

# Gender-based violence in primary schools: Nigeria

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# Gender-based violence in primary schools: Nigeria

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# Introduction

According to UNESCO, school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) involves acts or threats of sexual, physical, or psychological violence occurring within and around school, perpetrated because of gender norms and stereotypes, and facilitated by unenforced and unequal power dynamics. These acts or threats not only have detrimental effects on the academic outcomes of their victims but also more specifically, hinder a country's human, social, psychological, and economic development in addition to obstructing the government's poverty alleviation and peace building efforts.

In Nigeria, there is no known prevalence of SRGBV at the primary school level except as found in the 2014 Violence Against Children Survey (VACS) by the National Population Commission (NPC) (UNICEF 2015), which showed a high prevalence (approximately 60 percent) of violence among adolescents before the age of 18, a finding corroborated by United Nations Population Fund (2019). In higher education, Mejuini and Obilade (2012) found that 23 percent of university students had experienced SRGBV, but Iliyasu et al. (2011) found a much higher prevalence—58.8 percent. Cases often go unreported or underreported because students fear victimization, punishment, or ridicule (Njuguna and Itegi 2013).

Specifically, over half of the VACS study population (13- to 24-year-old females and males) had first experienced sexual violence between the ages of 6 and 11, which corresponds with primary school age (NPC, UNICEF, and CDC 2015). Further estimates suggest that the share of children and youth affected by bullying and school violence range from 10 percent to 65 percent, depending on the country and the form of violence (UNESCO 2017).

Violence in a child's formative years have far-reaching consequences on the child's physical, mental, sexual, and emotional well-being. Sexual harassment within the school environment can interfere with students' educational opportunities, especially among girls. Gender-based violence (GBV) devastates survivors and their families and also has significant social and economic costs. In some countries, violence against women is estimated to cost up to 3.7 percent

of their gross domestic product (GDP) (Vara-Horna, 2013)—more than double what most governments spend on education.

An early effort to address these issues was Nigeria’s enactment of the Child’s Right Act 2003 to protect children’s rights. The Act has been adopted by 24 states in the country to protect children from every form of violence, including sexual harassment and child labor.

In the same vein, violence against women has been acknowledged worldwide as a violation of basic human rights (Nigeria Demographic Health Survey [NDHS] 2018, as cited by NPC 2019). Increasing research has highlighted the health burdens, intergenerational effects, and demographic consequences of such violence (Ram *et al*/2019). In 2015, Nigeria passed the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015, which aims to eliminate all forms of violence in both the private and public spheres—and includes the right to housing and other social assistance for victims of violence.

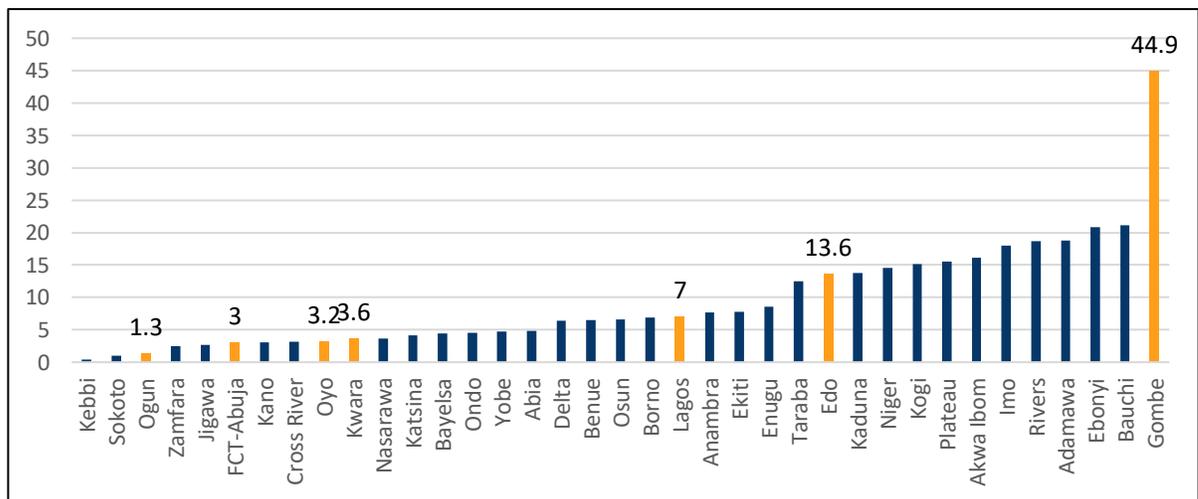
To monitor progress toward the elimination of violence the NDHS collects representative data on the prevalence of different forms of violence every five years. It measures experiences of violence among women ages 15–49 in three main forms: emotional, physical, and sexual. Although the trend of both physical and emotional violence has been fluctuating in Nigeria, sexual abuse has consistently increased across all age groups and for each survey year from 2008 to 2018 (Table 1). Also, there is wide disparity across states, so looking at national statistics disaggregated by region or state is critical to understanding where to focus efforts and attention (Figure 1).

