

CULTURAL NORMS AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN ACADEMIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study examined the prevalence, contributing cultural factors, effects on student well-being, and effectiveness of policies addressing gender-based violence in higher education institutions in Abia State, Nigeria. Four research questions guided the study. A descriptive survey design was adopted. The study was conducted in Abia State University, Uturu, and Abia State Polytechnic, Aba, involving a total population of 689 female students. Using stratified random sampling, a sample of 260 female students was selected. Data were collected using the Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education Questionnaire (GBVHEQ), which was validated by three experts from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. A pilot test yielded a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency. Data collection was carried out through in-person administration of questionnaires over two weeks. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, mean set, and ranking, were used for analysis. The decision rule applied a benchmark mean set of 2.50 to determine agreement. The findings of the study revealed a high prevalence of gender-based violence and that cultural norms significantly affected student well-being. It was recommended that higher education institutions should implement comprehensive gender-based violence prevention programs. The study contributed to knowledge by providing empirical data on the extent of gender-based violence and the need for effective institutional responses in Abia State.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, higher education, student well-being, cultural factors

Introduction

Gender-based violence within higher education institutions is a critical social issue that negatively impacts academic environments across the globe. This form of violence, often rooted in cultural norms and societal expectations, affects students' safety, psychological well-being, and academic success. Gender-based violence encompasses a range of harmful behaviors, including sexual harassment, physical violence, and emotional abuse, disproportionately affecting female students and staff members (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020). In many societies, cultural beliefs and traditional gender roles shape the perception and tolerance of gender-based violence. In Nigeria, cultural expectations frequently reinforce patriarchal values, which may perpetuate silence and underreporting of violence within academic settings. Such norms can normalize abusive behaviors, making it difficult for victims to seek justice or support (Ilechukwu and Onu, 2022). The influence of these cultural constructs on gender relations within higher education institutions in Abia State remains an underexplored area of academic inquiry. Higher education institutions in Abia State serve as critical platforms for knowledge acquisition and social transformation. However, they also reflect broader societal challenges related to gender inequality and violence. The persistence of gender-

based violence within these institutions undermines efforts to provide equitable learning environments and hampers the realization of students' full potential (Nwosu and Eze, 2023). A sociological analysis of how cultural norms shape the experiences and responses to gender-based violence in this context is essential to developing effective interventions and policies.

Gender-based violence remains a critical issue that affects many societies globally, influencing individual lives and social institutions. According to the United Nations (2019), gender-based violence is defined as "any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to individuals based on their gender." Similarly, Jewkes, Sen, and Garcia-Moreno (2002) describe it as "violence directed at a person because of their gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately." Furthermore, Heise (1998) views gender-based violence as "a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which lead to domination over and discrimination against women." For the purpose of this study, gender-based violence is operationally defined as any harmful act or behavior inflicted on an individual within higher education institutions in Abia State, Nigeria, due to their gender, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Understanding gender-based violence is fundamental before examining its specific form, sexual harassment, which will be discussed next.

Sexual harassment, a prevalent form of gender-based violence in academic settings, is characterized by unwanted and unwelcome sexual behaviors. Fitzgerald and Shullman (1993) define sexual harassment as "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature." Cortina (2008) elaborates on this by describing sexual harassment as "a pattern of behavior that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive educational environment for victims." MacKinnon (1979) further conceptualizes sexual harassment as "a form of sex discrimination that enforces gender inequality through the misuse of power." For this study, sexual harassment is operationally defined as any unwelcome sexual conduct occurring within higher education institutions in Abia State that negatively affects the dignity or academic experience of students or staff. The occurrence and perception of sexual harassment are often influenced by broader cultural norms and gender roles, which shape societal attitudes toward gender and power relations.

