

# Gender-Based Violence and Justice for Women Survivors in Rivers State, Nigeria, 2015-2025

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study examines gender based violence and justice for women survivors in Rivers State, Nigeria from 2015 to 2025. The research aims to identify the key obstacles that prevent women survivors of gender based violence in Rivers State from obtaining effective legal support. **Method:** A qualitative desk review grounded in feminist legal theory using four research questions was conducted using primary and secondary documents, including court records, media reports, legislation, books, and scholarly journal articles to identify patterns across individual, institutional, and societal levels. **Results:** Findings reveal that barriers operate at multiple, intersecting levels. At the individual level, stigma, fear of retaliation, economic dependence, and low legal literacy discourage reporting. At the institutional level, justice system delays and poor case handling by law enforcement, pose trust challenges and goes further to retraumatize survivors. At the societal level, patriarchal norms, and cultural practices normalise violence and silence survivors. **Novelty:** The study concludes that justice for women survivors in Rivers State requires coordinated reforms across the legal, health, and social sectors, alongside community level interventions to shift harmful norms. Key recommendations include establishing specialized gender based violence courts, strengthening survivor centered services, expediting case adjudication, mandating gender sensitivity training for law enforcement and judicial officers, and enforcing the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act 2015. This study contributes to limited state level data on GBV justice pathways in the Niger Delta. Findings are relevant for policymakers implementing the VAPP Act, NGOs designing survivor support programs, and journalists covering GBV ethically.

## INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) has become a widespread violation of human rights and a significant contributor to public health issues in Nigeria. The World Health Organisation [1] estimates that one in three women globally have experienced physical or sexual violence, with sub-Saharan Africa reporting some of the highest prevalence rates. The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey [2] found that 31% of women aged 15–49 have experienced physical or sexual violence at least once in their lives but more than fifty percent of them had never sought help. Olojede, Bose, and Ibikunle (2020) emphasized that GBV in Nigeria remains a deeply rooted issue that has drawn attention from both government and non-governmental organisations. Although GBV affects both men and women, women disproportionately face the worst of this violence, consequently perpetuating gender inequality and significantly impacting the nation's socio-economic progress, Olojede et al. [3] further explains. Research has shown that domestic violence hinders women's career advancement and that governments efforts to provide a sustainable solution have fallen short, Olojede et al. affirms. Rivers State, located in the oil rich Niger Delta region, has recorded high cases of domestic violence, sexual assault, harmful traditional practices such as widowhood rites, and intimate partner violence over the last decade.

The legal landscape moved with the enactment of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act in 2015, which criminalises a wide range of offenses including spousal battery,

economic abuse, and harmful traditional practices. In spite of the legislative progress of the enactment of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP) in 2015 and its domestication in Rivers State in September 2020 which led the state to becoming the first state in South-South to domesticate the VAPP Act, access to justice for women survivors remains limited. Reported cases of gender based violence against women and girls in Rivers State have increased though underreporting remains high in rural areas of the local government due to stigma and distrust (Healthy Life Initiative, 2025). Data from the Rivers State Observatory recorded 621 cases between the year 2015 to 2017, with all survivors being females and most perpetrators known to survivors [4]. The low conviction rate and case abandonment reflect systemic barriers within legal, institutional, and sociocultural structures seen across Nigeria [5]. Survivors often abandon cases either due to stigma, financial constraints, family pressure, and lack of faith in law enforcement [6]. In rural communities, oil related environmental degradation destroys women's livelihoods in farming and fishing consequently increasing economic dependence on male partners and families thereby making survivors less likely to reject customary settlements that favour the perpetrator's family [7]. Consequently making customary courts and traditional arbitration take precedence over formal legal channels. Data from the Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs and civil society organisations such as the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Rivers indicate a steady rise in reported GBV cases between 2015 and 2025, particularly during and after the COVID-19 lockdowns. However, conviction rates remain disproportionately low. Police records suggest that less than 5% of reported cases proceed to full trial, and fewer result in conviction. Adeyemo [8] highlights a prevalence rate of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) at 85.9%. Reported cases of GBV in Rivers State rose sharply in 2023, reaching 800 incidents [9]. In 2024, the situation worsened, with 1,319 cases of violence against women recorded. The then Rivers State's Commissioner for Health, Dr. Adaeze Oreh, announced this in November 2024 during the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against women and the launch of the global 16 days of activism against gender based violence [10]. The period 2015–2025 is significant because it captures both the pre-VAPP and post-domestication eras in Rivers State, which allows for an assessment of whether legal reform has translated into practical access to justice. This paper therefore examines access to justice for survivors of GBV in Rivers State within this period. Understanding this is critical for policymakers, legal practitioners, and civil society actors working to close the justice gap and fulfill the country's obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Sustainable Development Goal 5.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Gender-based violence is a major problem in Nigeria, with 27,698 cases of SGBV reported between 2020 and 2023 (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). Survivors of gender based violence has continued to face several obstacles in accessing justice in spite of the domestication of the VAPP Act in Rivers State in 2020 and the increased public awareness of GBV amongst women. Reports from the Nigerian Police Force, FIDA, and local NGOs show that cases are routinely withdrawn, dismissed, or stalled due to process delays, corruption, and limited cooperation from families. The National Bureau of Statistics [11] noted that while 33% of Nigerian women who experienced violence sought help, only 6% approached the police, and less than 1% obtained a court judgment. In Rivers State, survivors in oil producing communities like Ogoni, Okrika, and Ahoada face additional layers of vulnerability because GBV is often intertwined with conflict, environmental degradation, displacement, and economic dependence on male partners.