**Table 1. Percentage of Nigerian women who have experienced abuse since age 15, by age group and type, 2008–18**

Age group	2008			2013			2018		
	Emotional	Physical	Sexual	Emotional	Physical	Sexual	Emotional	Physical	Sexual
15–19	18.7	9.1	3.3	11.3	7.8	4.4	18.8	11.4	8.3
20–24	24.0	16.2	4.3	18.7	12.9	5.2	32.1	18.4	9.2
25–29	24.6	19.7	4.6	19.6	14.4	5.3	33.8	19.3	6.2
30–39	23.6	18.7	3.6	21.2	16.5	4.7	33.0	20.7	7.4
40–49	24.2	17.4	3.5	18.9	14.9	4.2	30.6	18.9	5.5

Sources: Nigeria Demographic Health Surveys, 2008, 2013, and 2018.

**Figure 1. Prevalence of sexual violence in Nigeria, by state, 2018**



Source: Nigeria Demographic Health Survey, 2018.

Note: Orange bars indicate YcDEI study sites. FCT is the Federal Capital Territory.

For this policy brief, the Youthcare Development and Empowerment Initiative (YcDEI) in Ibadan, Nigeria—led by the principal investigator, Adefunke Ekine (in collaboration with other Echidna Scholars at the Brookings Institution)—embarked on comparative research to collect baseline data on SRGBV in primary schools with the intention of empirically documenting types, causes, and possible preventive measures against GBV. Ideally, this research will provide a body of information that helps policymakers, researchers, civil society, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other stakeholders, especially in the education sector, to make informed decisions about implementing interventions to improve the plight of girls and boys—and enable them to progress and succeed in life without trauma.

## Study background

This study is a part of cross-country research conducted with other scholars in four countries—Jamaica, Kenya, Malawi, and Nigeria—to determine the prevalence and pattern of SRGBV in public primary schools and to contribute more broadly to knowledge of about SRGBV in primary schools.<sup>1</sup>

## Objectives

The general objective of the study was to ascertain the extent of GBV among primary school pupils. The study has the following specific objectives:

- Determine the prevalence and gender disparity of SRGBV in public primary schools in Nigeria
- Identify the location and timing of SRGBV in public primary schools
- Explore possible risk factors for SRGBV in public primary schools
- Reveal the identifiable patterns or forms of SRGBV in public primary schools
- State the impacts of SRGBV on public primary school pupils

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<sup>1</sup> A policy brief synthesizing the cross-country findings is forthcoming, as are country briefs for Jamaica, Kenya, and Malawi.

- Identify the level of training of public primary school teachers in handling SRGBV
- Evaluate the existence and effectiveness of school-based programs on SRGBV

## Nigeria-specific methodology

The research applied a mixed methods design, including quantitative surveys and qualitative focus group discussions. In Nigeria, education is primarily a public good (provided by government), but because of the current need for school proximity and quality education, private schools have proliferated. Thus, both public and private primary schools exist in Nigeria. However, because of government efforts to curb violence against women and girls and the higher proportion of pupils this study focused on public primary schools.

Nigeria comprises 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), but the scope of this study was limited to the FCT and five states—Lagos, Oyo, Kwara, Edo, and Ogun—based on previous studies, security, and regional spread, among other reasons. The chosen states represent three of the country’s six geopolitical zones (South West, South South, and North Central), which cover the three major tribes of the country (Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo). Western education started from the South West (Lagos, Oyo, and Ogun), which has the highest number of primary schools. The South South zone (Edo) has the highest prevalence of sex workers and sex traffickers, while the North Central zone (FCT and Kwara) represents a conglomerate of the northern states. Five schools were chosen in each state across rural, urban, and peri-urban areas.