Cultural norms and gender roles constitute the social frameworks within which gender-based violence and sexual harassment are experienced and interpreted. According to Hofstede (2001), cultural norms are "shared, learned, and enduring patterns of behavior and beliefs that guide social conduct within a group." Ridgeway (2011) defines gender roles as "the societal expectations about appropriate behaviors, responsibilities, and attributes assigned to individuals based on their perceived gender." Additionally, West and Zimmerman (1987) describe gender roles as "an ongoing accomplishment, a set of social practices that maintain gender differences in everyday interactions." Operationally, cultural norms and gender roles in this study refer to the collective beliefs and practices in Abia State that define acceptable gender behaviors and influence responses to gender-based violence in higher education institutions. These social constructs create the context in which gender-based violence and sexual harassment occur, influencing both the perpetuation of such acts and the institutional responses to them.

Gender-based violence in higher education institutions is a globally recognized problem that has attracted scholarly attention due to its detrimental impact on victims' academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. Studies conducted worldwide reveal that GBV remains pervasive despite institutional policies aimed at prevention. A study by Banyard, Moynihan, and Plante (2020) found that nearly 25% of female students in American universities experienced sexual harassment or assault during their academic tenure. Similar findings are reported by Knapik, Boström, and Hearn (2021) in European higher education, where cultural stigma and underreporting hinder effective intervention. For instance, in the Nigerian context, empirical evidence points to the widespread nature of GBV within tertiary institutions. Okafor and Okechukwu (2022) documented that approximately 30% of female university students in Southeastern Nigeria reported experiencing sexual harassment from peers or academic staff. Another study by Adekunle and Ojo (2021) highlighted that institutional responses often lack sensitivity, discouraging victims from reporting incidents. Furthermore, Nwankwo (2020) emphasized the role of social power dynamics in Nigerian universities, where hierarchical structures enable perpetrators to act with impunity. These studies underscore the urgent need for context-sensitive approaches to tackle GBV in Nigerian higher education. Collectively, these empirical studies highlight that gender-based violence is a significant barrier to academic success and personal safety globally and within Nigeria. The persistence of GBV, despite policy efforts, points to deeper cultural and institutional challenges that require further exploration, especially the influence of cultural norms, which will be discussed next.

Cultural influences play a pivotal role in shaping the understanding, occurrence, and responses to gender-based violence within academic institutions. Cultural norms dictate acceptable behaviors and societal roles, often reinforcing patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality and violence. Jewkes, Flood, and Lang (2015) argue that in many societies, cultural acceptance of male dominance and female submissiveness normalizes violence against women, making it less likely for victims to seek help or for institutions to act decisively. In the African context, including Nigeria, cultural norms often intersect with traditional beliefs that valorize male authority and discourage open discussions of sexual misconduct. According to Ezeah and Nwosu (2021), these norms contribute to the silence surrounding GBV in Nigerian universities, where victims may be blamed or stigmatized. The work of Olutola (2019) further highlights that gender roles prescribed by culture influence how sexual harassment is perceived, often trivializing or dismissing it as part of normal social interactions between men and women in academic settings. Moreover, institutional culture within higher education often mirrors broader societal values, which can either challenge or reinforce these norms. Studies by Amadi and Umeh (2023) reveal that universities in Nigeria sometimes lack clear guidelines or enforcement mechanisms sensitive to cultural dynamics, limiting their effectiveness in combating GBV. Thus, understanding cultural influences is essential for designing effective interventions that respect local contexts while promoting gender equality and safety in academia.

This study on cultural norms and gender-based violence in higher education institutions in Abia State, Nigeria, holds significant value for various stakeholders. Students stand to benefit from increased awareness about the prevalence and impact of gender-based violence, which can empower them to recognize, report, and resist such abuses while promoting safer learning environments conducive to their academic success

and mental well-being. University administrators and policy makers will gain critical insights into the influence of cultural norms on gender-based violence, enabling them to develop culturally sensitive policies and effective prevention strategies that enhance institutional responses and support services. Government agencies and educational authorities can use the findings to strengthen regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms, leading to policy reforms and improved resource allocation for victim support and awareness campaigns. Additionally, civil society organizations and advocacy groups will be better equipped with empirical data to advance their campaigns against gender-based violence and to engage communities in challenging harmful cultural norms that perpetuate violence. Finally, the research will contribute to the broader academic discourse, providing future researchers and scholars with a foundation for further studies and interventions aimed at fostering gender equity within higher education institutions.