Report shows that persistent environmental degradation in the Niger Delta had contributed to heightened anxiety, economic hardship, and social tensions linked to increased violence against women [12]. In such areas, reporting a husband or relative may result in rejection, deliberate exclusion, loss of economic support, or retaliation from community members. The problem therefore, is not the absence of law but the persistence of legal, institutional, sociocultural, and economic barriers that deny women survivors timely, fair, and effective remedies between 2015 and 2025.

Furthermore, the period 2015–2025 captures a critical transition from the pre-VAPP legal environment, where GBV was addressed under fragmented provisions of the Criminal Code and Penal Code, to the post-2020 era of VAPP domestication. However, evidence suggests that legislative reform has not translated into behavioral change within justice institutions. Police officers in Rivers State continue to classify spousal battery as a “family matter” [13], magistrates adjourn cases repeatedly due to lack of specialised GBV courts, and protection orders provided under VAPP are rarely issued or enforced. Survivors in rural LGAs such as Etche and Khana also face geographic barriers, as legal aid and police Gender Units are concentrated in Port Harcourt, leaving most of the state underserved. Economic constraints further worsen the problem because pursuing a GBV case requires transportation, legal fees, medical reports, and repeated court appearances. Given that 67% of women in Rivers State are engaged in the informal sector [14], many cannot afford to leave their market business or farms to attend protracted trials that may last 2–5 years. Consequently, survivors often opt for informal settlement through family elders, religious leaders, or traditional rulers. These forums typically prioritise family cohesion over survivor safety and rarely impose sanctions on perpetrators. This justice gap perpetuates a culture of impunity, discourages reporting, and undermines Rivers State’s obligations under national laws and international instruments such as CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol. Unless these barriers are systematically identified and addressed, the VAPP Act risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive in the lives of women in Rivers State.

### **Objective of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to examine gender-based violence (GBV) and justice for survivors in Rivers State from 2015 to 2025, with a view to understand why legal reforms have not translated into improved justice outcomes for survivors. The specific objectives of the study is to:

- i. Identify legal and process barriers within the criminal justice system that limit prosecution of GBV cases.
- ii. Examine institutional challenges faced by police, courts, and social welfare agencies in responding to GBV.
- iii. Assess sociocultural and economic factors that discourages women from reporting or sustaining legal action.
- iv. Propose actionable recommendations to strengthen access to justice for survivors in Rivers State.

### **Research Questions**

- i. What legal and process barriers impede the prosecution of GBV cases in Rivers State?
- ii. How do institutional practices of the police and judiciary affect access to justice for survivors?
- iii. In what ways do sociocultural norms and economic dependence influence survivor’s decision to seek justice?