A pilot study was also conducted before the study commenced. The study focused on pupils between the ages of 10 and 13 in primary grades 4, 5, and 6. Ethical clearance for the study was also obtained from the UI/UCH Ethical Review Board at the University College Hospital, Oyo State, Nigeria. A total of 1,200 pupils’ questionnaires and 100 teachers’ questionnaires were administered, with 1,041 pupils’ and 85 teachers’ questionnaires analyzed using STATA software 14 and SPSS.

# Key messages from the research findings

## **No. 1: Prevalence of SRGBV in primary schools in Nigeria is high, and both girls and boys are subject to it**

The prevalence of SRGBV among students in the study area averaged 47.1 percent. This is too high to be ignored. Gender disparity showed that 49.7 percent of male pupils indicated experiencing sexual harassment at one point or the other while 45.6 percent of females had experienced sexual harassment.

The great variation in the patterns within and across countries and within and across the groups of girls and boys shows that we still have an issue with reporting and documentation globally (Florence Njuguna and Itegi 2013). Boys are reporting higher instances of SRGBV than girls—yet the culture of silence around violence, especially against girls, has made SRGBV acceptable and regarded as normal (Read-Hamilton and Marsh 2016). This may seem absurd, but it affects our ability to fully understand the scope of SRGBV because this normalization of gender-based violence means girls are less likely than boys to report.

This finding is interesting because it depicts the presence and even more prevalence of SRGBV among male than female pupils. Also, some identifiable patterns such as teasing, unwelcome remarks, and unacceptable touching across the genders were observed from the Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

However, it can be stated that the boys voicing out more could still be because of rearing patterns in Africa of power play and superiority of the male child, whereas the girl child is taught submission and silence in the face of threat, injustice, and abuse. Duvuury (2007) opined that male sexual aggression is institutionalized and considered as normal, whereas girls tend to respond with resignation and passivity.

In addition, SRGBV is a reflection of abuse found in the home and the community. Female students are known to face multidimensional problems from

the society, teachers, and staff; those outside the school community; males with predatory behaviors; girls' female friends; and more—which has a twofold effect on their learning and self-esteem Desalegne (2019).

That girls and boys are both subject to SRGBV doesn't mean we should forget about our attention to girls, but the study has changed our focus to the narrative in literature. We must now try to understand how girls and boys experience violence differently and at different times in their lives, as well as how the impact and effects can be different for girls and boys based on the nature of that violence (as discussed in key message #4).

Table 2 breaks down the prevalence of SRGBV into the types of violence experienced, disaggregated by gender. Notably, unlike in Jamaica, where sexual harassment and bullying perpetrated over social media and technology was high (53.6 percent), this form of SRGBV was lowest (27.5 percent) in Nigeria because technology is less prevalent in the education system.

**Table 2. Students' experiences of violence in Nigeria, by type and gender**

Survey question	Male (%)	Female (%)
	Has someone ever made unwelcome sexual comments to or about you?	24.16
Has someone ever shown you sexy or sexual pictures that you did not want to see?	43.07	32.2
Have you ever been touched in an unwelcome sexual way?	16.91	13.77
Has someone ever exposed their naked body or naked pictures to you?	13.74	10.44
Have you ever been forced to do something sexual?	9.08	7.01
Have you been a target of sexual harassment online via social media?	32.51	22.49

**No. 2: SRGBV is usually perpetrated by familiar people in secluded places**

The surveyed students reported their levels of comfort and discomfort within various areas of their schools (Figure 2), with the results showing that SRGBV often occurs in hidden, quiet places that attract little or no attention. Bush areas, areas behind school, and toilets were predominantly mentioned across all states as places where SRGBV occurs (Figure 3, panel a), they also find these areas uncomfortable because of their hidden location and poor sanitation. Staff meetings, assembly periods, breaks while pretending to play, and after-school hours were mentioned as times when it occurs (Figure 3, panel b). Sexual harassment may not often take place in visible, public places where large numbers of school children are congregated; it happens more often at times and