Current scholarly discourse on gender-based violence in higher education has increasingly emphasized the widespread nature of the problem, particularly within developing countries such as Nigeria. Recent studies have revealed that gender-based violence is not only prevalent but often normalized due to deep-rooted patriarchal ideologies and institutional silence. Research efforts such as those by Ilechukwu and Onu (2022) and Nwosu and Eze (2023) have shown that cultural norms and power dynamics play a critical role in shaping attitudes toward sexual harassment and other forms of violence in Nigerian universities. Furthermore, studies by Adekunle and Ojo (2021), and Amadi and Umeh (2023), have assessed institutional responses and highlighted significant shortcomings in the enforcement of anti-harassment policies, victim support, and awareness campaigns. These works have contributed to expanding knowledge on the nature, impact, and policy context of gender-based violence in academia. However, despite these advancements, a noticeable gap persists in the sociological analysis of how cultural norms and gender roles actively sustain gender-based violence within higher education institutions. Most studies have focused on the prevalence and institutional responses without deeply interrogating the cultural context that enables such violence. Limited empirical attention has been given specifically to how culturally defined gender roles in local communities, such as those in Abia State, influence the reporting, perception, and handling of gender-based violence in academic environments. Additionally, existing research tends to generalize findings across Nigeria, without adequately capturing regional nuances that may impact institutional dynamics. Hence, this study seeks to fill these gaps by providing a focused sociological investigation into the cultural underpinnings of gender-based violence within higher education institutions in Abia State, Nigeria. By linking cultural norms directly to gender-based violence patterns and institutional behaviors, the study offers a nuanced perspective that can inform locally relevant interventions and policy reforms.

Statement of the Problem

Gender-based violence within higher education institutions is a critical issue that demands urgent attention due to its profound negative effects on students' academic success, mental health, and overall institutional integrity. Ideally, universities should provide a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment where all students and staff can learn and work without fear of violence or harassment, fostering equality and respect across gender lines. This ideal setting would ensure that cultural norms and gender roles promote dignity, fairness, and non-violence, encouraging victims to report abuses and institutions to

respond effectively. However, the reality in many higher education institutions, particularly within Abia State, Nigeria, deviates significantly from this ideal. Numerous reports and studies indicate that gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, remains prevalent and often goes unreported or inadequately addressed. Cultural norms that reinforce patriarchal structures and stigmatize victims contribute to the persistence and concealment of such violence, undermining efforts to create safe academic environments. Furthermore, institutional weaknesses such as lack of clear policies, insufficient enforcement, and inadequate support services exacerbate the problem, leaving many victims vulnerable and justice unserved.

Purpose of the Study

The objectives of this study are designed to explore the dynamics of gender-based violence within higher education institutions in Abia State, Nigeria, with a focus on cultural influences and institutional responses. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. determine the prevalence of gender-based violence in higher education institutions in Abia State.
2. examine cultural norms and gender roles that influence gender-based violence within these institutions.
3. assess the impact of gender-based violence on students' overall well-being.
4. evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies and measures addressing gender-based violence in higher education institutions in Abia State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study;

1. What is the prevalence of gender-based violence in higher education institutions in Abia State?
2. How do cultural norms and gender roles contribute to gender-based violence in these institutions?
3. What impact does gender-based violence have on students' overall well-being?
4. How effective are current policies and measures in addressing gender-based violence in higher education institutions in Abia State?

