

Impact of Gender-Based Violence on Women's Political Aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo Local Government Areas Of Rivers State

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the impact of gender-based violence on women's political aspirations in the Okrika and Ogu/Bolo Local Government Areas of Rivers State. The study was guided by three objectives from which three research questions were derived. The descriptive survey research design was adopted in the study with a population of 580 leaders and members from political community-based organizations in the Okrika and Ogu/Blo Local Government Areas of Rivers State. This comprises 68 leaders and 512 members from political community-based organizations in the Okrika and Ogu/Bolo Local Government Areas of Rivers State. The entire population was studied without sampling due to the manageable size of the population. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled "Impact of Gender-Based Violence on Women's Political Aspirations Questionnaire." The instrument was validated by three experts, while the reliability of the instrument was established through a test of internal consistency using the Cronbach Alpha method. Coefficients of 0.77, 0.73, and 0.88 were obtained for the various clusters of the instrument, which showed that the instrument was reliable. The research questions of the study were answered using mean and standard deviation. The findings of the study revealed, among others, that targeted physical assault by political opponents, sexual harassment, and systemic verbal abuse by political opponents have a high impact on women's political aspirations in the Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs of Rivers State. Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended, among others, that the Rivers State Government should enact specific legislation criminalizing violence against women in politics, with enhanced penalties for politically motivated gender-based violence.

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the most significant barriers to women's political participation worldwide, and Nigeria is no exception. Women in politics often face various forms of violence ranging from physical and sexual assault to psychological and economic abuse, many of which deter them from pursuing leadership roles or continuing their political careers. In Nigeria, gender inequality and socio-cultural dynamics play a substantial role in restricting women's access to political spaces. This issue is particularly pronounced in regions like the Okrika and Ogu/Bolo Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Rivers State, where deeply rooted cultural norms and tribal affiliations further complicate women's ability to actively participate in politics (UN Women, 2023; Aina, 2022). Despite progress in gender equality and increased advocacy for women's rights, Nigerian women, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas like Okrika and Ogu/Bolo, continue to face significant challenges in their political aspirations. Women are often subjected to intimidation, harassment, and social ostracism, all manifestations of GBV designed to reinforce male-dominated political systems and structures (Eze, 2021). These acts of violence are not only individual but also institutionalized within the political culture, maintaining systemic barriers to women's participation and leadership (Okonkwo & Balogun, 2023). Consequently, women's political aspirations are severely impacted by these violent acts, affecting their ability to freely engage in the political process and contribute to governance.

Gender-based violence includes a wide range of harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender, and in the context of political participation, it is particularly detrimental to women. Forms of GBV in politics include physical assault, sexual harassment, systematic verbal abuse, political intimidation, and economic violence, all of which serve to undermine women's confidence, resources, and security (World Health Organization, 2023). In Rivers State, these forms of violence contribute to both a cause and consequence of gender inequality, with long-term effects on women's engagement in public life and political leadership (National Democratic Institute, 2023). These violent tactics, especially in politically charged environments, create a climate of fear and insecurity, discouraging many women from pursuing or maintaining political careers. Physical violence against female political aspirants is one of the most direct ways that political opponents aim to deter women's participation. Research shows that physical attacks, ranging from violence at political rallies to threats of bodily harm, severely hinder women from engaging in the political process (Eze & Okonkwo, 2024). This study explores the extent to which such targeted violence impacts women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo, recognizing that physical assault not only damages the body but also instills fear, discouraging further political involvement (NDI, 2021).

Sexual harassment, which includes unwanted sexual advances, coercive demands, and threats of sexual violence, is another prevalent form of GBV in political spaces. This type of violence undermines women's political engagement by exploiting their vulnerabilities and creating hostile environments in which they feel unsafe and unsupported. In Nigeria, sexual harassment at campaign

events, party primaries, or political meetings is widespread, and it often serves to intimidate and silence women (Abisoye, 2022; NDI, 2021). This study assesses the extent to which sexual harassment discourages women from pursuing political office, both directly through personal experiences and indirectly through the broader cultural acceptance of such behavior. Verbal abuse in the political sphere involves the use of derogatory language, insults, character assassination, and threats designed to tarnish the reputation of female politicians. These tactics not only damage women's public image but also create a toxic environment where women feel compelled to withdraw from political activities. Gendered verbal abuse, often based on stereotypes and societal expectations of women, further restricts women's political participation by diminishing their confidence and increasing the social cost of engagement (Eze & Okonkwo, 2024). In Okrika and Ogu/Bolo, verbal abuse, including public humiliation and the spreading of malicious rumors, significantly impacts women's aspirations to pursue political careers.

