

TRENDS IN SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA IN A COVID-19 ERA: A REVIEW OF NEWSPAPER REPORTS

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Abstract

The incidence of sexual violence, especially against children and adolescents, has increased in the recent decade. This situation has been made worse as a result of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This secondary survey utilizing various newspaper reports explored the trends in sexual violence especially against women during the period of the COVID-19 period. Materials used for the review in this study were sourced, first from newspapers reports in Nigeria, especially from; the Daily Post, Thisday Newspaper, Vanguard, and The Sun. Secondly, BBC News, Reliefweb, and Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND) were also consulted as complementary sources. These newspaper reports were presented in tables according to the states in the Niger Delta Region. Findings from the study indicated that in all states of the Niger Delta Region within the period of study, at least three cases or incidence of rape occurred. Also, most of the victims of the sexual violence as reported were either minors or adolescents. Additionally, the perpetrators of this heinous crime were people aged over 30 years. Finally, while in most cases, the perpetrators were arrested, it is only in few cases that the trial process has run full course and suspects have been convicted. It is therefore recommended that the various state governments should create a special court to speedily try sexual violence offenders and impose stricter penalties if found guilty, to serve as deterrence to others.

Keywords: Sexual violence, Rape, COVID-19, Niger Delta Region, Newspaper

Introduction

There has been rising cases of rape, in recent times, in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria as in other parts of the country. The story of Uwaila Vera Omozuwa a microbiology student at the University of Benin, Nigeria who was raped and murdered in a church, and that of Iniobong Umoren, an outstanding Philosophy graduate of the University of Uyo, Nigeria who was also raped and murdered after being deceived to attend a job interview in the outskirts of Uyo constitute

two prominent cases of rape in the Niger Delta Region that attracted serious public outcry. These two cases are eye openers to likelihood of other cases of rape in the Region, with most cases being unreported and not investigated. According to Reliefweb (2020), there is hardly a week to pass in the region without an incidence of rape occurring or being reported in the media. However, the incidences of Uwaila and Iniobong have increased the level of awareness to the problem of rape in the region.

According to a UNICEF report in 2014, one in four girls and one in ten boys had experienced one form of sexual violence or the other before the age of 18 in Nigeria (UNICEF, 2014). Another survey from Positive Action for Treatment Access (PATA) reported that over 31.4% of girls reported that their first sexual encounter was rape or forced/unconsented sex (Kawu, 2013). Still, the Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development (CEHRD), had further reported that approximately 1,200 girls were raped in 2012 in Rivers State of Nigeria (Vanguard, 2013). More worrisome, was the claim of the Minister for Women Affairs and Social Development of Nigeria who in December 2019 while lunching the Sex Offenders Register, stated that about two million Nigerians (mainly women and girls) are raped every year (Reliefweb, 2020). NOIPOLLS' report in 2019 had also indicated that about 3 in 10 Nigerians had indicated that they know someone who has been raped. Most of the respondents in the report further indicated that the victims were particularly minors and young adults aged between 1 – 15 years (NOIPOLLS, 2019).

A 2013 report in the Niger Delta indicated that one in ten women surveyed in Niger Delta was either raped or survived a rape attempt. The report further reiterated that more women were raped in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria than in any other part of the country (CLEEN Foundation, 2013). The survey further added that the incidence of rape in the region was higher than the national average by 100 per cent which is one in every 20 women. The report indicated that the incidence of rape increases from 3 per cent in 2011 to 5 percent in 2013 within its geopolitical zones (CLEEN Foundation, 2013). There is no doubt that in recent time; this number must have likely doubled to about 10 percent. With this level of prevalence in rape, the CLEEN Foundation described the Niger Delta Region as the “rape capital of Nigeria.”

Thus, a pertinent question that needs to be answered is, why do we still have an increase in the trend of rape within the Niger Delta region when billions of naira are earmarked every year to fight against sexual and violent crimes against women and children? Hence, this conceptual review aims to investigate the trends in rape in the Niger Delta States in Nigeria, namely; Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers States.