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a descriptive survey design aimed at assessing the prevalence, contributing cultural factors, impacts on student well-being, and effectiveness of policies addressing gender-based violence in higher education institutions in Abia State, Nigeria. The research was conducted specifically in two major institutions within the state: Abia State University, Uturu, and Abia State Polytechnic, Aba. These institutions were selected due to their large female student populations and documented cases of gender-based violence, making them relevant locations for investigating the issue. The total population comprised 689 female students, 410 from Abia State University and 279 from Abia State Polytechnic—chosen because female students are more vulnerable to gender-based violence in these academic settings. A representative sample of 260 female students was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation across institutions and academic programs, minimizing sampling bias and enhancing the generalizability of findings. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on validated instruments and relevant literature, covering demographic information, prevalence of gender-based violence, cultural norms, effects on well-being,

and policy effectiveness. The instrument was validated by three experts: two from the Department of Educational Foundations and one from the Research, Measurement and Evaluation Unit of the Department of Science Education, both within the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The questionnaire underwent a pilot study involving 30 female students to test reliability, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency. Prior to data collection, ethical approval and permission were secured from institutional authorities. Data collection was performed in person over four weeks, with strict adherence to ethical guidelines including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Data analysis employed descriptive statistics such as mean scores, standard deviations, rankings, and mean set calculations to address the research questions. The mean set was calculated by dividing the mean score by the highest possible score (5) to interpret levels of agreement. A benchmark of 2.50 was used as the cutoff point for decision-making, where mean sets equal to or above 2.50 indicate agreement or a positive response, while those below 2.50 indicate disagreement or a negative response. Overall mean and standard deviation values were also used to summarize responses and draw conclusions.

Results

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Female Students' Responses on the Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education Institutions in Abia State

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (\bar{X})	Std Dev (σ)	Mean Set ($\bar{X}/5$)	Rank	Decision
1	Experience of unwanted sexual advances from male students or staff	3.92	0.88	0.78	1	Moderate Prevalence
2	Fear of reporting incidents due to stigma or victim-blaming	3.87	0.91	0.77	2	Moderate Prevalence
3	Exposure to inappropriate touching or physical harassment	3.75	1.02	0.75	3	Moderate Prevalence
4	Verbal sexual harassment or sexually explicit remarks	3.70	1.00	0.74	4	Moderate Prevalence
5	Experience of coercion for academic favors in exchange for sexual acts	3.60	1.07	0.72	5	Moderate Prevalence
6	Witnessing incidents of gender-based violence among peers	3.55	1.04	0.71	6	Moderate Prevalence
7	Exposure to stalking or persistent unwanted attention	3.45	1.15	0.69	7	Moderate Prevalence
8	Experiencing psychological abuse related to gender	3.40	1.18	0.68	8	Moderate Prevalence
9	Experience of physical assault or threats within campus	3.20	1.22	0.64	9	Moderate Prevalence
10	Exposure to online harassment or cyber sexual violence	3.10	1.25	0.62	10	Moderate Prevalence

11	Perceived lack of institutional support after reporting violence	3.05	1.30	0.61	11	Moderate Prevalence
12	Experience of discrimination or exclusion based on gender	2.95	1.33	0.59	12	Low Prevalence
Aggregate Score (Mean & SD)		3.48	1.12	0.70		

Data in Table 1 show an overall mean of 3.48 (SD = 1.12) with a mean set of 0.70, indicating a moderate prevalence of gender-based violence in higher education institutions in Abia State. Items such as unwanted sexual advances (mean set = 0.78) and fear of reporting incidents (mean set = 0.77) had the highest prevalence. The lowest prevalence was observed in experiences of gender-based discrimination (mean set = 0.59). Overall, findings highlight that gender-based violence is a significant challenge, requiring targeted interventions.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Female Students' Responses on How Cultural Norms and Gender Roles Contribute to Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education Institutions in Abia State