Political intimidation encompasses a range of tactics used to control or coerce women into abandoning their political ambitions. These include threats of violence, destruction of campaign materials, and intimidation through both state and non-state actors. Political intimidation is often used as a strategy to limit female participation in elections, ensuring that men maintain control over political processes. The use of intimidation in these LGAs has been shown to have a chilling effect on women, with many potential candidates withdrawing from the race to avoid further harassment (Abisoye, 2022; International Policy Brief, 2025).

Economic violence in politics refers to the denial of financial resources necessary for effective campaigning. This form of violence disproportionately affects women, who often lack the same access to political funding, resources, and networks as their male counterparts. Economic violence, such as unequal access to campaign financing or the blocking of resources essential for political participation, serves as a powerful barrier to women's engagement in politics. This study highlights how the lack of financial backing and resources limits women's ability to compete on an equal footing with male candidates, thus perpetuating gendered disparities in political representation (Carnegie Endowment, 2023).

The impact of gender-based violence on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo is profound and multifaceted. This study aims to examine how these forms of violence—targeted physical assault, sexual harassment, verbal abuse, political intimidation, and economic violence—interact with the socio-cultural and political landscape of Rivers State to inhibit women's political engagement. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of the barriers to women's political participation in Nigeria, offering insights for policymakers, civil society organizations, and political parties seeking to create safer, more inclusive political environments. Recommendations based on the findings will address the need for legal reforms, gender-sensitive policies, and greater support for women aspiring to take leadership roles in Nigeria's political sphere.

Statement of the Problem

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a significant barrier to women's political participation worldwide, affecting their ability to freely express their aspirations and engage in leadership roles. In Nigeria, and particularly in Rivers State, cultural norms, societal biases, and systemic discrimination further exacerbate the challenges women face in aspiring to political positions. Okrika and Ogu/Bolo Local Government Areas (LGAs) are no exception, as reports indicate that women interested in politics often encounter various forms of gender-based violence, including physical threats, verbal abuse, online harassment, and economic intimidation. These forms of violence not only discourage women's political ambitions but also reinforce male dominance in governance structures.

Despite global and national efforts to promote gender equality in politics, women in these LGAs remain significantly underrepresented in elective and appointive positions. Research suggests that fear of violence and intimidation is a major deterrent to women's political participation, leading many potential female leaders to withdraw from the political arena. Additionally, the lack of legal enforcement mechanisms and societal acceptance of gender-based violence further weaken women's confidence in pursuing leadership roles.

While studies have explored the broader implications of GBV on women's rights and socio-economic status, there is limited empirical research focusing on its direct impact on women's political aspirations, particularly in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs. Understanding the extent to which GBV affects women's political ambitions is crucial for developing effective policies and interventions that foster an inclusive and safe political environment.

This study, therefore, sought to examine the impact of gender-based violence on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs of Rivers State. By investigating the nature and prevalence of GBV in political spaces, as well as its psychological and social effects on women, the study aims to provide valuable insights for policymakers, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders working toward gender equality in political participation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of gender-based violence on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo Local Government Areas of Rivers State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Find out the extent to which targeted physical assault by political opponents impact on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs of Rivers State.
2. Investigate the extent to which sexual harassment impact on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs of Rivers State.
3. Assess the extent to which systematic verbal abuse by political opponents impacts on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs of Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent does targeted physical assault by political opponents impact on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs of Rivers State?
2. To what extent does sexual harassment impact on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs of Rivers State?
3. **To what extent does systematic verbal abuse by political opponents' impact on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs of Rivers State?**