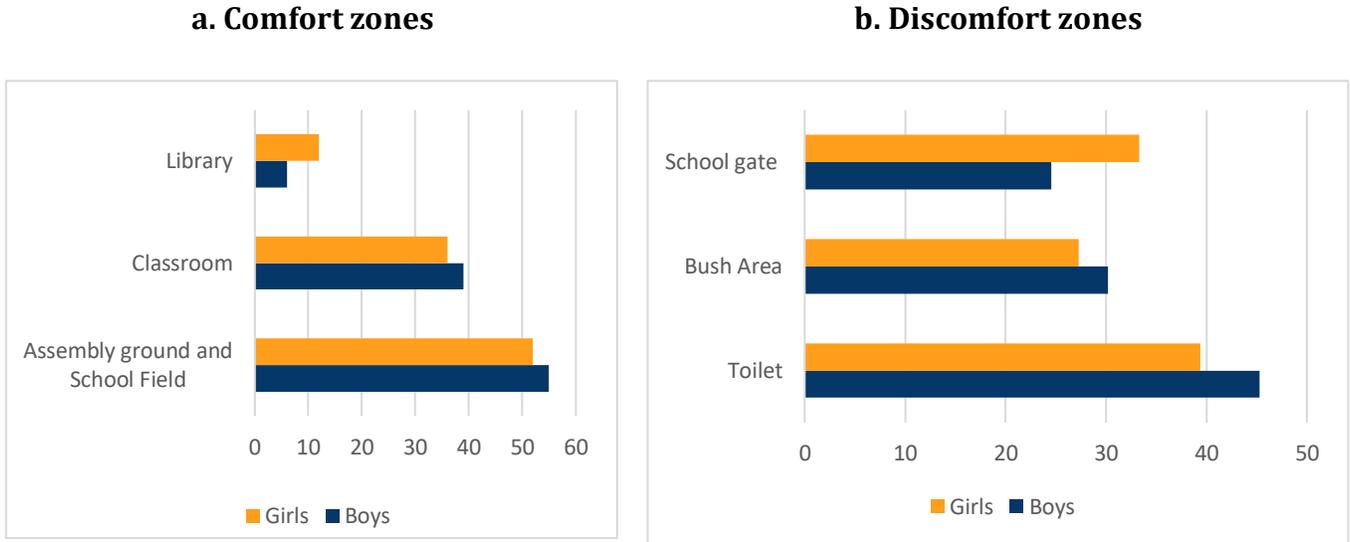
places that are private and where the interactions are one-on-one. In contrast, bullying takes place in more-public spheres and in more-public ways, because the bullying expresses power and domination differently than sexual violence. So, we cannot take a homogeneous approach to addressing SRGBV.

SRGBV, like many other kinds of GBV, is usually perpetrated by someone the victim knows. This is in line with the findings from a situational analysis survey of 640 public and private schools in Ilorin, Nigeria which revealed that 85 percent of schools had experienced physical violence and 50 percent had experienced psychological violence (Fawole, Balogun, and Olaleye 2018). In another survey, OHCHR (2015) reported that 27 percent of secondary-school girls stated that their teachers pressured them for sex, and 79 percent were sexually harassed by male classmates.

In addition, Onasoga et al. (2019) established the existence and identified the prevalence of sexual violence in the university. However, they opined that although students are aware of sexual violence, most of them have poor knowledge of where to report such cases in the university. The perpetrators of the violence are sometimes identified as partners such as boyfriends or girlfriends (29.8 percent); friends (51.1 percent); and family members (16.1 percent) regarding out-of-school experience.

