Shame	7 (11.1)
Fear of being killed / Threats	26 (41.3)
Stigma / discrimination	22 (34.9)
Parents will be disappointed	2 (3.2)
The authorities will not do anything	2 (3.2)
Because they enjoy it	6 (9.5)

\*Multiple responses were given

who were males, and 44.4% (all females) had been forcefully kissed. Perpetrators of the assaults were identified as friends (46.0%), teachers (6.3%), relations (25.4%), neighbours (11.1%), and strangers (11.1%).

Approximately fourteen percent (14.1%) of the respondents that had experienced one form of sexual assault reported the incident and over half them was to their parents. None of the respondents made a formal report.

The respondents gave reasons such as shame, threats, fear, stigma, discrimination, the fact that parents will be disappointed and the notion that the authorities will not act and because they enjoyed it as factors discouraging reporting of sexual assaults. The consequences of these sexual assaults on the students resulted in feeling of shame, depression, low self esteem and fear.

## Discussion

Possessing adequate knowledge and the right perceptions of gender based violence is a crucial step towards curbing this age long menace in the society. Adolescents in this study did not have adequate knowledge and right perceptions of gender based violence. Though majority (65.3%) claimed to have heard about gender based violence only 1.8% could define it, a significant proportion could not identify the various forms of gender based violence correctly and in addition only 58.9% of the respondents scored above 60% in the overall ratings of the questions to assess knowledge of GBV.

Similar studies by Mahmoud, *et al.* [14] in Egypt reported that adolescent in their cohort demonstrated a less than satisfactory knowledge about the forms of gender based violence. Adika and colleagues [15] also conducted a study among men in Yenagoa, Nigeria and reported less than satisfactory knowledge of GBV among their cohort. This is a reflection of the general low level of understanding of the subject matter in our environment.

Only 14.3% claimed to have reported the incidents of sexual assault of which majority was to their parents and none made formal reports. Studies carried out by Palermo, *et al.* [9] on reporting patterns of gender based violence cases in developing countries stated that among the 40% that disclosed their experience to someone in their study, only 7% reported to formal sources. An indication that gender based violence cases are seldom reported formally though it may be disclosed.

Furthermore the parents whom the adolescents disclosed to in our study obviously covered up the story or decided not to take it up for reasons we might not decipher. Several reasons such as the stigma attached, trying to protect the family name, not been aware of avenues to channel such cases, the fact that the perpetrator is a close family member, or an influential personality that can intimidate them are documented to be responsible for cases not been reported.

Our findings showed that both male and female adolescents experienced sexual assaults with higher occurrence among females (73%) compared to the males (27%). There is an increasing trend of male sexual harassment in recent times and reasons for this might not be known until investigated.

Following results obtained from our study we hereby recommend intensified efforts towards educating the public and creating awareness on gender based violence as this is imperative to its eradication.

The general trend of not reporting cases of gender based violence cases is also an obstacle to its documentation and accurate determination of burden and prevalence. Reporting of sexual violence cases should be encouraged by ensuring protection of victims and their families. Stringent legislative laws on sexual assaults should be instituted and implemented.

## Conclusion

The knowledge of gender based violence among respondents was inadequate, and a significant proportion of both sexes experienced gender based violence of sexual nature. This highlights the need for public enlightenment on GBV in order to equip the adolescents

with information to protect them and also prevent them from being perpetrators of violence in adulthood.

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