Materials and Methods

This secondary survey explores the incidence of rape especially against women in the South-south region of Nigeria focussing on the COVID-19 era (2020-2021). Because of the nature of the study, the literature used for this study were mainly gleaned from various newspaper reports from Nigeria published between 2020-2021 on the issue of rape within the six South-south states of Nigeria. Key search words used in the course of searching literature in the study include; rape in the Niger Delta Region, rape incidence in Akwa Ibom State, rape incidence in Bayelsa State, rape incidence in Cross River State, rape incidence in Delta State, rape incidence in Edo State, and rape incidence in Edo State. Also, sexual violence as a synonym for rape was used as a keyword to search for literature in the various states. The search period was limited to 2020 to 2021. This was done to limit the number of cases of rape reported to a manageable incidence as the cases reported each year is very high. The search was done using the Google search engine. Each search done based on the state level yielded approximately 900 results.

However, after proper screening of titles, period of the incident report, and source of the report, these numbers were reduced to approximately 11 cases each. A bulk of the report reviewed after the literature search came from; the Daily Post, Thisday, Vanguard, The Sun, BBC News, Reliefweb, and Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND). The two authors (EU and IN) independently searched and reviewed all newspaper reports addressing the keywords. After this process, reports which did not properly address the main objectives of the study were excluded from the study. After the two authors reached a mutual decision on the selected newspaper, the successful newspapers were then used and reviewed for the study. Thus, authors considered only articles that contained information addressing rape cases within the specified region of the study and year of publication. Also, in the selection process of newspaper reports, priority was given to reports during the period of the COVID-19 lockdown. Reports from these newspaper reports were analyzed and presented in tables according to the states in the Niger Delta Region.

Results/ Findings

The results/ findings of this research are presented on state to state basis as follows:

Akwa Ibom State

In recent times, newspaper reportage of rape seems to be highest in Akwa-Ibom state compare to the other South-South States in Nigeria. From our online search of newspapers between 2020-2021, Akwa Ibom yielded thirteen reported cases of rape in various localities in the state. However, reports have noted that the number is far beyond the recorded cases, as most cases are not reported due to fear of stigmatization and other social factors (Partnership Initiatives in the

Niger Delta -PIND & Niger Delta Partnership Initiative – NDPI, 2020a). In some of the cases, the victims were raped to death as is the most recent case that involved the job seeker and the 20-year-old rapist. In all the cases reported so far, only one involved a sentence of life imprisonment while others are either awaiting trials or the case is ongoing. According to data extracted from PIND and NDPI (2020) weekly report, over 20 incidents of sexual violence including rape and child molestation were reported in Akwa Ibom State in 2020. Recent data in 2021 have indicated an increase in reported cases of rape and child sexual abuse in the state (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Selected reported rape incidence in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria 2020-2021

Year of Incidence/Report	Victim	Suspected Perpetrator(s)	Outcome
2021	26-year-old female Philosophy Graduate	20-year-old Male	Arrested by the Police
2021	16-year-old girl	Three-man gang	One of the suspects was arrested
2021	3-year-old stepdaughter	23-years-old man	Sentence to life imprisonment
2021	3-year-old girl	Unknown	The police arrested some of the school officials and the landlord of the girl's house
2020	<i>12-year-old girl</i>	<i>Five-man gang</i>	<i>five (5) suspects were arrested</i>
2020	15-year-old girl	33-year-old Pastor (Had also attempted to rape 21-year-old girl)	Arrested by the police
2020	28-year-old lady	30-year-old indigene of UkoNteghe	Arrested by the police
2020	five-year-old girl	21-year-old indigene of Ikot Akpan Udo	Arrested by the police
2020	16-yr-old daughter	34-year-old suspect	Arrested by the police
2020	17-year-old girl	30-year-old nephew	
2020	8-year-old girl	a clergyman	
2020	11-year-old girl	a 60-year-old village head	
2020	16-year-old girl	a 35-year-old clergyman	

Source: Culled from Various Newspapers Reports in Nigeria.

Bayelsa State

The Gender Response Initiative Team (GRIT), a gender-based human rights group, in June mobilized people to march through major streets of Yenagoa, the Bayelsa State capital, to raise the alarm over increasing cases of rape and other

gender-related violence against women and girls. The convener of the group Mrs Maria Oloidi, who called for stern measures to curb gender-based violence, stated that three underage girls between 13 and 14 years were raped between May to June. She also added that many cases remain unreported (Obe, 2020). The group further added that this situation got to its peak during the corona virus lockdown. In 2018, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), reported a total of 88 cases of rape and indecent assault in Bayelsa state for the year of 2017 (NBS, 2018). This is to say, that the cases of rape in the state have been high for quite some time. While newspapers reported only 4 cases of rape cases of young girls, the number as noted earlier far exceed the number of reported cases (see Table 2). Nevertheless, of the four cases reported so far, about three of the victims were raped to death while only one survived the ordeal of rap.