- iv. What policy and programmatic interventions can reduce barriers to justice between 2015 and 2025?

## **Conceptual Reviews**

### **Gender**

Gender refers to the roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society at a given time considers appropriate for men and women (UN Women, n.d.). It is the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. Gender is hierarchical and produces inequalities that intersect with other social and economic inequalities [14]. Food and Agriculture Organisation [15] went further to describe gender as the relations between men and women, both perceptual and material. They believe gender is not determined biologically, as a result of sexual characteristics of either women or men, but is constructed socially. In Nigeria, these constructs are often embedded in patriarchal norms, customs and religious interpretations that define expectations for allocation of power, decision making, masculinity or femininity. Contextually in GBV, gender functions in two dimensions. Analytically, in relation to this paper it answers why females experience disproportionate rate of intimate partner and sexual violence and structurally, it shows the unequal power relation that normalize male control over female.

### **Gender-Based Violence (GBV)**

The United Nations defines GBV as harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender, rooted in gender inequality, power imbalance, and harmful norms [16]. Decades of research and activism on women's experiences of poverty have shown that issue extends beyond material deprivation to include the erosion of agency through abuse, stress, fatigue, and voicelessness as it is about lack of resources [17]. GBV is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality and constitutes a violation of fundamental human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [18], the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and Nigeria's 1999 Constitution. In the Nigerian context, the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act [19] provides a comprehensive legal definition that includes physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and harmful traditional practices. In Rivers State, common manifestations of GBV between 2015 and 2025 include intimate partner violence, marital rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment in workplaces and tertiary institutions, female genital mutilation in some rural communities, widowhood disinheritance, and economic abuse through denial of resources [20]. The Niger Delta context adds distinct dimensions, as environmental degradation, communal conflict, and militarization have been linked to increased vulnerability of women to sexual exploitation and transactional sex [21]. Consequently, GBV in Rivers State is not a uniform experience but is shaped by geography, class, and exposure to oil related conflict.

### **Forms and Contexts of Gender-Based Violence**

Gender-based violence manifests in multiple forms and occurs across diverse social contexts. Understanding these forms and contexts is essential for analysing access to justice, as the type and setting of violence often determine reporting patterns, institutional responses, and survivor experiences. Scholars and policy frameworks categorise GBV into five primary forms.

### **1. Physical violence**

This involves the use of physical force resulting in injury, pain, or bodily harm, including beating, slapping, and use of weapons [22]. It involves coercion and is aimed at creating power imbalance.

### **2. Sexual violence**

This encompasses rape, marital rape, sexual harassment, forced prostitution, and other non-consensual sexual acts [23]. It involves unwanted sexual activities that violate fundamental human rights.

### **3. Psychological or emotional violence**

This is a form of violence that includes threats, humiliation, intimidation, and controlling behavior that undermines a woman's self-worth and mental health [24]. It often utilises manipulation and creates fear without leaving physical marks but can lead to severe psychological harm like anxiety and depression.

### **4. Economic violence**

This refers to the denial of access to financial resources, property, education, or employment, thereby creating dependence on the abuser [25]. It is a form of violence where perpetrator restricts the victim from maintaining economic resources often targeted at creating financial dependency.

### **5. Harmful traditional practices**

These are customs which are known to have detrimental effects on the well being of people. It constitute culturally sanctioned forms of violence such as female genital mutilation, widowhood rites, and forced/child marriage [26]. These forms often intersect, with survivors experiencing multiple types simultaneously, compounding trauma and complicating legal redress.

## **Contexts of Gender-Based Violence**

The context in which GBV occurs shapes both its dynamics and the institutional response. Domestic or intimate partner violence is the most reported context globally and in Nigeria, occurring within marriages, cohabitation, or dating relationships. The 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey found that 31% of ever married women aged 15–49 had experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence by an intimate partner [27]. Community based violence occurs in public spaces and includes sexual harassment, trafficking, and assault by non-partners. In Rivers State, oil producing communities present a unique context where environmental degradation, youth unemployment, and the influx of transient oil workers have been linked to increased sexual exploitation and transactional sex [28]. Institutional violence refers to abuse perpetrated or condoned by state actors, including police extortion, sexual exploitation of detainees, and judicial bias against women complainants [29]. Conflict and crisis contexts further exacerbate GBV, as displacement, breakdown of law enforcement, and militarisation increase women's vulnerability. While Rivers State is not a conflict zone, periodic cult clashes, political violence, and communal disputes create conditions where GBV is normalised and accountability structures weaken.