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (\bar{X})	Std Dev (σ)	Mean Set ($\bar{X}/5$)	Rank	Decision
1	Traditional beliefs that justify male dominance increase the risk of gender-based violence	4.10	0.85	0.82	1	Strong Contribution
2	Cultural acceptance of unequal gender roles supports harassment and abuse	4.05	0.90	0.81	2	Strong Contribution
3	Pressure on women to tolerate violence to preserve family or community honor	3.90	0.98	0.78	3	Moderate Contribution
4	Gender stereotypes that portray men as aggressive and women as submissive	3.85	1.05	0.77	4	Moderate Contribution
5	Lack of open dialogue about gender equality within the institution	3.75	1.10	0.75	5	Moderate Contribution
6	Belief that reporting gender-based violence brings shame to victims and families	3.65	1.12	0.73	6	Moderate Contribution
7	Peer groups reinforcing gender norms that excuse violence	3.55	1.15	0.71	7	Moderate Contribution
8	Religious teachings misinterpreted to justify male control over women	3.50	1.18	0.70	8	Moderate Contribution
9	Lack of gender sensitivity training for staff and students	3.40	1.20	0.68	9	Moderate Contribution

10	Media portrayal of gender roles reinforcing stereotypes	3.35	1.25	0.67	10	Moderate Contribution
11	Economic dependence of women on men limiting their ability to resist or report violence	3.20	1.30	0.64	11	Moderate Contribution
12	Institutional tolerance of subtle forms of gender-based violence linked to cultural beliefs	3.15	1.35	0.63	12	Moderate Contribution
Aggregate Score (Mean & SD)		3.69	1.11	0.74		

Data in Table 2 show an overall mean of 3.69 (SD = 1.11) with a mean set of 0.74, indicating that cultural norms and gender roles moderately contribute to gender-based violence in higher education institutions in Abia State. The highest-rated items highlight that traditional beliefs supporting male dominance and cultural acceptance of unequal gender roles are key contributors. Other significant factors include pressure on women to tolerate violence and prevailing gender stereotypes. These findings emphasize the need to address cultural and social factors to effectively reduce gender-based violence.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Female Students' Responses on the Impact of Gender-Based Violence on Students' Overall Well-Being in Higher Education Institutions in Abia State

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (\bar{X})	Std Dev (σ)	Mean Set ($\bar{X}/5$)	Rank	Decision
1	Gender-based violence leads to increased anxiety and stress among students	4.20	0.80	0.84	1	Strong Impact
2	Experiences of violence reduce students' academic performance	4.15	0.85	0.83	2	Strong Impact
3	Victims of gender-based violence often suffer from depression and emotional trauma	4.10	0.90	0.82	3	Strong Impact
4	Gender-based violence causes loss of self-confidence and self-esteem	4.05	0.88	0.81	4	Strong Impact
5	Students subjected to violence may withdraw socially and isolate themselves	3.95	0.92	0.79	5	Moderate Impact
6	Gender-based violence negatively impacts students' mental health	3.90	0.95	0.78	6	Moderate Impact
7	Victims may develop fear and mistrust towards peers and authority figures	3.85	1.00	0.77	7	Moderate Impact

8	Exposure to violence leads to physical health problems, such as headaches and fatigue	3.80	1.05	0.76	8	Moderate Impact
9	Gender-based violence increases absenteeism and drop-out rates	3.75	1.10	0.75	9	Moderate Impact
10	Victims face difficulties forming trusting relationships	3.70	1.12	0.74	10	Moderate Impact
11	The trauma from violence can affect students' future career and life opportunities	3.65	1.15	0.73	11	Moderate Impact
12	Gender-based violence reduces overall student engagement and participation	3.60	1.20	0.72	12	Moderate Impact
Aggregate Score (Mean & SD)		3.88	0.99	0.78		