Table 2: Selected reported rape incidence in Bayelsa State, Nigeria 2020-2021

Year of Incidence/Report	Victim	Suspected Perpetrator(s)	Outcome
2021	5-year-old girl	21-year-old man	Sentenced to 10 years in prison
2020	13-year-old girl	30-year-old teacher	No action was reported to have been taken
2020	17-year-old sister-in-law (Had initially raped her when she was nine years old)	50-year-old electrical engineer	Sentenced to five years in jail
2020	8-year-old girl	Adult male	Arrested by the police

Source: Culled from Various News Papers Reports in Nigeria.

Cross River State

Just like the other South-South states in Nigeria, the incidence of rape in Cross River state seems to also be on the rise. For instance, over 500 women took to the street in Cross River State to protest against the rising trend in rape especially during the peak of the COVID-19 Pandemic. One of the Protestants noted thus; “In the past three months of COVID-19, the cases we have been having are the cases of rape. A 6 months old baby has been raped, a 4-year-old has been raped and Amina, who was raped by 11 men and kept there. Rape has been on the rise and only God knows when it will end” (Edem, 2020).

Table 3: Selected reported rape incidence in Cross River State, Nigeria 2020-2021

Year of Incidence/Report	Victim	Suspected Perpetrator(s)	Outcome
2021	14-year-old daughter	A 47-year-old man	Sentenced to 22 years imprisonment, without the option of a fine
2020	4-year-old Niece	A 73-year-old retired Captain	Arrested by the Police
2020	12-year-old girl	Elderly man	No action was taken when the report was filed
2021	58-year-old mother	Unknown	None

Source: Culled from Various News Papers Reports in Nigeria.

Delta State

Data extracted from various sources in Delta state shows a sharp increase in rape incidence, especially of children and adolescent female (see table 4). For instance, data from PIND and NDPI (2020b), revealed that over 40 cases of sexual violence were reported in the state 2020. The situation became worse at the nationwide lockdown initiated by both the State and the Federal Government to curtail the spread of the coronavirus. A recent trend on rape in the state shows that more girls are being exposed to the risk of sexual abuses and other forms of violence in the state, as law enforcement agencies are yet to take proactive steps to curb this situation.

Table 4: Selected reported rape incidence in Delta State, Nigeria 2020-2021

Year of Incidence/Report	Victim	Suspected Perpetrator(s)	Outcome
2021	19-year-old girl	A member of the Delta State Anti-Cult Volunteer Corps	Arrested by the police
2021	15-year-old girl	Seven-man gang	No arrest was made
2020	19-year-old girl	A Clergyman	Arrested by the police
2020	14-year-old girl	A 51-year-old man	Arrested by the police
2020	12-year-old girl	A 38-year-old man	Arrested by the police
2020	14-year-old girl	Youth President of a community	Arrested by the police
2020	16-year-old teenage girl	Two armed-men robbers	

Source: Culled from Various News Papers Reports in Nigeria.

Edo State

Though newspapers report is few reporting rape cases in Edo state between 2020-2021 except the case of Uwaila, there is no doubt that the state has not been free from the incidence of rape. For instance, a protest led by an NGO; Brave Heart Initiative (BHI) in October 2020, organized a mass protest against the rising cases of rape in Igarra, Headquarters of Akoko-Edo LGA in Edo State. According to the Executive director of the Initiative, 24 cases of rape were recorded between January to October 2020 in just the local government area alone (Aliu, 2020). In fact, it has been reported that in 2020 alone, a whopping sum of 150 cases of rape and other sexual violence cases were reported in Edo State. Of this number, 20 persons were convicted for the offences (Osauzo, 2020).

Table 5: Selected reported rape incidence in Edo State, Nigeria 2020-2021

Year of Incidence/Report	Victim	Suspected Perpetrator(s)	Outcome
2020	22-year-old girl	yet to be fully identified	Six suspects were arrested
2020	Female trader	three-member gang	Three suspects arrested by the police
2020	9-year-old girl	Neighbour	Arrested by Vigilante group of the community
2020	Pregnant Women	Unidentified Assailant	No arrest made
2020	13-year-old girl	76-year-old community head	The suspect was yet to be arrested and arraigned in Court

Source: Culled from Various News Papers Reports in Nigeria.