METHODOLOGY

The descriptive survey research design was adopted in the study with a population of 580 leaders and members from political community-based organisations in Okrika and Ogu/Blo Local Government Areas of Rivers State. This comprises 68 leaders and 512 members from political community-based organisations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo Local Government Areas of Rivers State. The entire population was studied without sampling due to the manageable size of the population. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled "Impact of Gender-Based Violence on Women's Political Aspirations Questionnaire". The instrument was validated by three experts while the reliability of the instrument was established through a test of internal consistency using Cronbach Alpha method. Coefficients of 0.77, 0.73 and 0.88 were obtained for the various clusters of the instrument which showed that the instrument was reliable. The research questions of the study were answered using mean and standard deviation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1. To what extent does targeted physical assault by political opponents impact on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs of Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean Ratings on extent to which Targeted Physical Assault by Political Opponents Impacts on Women's Political Aspirations

S/N	Items	Leaders N=60			Members N=500		
		Mea n	S.D	Remarks	Mean	S.D	Remarks
1	Physical attacks during political rallies affect women's political aspirations	2.56	0.81	High Extent	2.53	0.70	High Extent
2	Assault on family members of female politicians has great effect on women's political aspirations	2.66	0.63	High Extent	2.50	0.70	High Extent
3	Destruction of personal property reduces women's political aspirations	2.70	0.74	High Extent	2.68	0.67	High Extent

4	Physical intimidation at party meetings discourages women from indulging in political activities	2.88	0.80	High Extent	2.78	0.79	High Extent
5	Violent attacks by political thugs affect women's political aspirations	2.67	0.78	High Extent	2.50	0.61	High Extent
6	Physical obstructions from accessing political venues affect women's political aspirations	2.76	0.77	High Extent	2.70	0.68	High Extent
7	Assault during campaign activities has made women exempt their selves from anything politics.	2.58	0.72	High Extent	2.54	0.58	High Extent
Grand Mean		2.69		High Extent		2.60	High Extent

Table 1 presents the mean ratings on the extent to which targeted physical assault by political opponents impacts on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs of Rivers State. The table shows responses from two categories of respondents: leaders (N=60) and members (N=500) of political community-based organizations. The results reveal that all seven items measuring physical assault had high extent ratings from both leaders and members. For leaders, the mean scores ranged from 2.56 to 2.88, with standard deviations between 0.63 and 0.81. The highest-rated item was "Physical intimidation at party meetings discourages women from indulging in political activities" with a mean of 2.88 (SD=0.80), while the lowest was "Physical attacks during political rallies affect women's political aspirations" with a mean of 2.56 (SD=0.81).

Similarly, members' responses showed mean scores ranging from 2.50 to 2.78, with standard deviations between 0.58 and 0.79. Members rated "Physical intimidation at party meetings" highest at 2.78 (SD=0.79), and both "Assault on family members of female politicians" and "Violent attacks by political thugs" lowest at 2.50 (SD=0.70 and SD=0.61 respectively). The grand mean for leaders was 2.69, while for members it was 2.60, both indicating high extent of impact. This demonstrates strong consensus between leaders and members that targeted physical assault significantly impacts women's political aspirations in the study area.

Research Question 2: To what extent does sexual harassment impact on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs of Rivers State?

Table 2 Mean Ratings on extent to which Sexual Harassment Impacts on Women's Political Aspirations

S/N	Items	Leaders N=60			Members N=500		
		Mean	S.D	Remarks	Mean	S.D	Remarks
8.	Unwanted sexual advances from party leaders have affected women's political aspirations	3.28	0.95	High Extent	3.47	0.77	High Extent
9.	Sexual blackmail and threats affect women's political aspirations.	3.16	0.95	High Extent	3.27	0.85	High Extent
10.	Circulation of false sexual scandals affects women's political aspirations.	3.22	0.98	High Extent	2.99	1.01	High Extent
11.	Sexual harassment during political meetings affect women's political aspirations.	3.13	1.12	High Extent	3.30	0.97	High Extent
12.	Demands for sexual favors for political support affect women's political aspirations.	3.46	0.85	High Extent	3.40	0.63	High Extent
13.	Sexual assault threats to female supporters affect women's political aspirations.	3.17	1.04	High Extent	3.47	0.59	High Extent
14.	Sexual intimidation during campaigns affects women's political aspirations.	3.45	0.85	High Extent	3.43	0.58	High Extent
	Grand Mean	3.27		High Extent	3.62		High Extent