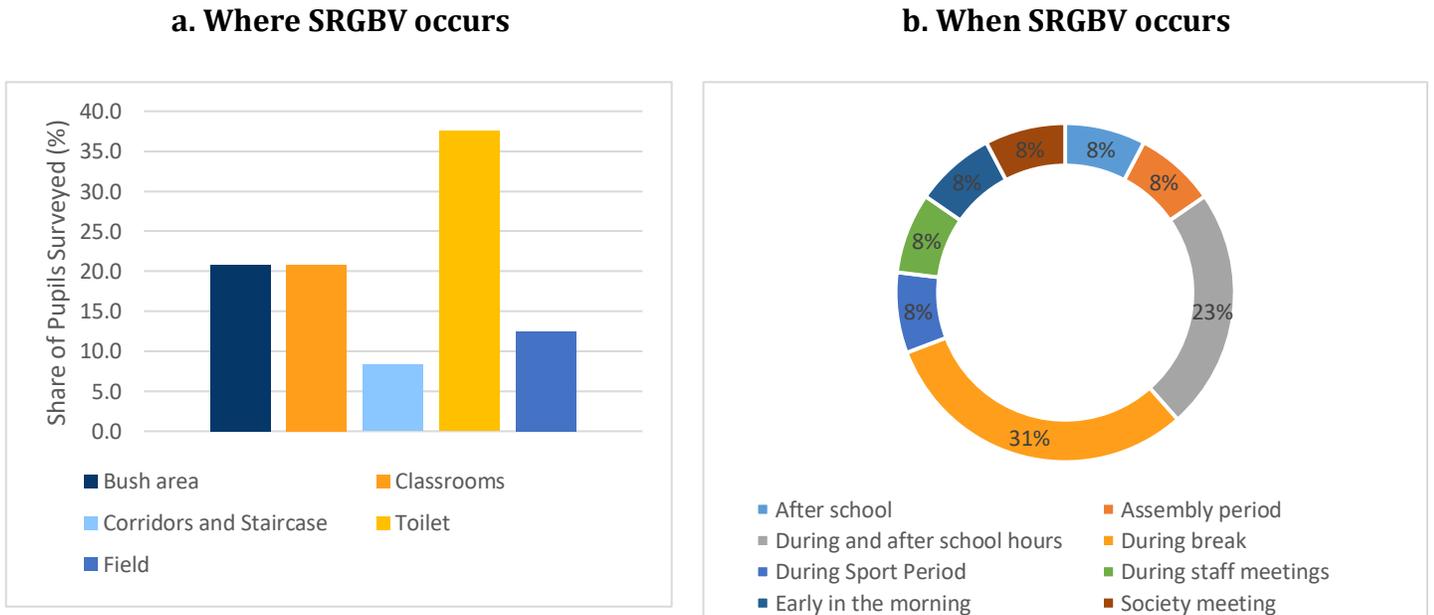
As these studies show, interpersonal relationships are central, which means that addressing GBV entails addressing not only behaviors and values but also the power dynamics between, with, and over others. This has a flip side; it is also the positive social and interpersonal relationships that create avenues for change. Learning from the SRGBV study about how children view parents or other trusted adults as allies (or not) is crucial to understanding how to address power inequality in relationships that can either lead to or eliminate GBV.

**Figure 2. Students' comfort and discomfort zones in school, by gender**



Source: Author's computation from field survey, 2020.  
 Note: Share of pupils surveyed in the six study states

**Figure 3. Location and timing of SRGBV**



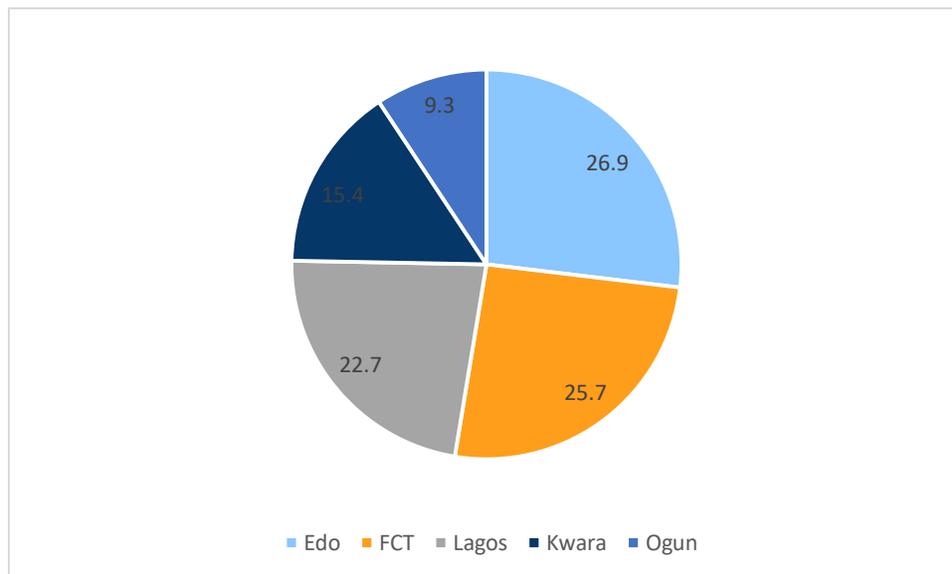
Source: Author's computation from field survey, 2020.  
 Note: Share of pupils surveyed in the six study states.

### No. 3: Pupils lack appropriate support structures or reporting mechanisms to address SRGBV

Results from the study showed that an average only 17 percent of cases are referred to the local Police Victim Support Unit, 14 percent to child protection workers, and 8 percent to health facilities. These referrals are not enough relative to the number of instances of SRGBV, although support services for sexually harassed pupils is high in Edo State compared with other states within the study (Figure 4). This is expected given that Edo state has the second highest rate of sex traffickers in the nation, and the government has focused greatly on this with improved monitoring there—which was evident while officers were on the field to collect data in the schools (Agency Report 2020).