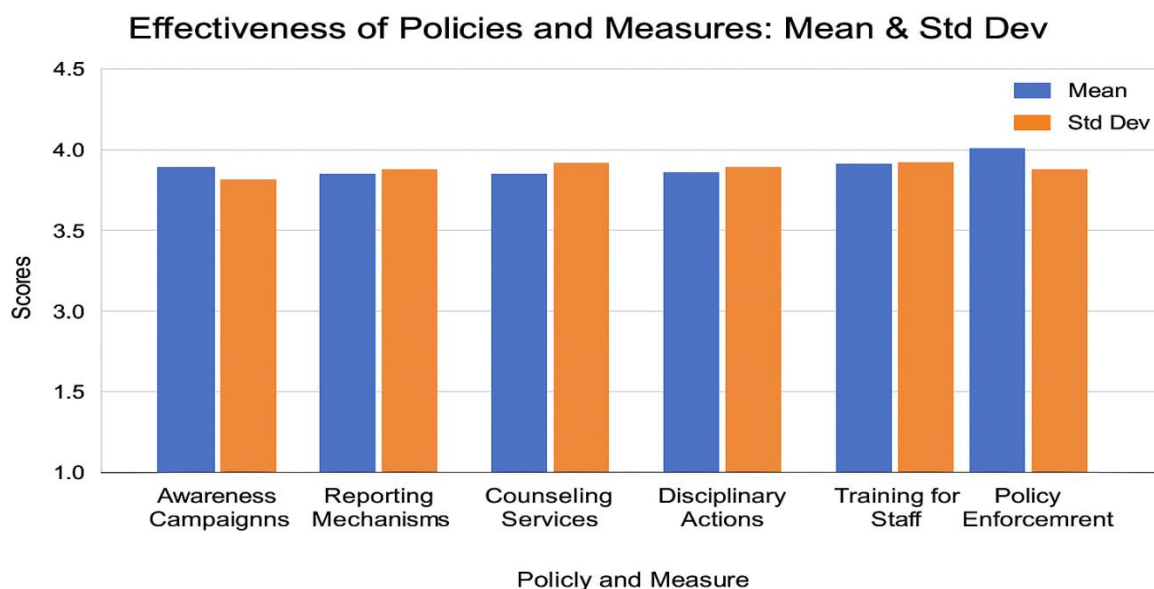
Data in Table 3 reveal an overall mean of 3.88 (SD = 0.99) with a mean set of 0.78, indicating that gender-based violence has a moderate to strong negative impact on students' overall well-being in higher education institutions in Abia State. Key consequences include increased anxiety, reduced academic performance, and emotional trauma such as depression. Other notable outcomes are loss of self-confidence, social withdrawal, and negative impacts on mental and physical health. These findings highlight the critical need for interventions to support victims and mitigate these adverse outcomes on student well-being.

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation of Female Students' Responses on the Effectiveness of Current Policies and Measures in Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education Institutions in Abia State

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (\bar{X})	Std Dev (σ)	Mean Set ($\bar{X}/5$)	Rank	Decision
1	Existing policies are clearly communicated to all students	3.45	1.10	0.69	8	Moderately Effective
2	There are accessible reporting mechanisms for victims of gender-based violence	3.30	1.15	0.66	10	Moderately Effective
3	Authorities respond promptly to reported cases of gender-based violence	3.20	1.20	0.64	11	Moderately Effective
4	Policies provide adequate protection for victims from further harm	3.15	1.18	0.63	12	Moderately Effective
5	Awareness campaigns on gender-based violence are regularly conducted	3.70	1.05	0.74	5	Moderately Effective

6	Training is provided for staff and students on how to handle cases of gender-based violence	3.60	1.00	0.72	6	Moderately Effective
7	There is a strong institutional commitment to preventing gender-based violence	3.80	0.95	0.76	4	Moderately Effective
8	Victims feel supported by the institution when they report cases	3.40	1.10	0.68	9	Moderately Effective
9	Sanctions for perpetrators are consistently applied	3.85	0.90	0.77	3	Moderately Effective
10	Policies consider cultural norms and challenges when addressing gender-based violence	3.90	0.85	0.78	2	Moderately Effective
11	Collaborative efforts exist between institutions and external agencies to combat gender-based violence	4.00	0.80	0.80	1	Moderately Effective
12	Policies are regularly reviewed and updated to meet current challenges	3.50	1.05	0.70	7	Moderately Effective
Aggregate Score (Mean & SD)		3.60	1.00	0.72		