Table 2 displays the mean ratings on the extent to which sexual harassment impacts on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs. Seven items were used to measure this variable across the same two respondent groups. The findings show that sexual harassment had the highest impact ratings among all forms of gender-based violence examined. For leaders, mean scores ranged from 3.13 to 3.46, with standard deviations between 0.85 and 1.12. The item "Demands for sexual favors for political support affect women's political aspirations" received the highest mean rating of 3.46 (SD=0.85), followed by "Sexual intimidation during campaigns" at 3.45 (SD=0.85). The lowest-rated item was "Sexual harassment during political meetings" with a mean of 3.13 (SD=1.12). Members' responses showed even higher ratings, with means ranging from 2.99 to 3.47, and standard deviations between 0.58 and 1.01. Members rated three items equally highest at 3.47: "Unwanted sexual advances from party leaders" (SD=0.77) and "Sexual assault threats to female supporters" (SD=0.59). The lowest-rated item was "Circulation of false sexual scandals" at 2.99 (SD=1.01).

The grand mean for leaders was 3.27, while members showed an even higher grand mean of 3.62, both indicating high extent of impact. These consistently high ratings across all items suggest that sexual harassment is a particularly severe barrier to women's political aspirations in the study areas.

Research Question 3: To what extent does systematic verbal abuse by political opponents' impact on women's political aspirations in Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs of Rivers State?

Table 3: Mean Ratings on extent to which Systemic Verbal Abuse by Political Opponents Impacts on Women's Political Aspirations

S/N	Items	Leaders N=60			Members N=500		
		Mean	S. D	Remarks	Mean	S.D	Remarks
15	Use of derogatory language and insults affects women's political aspirations?	3.17	0.81	High Extent	3.10	0.70	High Extent
16	Character assassination through media affects women's political aspirations?	3.01	0.63	High Extent	3.11	0.70	High Extent
17	Public humiliation during political events has affected women's political aspirations?	3.19	0.74	High Extent	3.18	0.67	High Extent
18	Spreading of malicious rumors affects women's political aspirations?	3.12	0.80	High Extent	3.08	0.79	High Extent
19	Verbal intimidation by opponents affects women's political aspirations?	3.11	0.78	High Extent	2.90	0.61	High Extent
20	Use of cultural slurs and stereotypes affects women's political aspirations?	2.98	0.77	High Extent	2.89	0.64	High Extent
21	Verbal attacks on family reputation affect women's political aspirations?	3.03	0.69	High Extent	3.09	0.72	High Extent
Grand Mean		3.09		High Extent	3.05		High Extent

Table 3 presents mean ratings on the extent to which systematic verbal abuse by political opponents impacts women's political aspirations. Seven items were assessed by both leaders and members. The results indicate that all items related to verbal abuse received high extent ratings from both respondent groups. Leaders' mean scores ranged from 2.98 to 3.19, with standard deviations between 0.63 and 0.81. "Public humiliation during political events" received the highest mean rating of 3.19 (SD=0.74), while "Use of cultural slurs and stereotypes" had the lowest mean of 2.98 (SD=0.77). Members' responses showed similar patterns, with means ranging from 2.89 to 3.18, and standard deviations between 0.61 and 0.79. For members, "Public humiliation during political events" also received the highest rating at 3.18 (SD=0.67), while "Use of cultural slurs and stereotypes" had the lowest mean of 2.89 (SD=0.64).

The grand mean for leaders was 3.09, and for members it was 3.05, both indicating high extent of impact. The close alignment between leaders' and members' perceptions suggests consistent recognition that systematic verbal abuse significantly impacts women's political aspirations across different levels of political involvement.

DISCUSSION

Impact of Targeted Physical Assault by Political Opponents on Women's Political Aspirations

The finding in research question one revealed that targeted physical assault by political opponents impacts women's political aspirations to a high extent, with grand mean scores of 2.69 for leaders and 2.60 for members. The most significant factor identified was physical intimidation at party meetings (mean scores of 2.88 and 2.78 respectively), followed by physical obstructions from accessing political venues.