We were only allowed at specific times after meeting stringent rules to obtain clearance and ethical clearance from the supervising ministries. This is interesting, and it indicates that increased attention to the issues can indeed translate into increased investment in support to victims.

**Figure 4. Percentage of support services provided to sexually harassed pupils, by state**



Source: Author's computation from field survey, 2020.

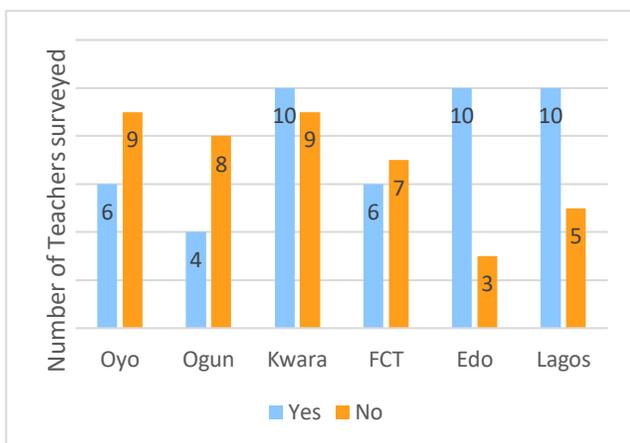
Note: Share of the aggregate total number of sexually harassed pupils receiving support services in five states except Oyo state, where there was no response to the question.

Also, although teachers recognize their pupils are at risk of GBV, they are not aware of the extent to which SRGBV is happening at their schools and do not know how to correctly handle cases reported to them because they have not received proper training on how to handle such cases. About 52 percent of the teachers had received training on guidance and counselling, which means that over half of the teachers can counsel the children (Figure 5, panel a). Upon closer scrutiny, only 39.5 percent had received training on handling SRGBV (Figure 5, panel b), while over 52 percent had handled cases among their pupils. Overall, teachers' training is uneven across states (Figure 5). The findings also reveal that most of the trainings were from the teachers' respective religious bodies and that few had shared information among themselves as teachers.

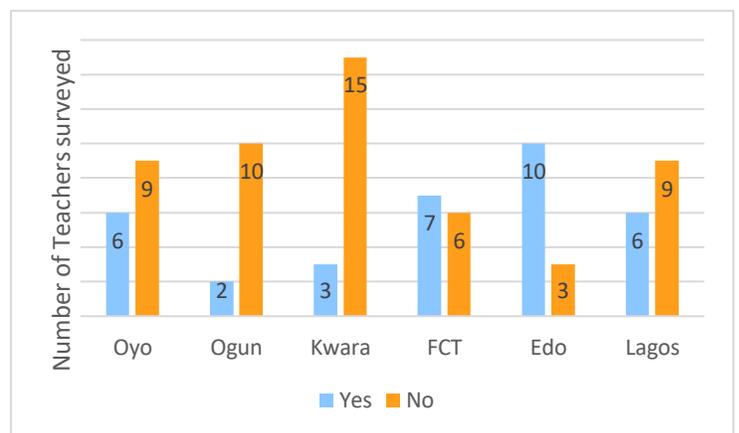
These observations lay bare two things: First, GBV occurs in primary schools. Second, the teachers need to be empowered to talk about this issue, interrogate students, provide first-hand counselling for the pupils, and later provide the necessary referrals. Because teachers are the first point of call in the school, there is an imperative need to empower them to function in this capacity.

**Figure 5. Number of teachers trained on guidance and counselling, and on gender-based violence, by state**

**a. Guidance and counselling training**



**b. Gender-based violence training**



Note: Bars indicate the number of teachers surveyed.  
Source: Author's computation from field survey, 2020.

#### **No. 4: Inadequate school-based programs exist to curb SRGBV**

Despite the high prevalence of SRGBV in Nigeria’s public primary schools, only about 36 percent of the sampled schools had any SRGBV program in place, not even one to create awareness. Among the schools that do have a program, awareness is disseminated mainly through class-taught subjects like social studies and civic education or through tips given regularly on the assembly ground. Some of the programs implemented in these schools with existing programs include Valentine’s Day discussions, NGO activities, and moral instruction from school counsellors (in schools where they exist).