Data in Table 4 show an overall mean of 3.60 (SD = 1.00) and a mean set of 0.72, suggesting that current policies and measures addressing gender-based violence in higher education institutions in Abia State are moderately effective. While there is institutional commitment, collaborative efforts with external agencies, and consistent sanctions for perpetrators, some gaps remain in prompt response, victim protection, and clear communication of policies. This underscores the need for strengthening implementation, awareness, and support systems to enhance policy effectiveness.



The combo bar chart above illustrates the effectiveness of current policies and measures addressing gender-based violence in higher education institutions in Abia State across five critical dimensions. The level of awareness creation among students showed a moderate effectiveness, indicating that while institutions have made efforts to inform students about gender-based violence, these efforts are not yet comprehensive or far-reaching. Reporting mechanisms recorded the lowest level of effectiveness, suggesting that students find it difficult to report incidents due to lack of trust, fear of victimization, or ineffective channels. Support services, such as counseling and post-incident care, were also rated below average, pointing to insufficient institutional responses to survivors' needs. Disciplinary measures showed a relatively better effectiveness, implying that while some actions are taken against perpetrators, consistency and transparency in these processes are still questionable. Lastly, policy implementation received an average rating, revealing that although institutions may have formulated relevant policies, their execution remains inconsistent or superficial. Overall, the chart highlights the need for higher education institutions to strengthen their reporting systems, provide better support services, and ensure the effective implementation of disciplinary actions to meaningfully address gender-based violence.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that gender-based violence is highly prevalent in higher education institutions in Abia State. Incidences such as sexual harassment, unwanted advances, and verbal abuse are commonly experienced by students, particularly females. These forms of violence are often normalized and remain underreported due to fear of victim-blaming or institutional inaction. The findings are in consonance with the study of Ilechukwu and Onu (2022) who posited that the persistence of sexual harassment in Nigerian universities is significantly influenced by normalized gender norms and silence around the issue. Similarly, Nwankwo (2020) reported that institutional power dynamics enable perpetrators to exploit their positions, making students vulnerable to various forms of abuse. The findings of the study revealed that deep-rooted cultural norms and traditional gender roles significantly contribute to the perpetuation of gender-based violence in higher education institutions. Expectations that women should be submissive and tolerate inappropriate behavior foster environments where such violations are overlooked. The findings are in consonance with the study of Olutola (2019) who explained that cultural acceptance of male dominance in academic institutions reinforces behaviors such as sexual harassment. Additionally, Ezeah and Nwosu (2021) found that institutional silence, shaped by sociocultural beliefs, serves as a barrier to reporting and addressing cases of abuse.

The findings of the study revealed that gender-based violence negatively impacts students' psychological, emotional, and academic well-being. Victims often suffer from anxiety, depression, fear of attending classes, and declining academic performance. The findings are in consonance with Okafor and Okechukwu (2022) who highlighted that survivors of sexual harassment experience trauma that interferes with their educational goals and mental health. Similarly, Adekunle and Ojo (2021) found that continuous exposure to such hostile environments leads to emotional distress and reduced engagement with academic activities. The findings of the study revealed that existing policies and

institutional responses to gender-based violence are largely ineffective due to poor implementation, lack of awareness, and minimal accountability mechanisms. Many students are unaware of complaint procedures, and when reports are made, they are often not treated with the urgency or seriousness they deserve. The findings are in consonance with Amadi and Umeh (2023) who observed that institutional policies in Nigerian universities exist mostly on paper and lack the robust enforcement necessary to protect students. This is supported by Nwosu and Eze (2023), who reported that structural and cultural barriers continue to undermine genuine institutional commitment to addressing gender-based violence.