Rivers State

Reports from Rivers state have also indicated a high trend in rape and sexual violence. Reports have noted that between 2016- 2020, over 160 incidents of sexual violence were recorded with about 80 of these incidences involving child defilement and incestuous abuse (PIND & NDPI, 2020c). A civil society organization; Community Health Educator for Doctors Without Borders added that an average of 120 cases of rape are even recorded every month in rivers state with an average of 70-80% being children below the ages of 15 years (BBC News Pidgin, 2019).

Table 6: Selected reported rape incidence in Rivers State, Nigeria 2020-2021

Year of Incidence/Report	Victim	Suspected Perpetrator(s)	Outcome
2020	A 23-year-old widow	Police Officer	Invitation of both the victim and the suspect
2020	A teenager	A 37-year-old man	Remanded in Prison
2020	4-year-old boy	24-year-old female nanny	
2020	10-year-old girl	male neighbor	
2020	13-year-old girl	30-year-old commercial motorcyclist	
2020	Three girls aged 10, 7 and 5 years	Serially defiled by their 38-year-old father (the man has been sexually abusing one of his girls since 2012 when she was only 2 years old)	

Source: Culled from Various News Papers Reports in Nigeria.

Consequences of Sexual Violence in the Niger Delta Region

The social consequences of rape and child sexual abuse can be intergenerational as sexually abused children could grow up becoming vulnerable and frustrated; some tend to develop age inappropriate sexual behaviors including high risk sexual conducts that could increase the risk of victimization and perpetration of sexual violence against them. Rape and sexual abuse on women and child can be socially upsetting and far-reaching since it can lead to death, mental disorder, and sexual and reproductive health problems for the victims. Rape and sexual violence against women and children can have wide-ranging psycho-social and health impacts on the victims and their families. The effect of the ugly menace can result in injuries, mental, sexual and reproductive health problems including unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and diseases as well as Vesico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF). In some cases sexually abused children grow up becoming vulnerable to the society, distrustful and frustrated. The culture of silence associated with rape and sexual violence against women and children, gives the perpetrators the zeal to commit more violence and havoc in the society.

Economically, sexual violence and rape could be demanding on the family of the victim, the victims, their immediate communities and government. Therefore such act as sexual violence when perpetuated portends great economic cost on everything associated with the victims. The economic burden associated with rape and sexual violence against women and children is summed up in the high cost of criminal justice, healthcare and welfare. Economically due to rape and sexual violence, the education of the victims may be altered thereby promoting poverty, unemployment and even death of the

victims. Death resulting from rape and sexual violence portray loss of investment by family, community and government on the victim.

Politically, rape and sexual violence against women and children connotes that the government lacks the appropriate legislative, administrative and educational measures to protect children from vices such as rape sexual violence and death. Government could be incited through public outrage, mass protests and anti-rape rallies. Thereby, causing political instability and disrupting of governance in Nigeria. Rape and sexual abuse connotes failure to protect the dignity and rights of the citizens by Nigeria government and this can promote and breed mistrust on the ability of the government to defend her subject

Conclusion/Recommendations

The scourge of sexual violence has permeated almost every nook and crannies of the Nigerian society. However, this menace seems to be more prevalent in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that rape and sexual violence are no doubt on the increase in the region. In some cases, the victims of rape die as a result of this heinous crime. Also, in all states of the Niger Delta Region within the period of study, at least three cases of the incidence of rape occurred. Still, most of the victims of sexual violence were either minors or adolescents, while the perpetrators were people aged over 30 years. Finally, while in most cases, the perpetrators were arrested, it is only in few cases that the suspects have been convicted.

Based on the findings from the study, the following recommendations have been made;

1. The Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act as proposed by President Muhammadu Buhari , which demands a minimum 12-year sentence for rape, and create a Sex Offender Register should be implemented with much vigor across the country.
2. Castration of convicted pedophiles should be promulgated and implemented in all states of the federation just as it is done in the some North-Central states of Nigeria.
3. Given the age range of the victims, it means that parents and guardians of these children are also failing in their responsibilities. On this note, it is pertinent that parents and guardians ensure the security of their children and do not let them out of sight. They should be monitored all the time.
4. While various women civil societies and non-governmental organizations such as FIDA have actually been trying in their fight against sexual violence, there is still the need for other women's groups come together to find a lasting solution to this menace as previous efforts seems not to be very successful. This they can do by transforming the culture of sex stereotypes and promoting laws that ensure the

enforcement and protection of women's rights, and punishment for any form of violence against the girl child.

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