The impact of these efforts has not been systematically documented. Anecdotal evidence tells us that the programs help pupils to become more aware of SRGBV. However, to see these efforts translate into the elimination of SRGBV, more effort is needed on a widespread campaign to increase sensitization to SRGBV among pupils and teachers, to train teachers on effective means of handling cases and using appropriate reporting mechanisms, and to teach pupils on the direct and indirect effects of SRGBV.

Findings from the research shows that the impacts of failing to address SRGBV means that many students feel unsafe or depressed and experience decreased self-confidence and self-esteem—the latter of which is higher among boys than girls (Table 3). This necessitates the need for adequate school-based programs to reduce the effects of SRGBV on the learning outcomes of pupils.

**Table 3. Impacts of failure to address SRGBV on against pupils, by gender**

Response	Male (%)	Female (%)
I feel unsafe at school.	43.91	44.73
I don't have a sense of belonging at school.	53.84	35.14
I often feel depressed.	34.88	36.12
I often have feelings of low self-confidence/self-esteem.	48.84	41.67
I am often afraid to interact with other students.	44.19	27.77
Sometimes I feel frustrated at school.	34.89	32.44
I am unable to concentrate on my studies/work.	51.17	50.01

*Source:* Author's computation from field survey, 2020.

# Policy recommendations

Stemming from the findings of the study, which confirms the presence of SRGBV in public primary schools, it is important to understand the indispensable roles played by the students, schools, parents or guardians, and the community in protecting our children from SRGBV. There is therefore the need for a widespread campaign and sensitization to increase awareness among teachers, pupils, and local education officers (Table 4).

**Table 4. Key messages and policy recommendations for reducing SRGBV**

Key messages	Policy recommendations
<p>The study showed that SRGBV is highly prevalent in Nigerian primary schools.</p> <p>In addition, SRGBV affects both girls and boys.</p> <p>It should be noted that the short- and long-term effects of violence differ by gender.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a need for advocacy and sensitization through community dialogues</li> <li>• Efforts should be in place to ensure effective implementation of child-friendly safety standards in all schools</li> <li>• Stakeholders should explore interventions that pay attention to the unique GBV experiences of girls and boys to support the wholesome development of both genders.</li> </ul>
<p>The study further confirmed that SRGBV is usually perpetrated by familiar people in secluded places.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There should be a system created to safely report familiar perpetrators without fear.</li> </ul>
<p>Findings revealed that pupils lack appropriate support structures or</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is the need for periodic teacher training on SRGBV, reporting systems, and case management.</li> </ul>

<p>reporting mechanisms to address SRGBV.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The government and nongovernmental organizations should provide structured referral centers, shelters, and psychosocial counselling centers for survivors across all states in the country.</li> <li>• In addition, the Child’s Right Act 2003 should be incorporated into school curriculum to empower and provide assertive skills for pupils</li> </ul>
<p>Furthermore, there are inadequate school-based programs to curb SRGBV.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government should endeavor to collection of data on violence against children younger than 15, because available data and our findings support early onset of violence</li> </ul>

*Note:* GBV = gender-based violence. SRGBV is school-related gender-based violence.

In curbing this menace, it should be noted that discriminatory gender norms, gender stereotypes, and double standards rooted in patriarchy are at the heart of how we explain away violence.

## Conclusion

The results of the SRGBV research provided useful information on SRGBV and physical violence in primary schools. It brings to the fore that boys are victims as much as girls. Hence, an all-encompassing intervention for both boys and girls is warranted. When boys are helped, this in turn will affect girls’ education because boys are ultimately the perpetrators.

In addition, teachers should receive periodic training because they are primary caregivers in schools. Teachers perceive not only the existence but also a high prevalence of SRGBV among pupils of public primary schools in Nigeria.

Despite the high prevalence, few structured efforts are currently in place for handling cases of SRGBV in schools. The existing programs available in the schools are not sufficiently directed to empower pupils and teachers on this raging challenge—hence the need for prompt intervention in schools, even from the basic primary schools. Community heads and religious leaders also must be trained on this menace and enlightened on factors that might perpetrate it. Teachers need to be well trained and empowered as counsellors; parents must ensure that their children are kept safe; and pupils must be taught to remain assertive, take their stand, and ensure they can maintain appropriate boundaries. These are essential steps to curb the menace of SRGBV in our schools while ensuring pupils are safe in their classes.

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