Educational Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have far-reaching implications for educational systems and stakeholders within higher education institutions in Abia State and beyond. Firstly, the study underscores the critical need for institutions to integrate comprehensive gender sensitivity training into curricula and campus life to challenge and transform harmful cultural norms that normalize gender-based violence. This implies that education should go beyond academic instruction to include value re-orientation and the promotion of gender equity. Secondly, the study reveals the necessity for educational policymakers to develop and enforce clear, functional anti-violence frameworks. Institutions must revise their policies to explicitly address gender-based violence, ensure survivor protection, and implement stringent punitive measures for offenders. This calls for enhanced institutional accountability mechanisms. Thirdly, teacher education programmes and professional development should incorporate content that prepares educators to recognize, respond to, and prevent gender-based violence in educational settings. This will ensure that both staff and students are adequately informed about their rights and responsibilities. Fourthly, the study emphasizes the importance of creating safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments. Institutions must establish confidential and accessible reporting systems and promote mental health and psychosocial support services for survivors of gender-based violence. Lastly, the study implies that educational research and interventions must be context-specific, acknowledging cultural dynamics and power structures that shape gender relations in academic institutions. This will foster more sustainable and culturally sensitive solutions in addressing gender-based violence within the educational sector.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study provides significant contributions to the body of knowledge on gender-based violence in higher education, particularly in the Nigerian context. Firstly, it offers a sociological perspective on how deeply rooted cultural norms and gender roles perpetuate gender-based violence within academic institutions, an area that has remained underexplored in recent research. Secondly, it provides empirical data on the prevalence and forms of gender-based violence in higher institutions in Abia State, thereby serving as a foundation for evidence-based interventions and policy formulation. Furthermore, the study enriches theoretical discourse by linking sociological theories of gender to practical, lived experiences within academia, offering nuanced insights into how institutional silence and cultural expectations contribute to the normalization of violence. Lastly, by examining the effectiveness of existing policies and identifying institutional gaps, the research advances knowledge on policy responsiveness and the structural transformation needed to foster safe learning environments.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have underscored the persistent and multifaceted nature of gender-based violence within higher education institutions in Abia State, Nigeria. It was established that gender-based violence is a prevalent issue, with numerous students experiencing various forms of harassment and abuse within academic settings. This prevalence is significantly sustained by entrenched cultural norms and rigid gender roles that perpetuate silence, victim-blaming, and institutional inaction. The study further revealed that these cultural norms, which are deeply embedded in the social fabric of the region, often position women and female students in subservient roles, thereby reinforcing power imbalances that enable gender-based violence. The effects of such violence on students' well-being were found to be profound—ranging from emotional distress and academic disengagement to loss of self-esteem and physical health complications. Moreover, while policies and institutional measures to curb gender-based violence exist on paper, their implementation remains largely ineffective due to weak enforcement mechanisms, limited awareness, and the absence of a culturally responsive framework that addresses root causes. In light of these findings, the study concludes that addressing gender-based violence in higher education institutions requires not only institutional commitment but also a critical interrogation and transformation of prevailing cultural norms and gender ideologies. An integrated approach that combines education, policy enforcement, and cultural reorientation is essential to dismantle the systemic barriers that perpetuate violence and ensure a safe academic environment for all students.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that gender-based violence in higher education institutions in Abia State is a serious concern rooted in cultural norms and institutional inefficiencies. The following recommendations are made to address the identified issues:

1. Institutions should establish functional gender response units that provide confidential support, counseling, and legal assistance to survivors of gender-based violence.
2. University authorities should develop and enforce comprehensive gender policies that explicitly define and penalize all forms of gender-based violence, including subtle and normalized behaviors.
3. Public awareness campaigns should be regularly conducted to challenge harmful cultural norms and gender stereotypes that foster silence and tolerance of violence in academic environments.
4. Training and capacity-building programs should be organized for administrative and security personnel to enable timely identification, reporting, and management of gender-based violence cases.
5. Students should be actively involved in peer-led initiatives and forums aimed at promoting gender equality and respectful interactions within the university community.

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