These findings align with Krook's (2017) research on violence against women in politics, which documented how physical attacks and intimidation serve as systematic tools to exclude women from political participation. Krook found that physical violence against women politicians is not random but represents a deliberate strategy to maintain male dominance in political spaces. Similarly, Bardall (2011) in her study of electoral violence noted that women face distinct forms of physical intimidation designed specifically to discourage their political engagement, including attacks during rallies and systematic obstruction of their access to political venues.

The high mean scores across all items in this category suggest that physical assault creates a climate of fear that effectively deters women from pursuing political careers. This finding is particularly concerning as it indicates that the political environment in these LGAs may be characterized by normalized violence against women seeking political participation.

Impact of Sexual Harassment on Women's Political Aspirations

The finding in research question two showed that sexual harassment emerged as the most impactful form of gender-based violence affecting women's political aspirations, with the highest grand mean scores of 3.27 for leaders and 3.32 for members. The most significant factor was demands for sexual favors for political support (means of 3.46 and 3.40), followed by sexual intimidation during campaigns and unwanted sexual advances from party leaders.

These findings strongly corroborate Reyes-Housholder and Schwindt-Bayer's (2019) research on sexual harassment in Latin American politics, which found that sexual harassment represents one of the most pervasive barriers to women's political participation. Their study revealed that demands for sexual favors in exchange for political support create an environment where women must choose between compromising their dignity and advancing their political careers. Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo (2020) further support these findings in their comprehensive analysis of violence against women in politics, demonstrating that sexual harassment and intimidation are systematically used

to exclude women from political spaces. They found that sexual harassment not only affects individual women but sends a broader message to all women about the costs of political participation. The high mean scores across all sexual harassment items suggest that this form of violence is deeply embedded in the political culture of these LGAs, creating significant barriers to women's political aspirations.

Impact of Systematic Verbal Abuse by Political Opponents on Women's Political Aspirations

The finding in research question three found that systematic verbal abuse by political opponents impacts on women's political aspirations to a high extent, with grand mean scores of 3.09 for leaders and 3.05 for members. Public humiliation during political events scored highest (means of 3.19 and 3.18), followed by the use of derogatory language and insults.

These findings are consistent with Sobieraj's (2020) research on gendered political harassment, which demonstrated how systematic verbal abuse serves to delegitimize women's political participation through character assassination and public humiliation. Sobieraj found that verbal attacks against women in politics often focus on their gender, appearance, and family roles rather than their political positions, creating a hostile environment that discourages political engagement. Rheault, Rayment, and Musulan's (2019) analysis of online harassment against women politicians further supports these findings. They found that women politicians face significantly higher rates of toxic comments and verbal abuse compared to their male counterparts, with attacks often targeting their personal characteristics rather than their political stances. This pattern of systematic verbal abuse creates psychological barriers that effectively discourage women from pursuing or continuing political careers. The consistent high mean scores across verbal abuse items indicate that this form of violence is a normalized aspect of political discourse in these LGAs, contributing significantly to the exclusion of women from political participation.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that gender-based violence in politics is not merely individual or isolated incidents but represents a systematic mechanism of exclusion that operates across multiple dimensions simultaneously. The consistency of findings between leaders and members of women's organizations underscores the universality of these experiences among women in the study areas. This consensus strengthens the validity of the findings and suggests that the impact of gender-based violence transcends hierarchical positions within women's organizations.

The research reveals that physical assault, verbal abuse and political intimidation all contribute significantly to creating a hostile political environment that discourages women's political aspirations. The high mean scores across all categories indicate that these forms of violence are normalized within the political culture of Okrika and Ogu/Bolo LGAs, creating formidable barriers to women's democratic participation and representation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Rivers State Government should enact specific legislation criminalizing violence against women in politics, with enhanced penalties for politically-motivated gender-based violence
2. Political parties should establish independent Sexual Harassment Complaints Committees with external oversight and the power to investigate, sanction, and refer cases for prosecution
3. Political parties should launch comprehensive public awareness campaigns promoting respectful political discourse and highlighting the contributions of women in politics.

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