## **Access to Justice**

According to the United Nations Development Programme [30], access to justice refers to the ability of individuals to seek and obtain a remedy through formal or informal institutions of justice in compliance with human rights standards. For women survivors of GBV, access to justice is a continuum that begins with the decision to report and extends through police investigation, forensic evidence collection, prosecution, adjudication, sentencing, and enforcement of court orders, including protection orders and compensation [31]. Importantly, access to justice is not

limited to courts. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women [32] in General Recommendation No. 33 emphasises that justice systems include plural legal systems, traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, and administrative bodies. In Rivers State, many survivors first encounter community leaders, religious authorities, or family elders before, or instead of, the police. Therefore, a survivor-centered definition of access to justice must account for both formal and informal pathways and assess whether they deliver safety, accountability, and redress in line with human rights standards.

### **Barriers to Justice**

Barriers to justice refer to the legal, institutional, sociocultural, and economic obstacles that prevent individuals from initiating or completing the justice process [33]. For GBV survivors, these barriers operate at multiple levels and often intersect. Scholars typically classify them into four categories.

#### **1. Legal and Process Barriers**

This refers to the absence of laws or poor implementation. These include gaps in legislation, restrictive definitions of offenses, and procedural rules that disadvantage survivors. In Nigeria, prior to the VAPP Act, marital rape was not recognised under the Criminal Code. Even after VAPP domestication in Rivers State in 2020, challenges persist with the implementation of protection orders, admissibility of medical evidence, and lack of fast-track procedures for GBV cases [34].

#### **2. Institutional Barriers**

This refers to limitations like corruption, delays or police inactions. It relates to the conduct, capacity, and resources of justice sector agencies. Common examples in Rivers State include police officers dismissing complaints as “family matters,” requesting money for case files, inadequate gender desks at police stations, shortage of female investigators, prolonged court adjournments, and limited shelter or legal aid services outside Port Harcourt [35]. Institutional barriers also include poor record keeping and weak coordination between police, health facilities, and the Ministry of Women Affairs.

#### **3. Sociocultural Barriers**

These stem from patriarchal norms, stigma, and community attitudes that normalise violence against women. In many communities in Rivers State, bride price is misinterpreted as conferring ownership of a wife, while survivors who report are labeled as “disobedient” or “home breakers” [36]. Religious and traditional leaders often pressure survivors to reconcile for the sake of family honor, effectively denying them legal recourse.

#### **4. Economic Barriers**

Economic dependence on perpetrators is a major deterrent to reporting and litigation. The cost of transportation to police stations and courts, medical reports, legal representation, and time away from income-generating activities in the informal sector makes justice unaffordable for many women [37]. In oil producing communities, women’s economic vulnerability is heightened by environmental pollution that destroys farmland and fishing waters, increasing dependence on male partners.

The ecological model of violence [38] suggests that these barriers do not operate in isolation but interact across individual, relationship, community, and societal levels. Therefore, understanding barriers to justice in Rivers State from 2015 to 2025 requires analysing how legal reforms intersect with institutional practice and lived sociocultural realities.

## Women

In line with UN usage, “woman” refers to an adult’s female person while WHO considers a woman as a person who typically has biological characteristics associated with female sex. [39]. For instance, a report by WHO on violence against women states it covers “women aged between 15-49 and defines violence against women as violence directed at females. Gender based violence against women is hereby defined as violence directed at a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately [40]. In Nigeria, violence against women manifests as domestic abuse, rape, sexual assault, early or forced marriages, female genital cutting and femicide with women continuing to suffer degradation in both public and private spaces. The disproportionate burden is evident in prevalence data: one in three Nigerian women have experienced physical violence by age 15. Globally, nearly 736 million women have experienced intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence [41]. Women’s vulnerability is structured by patriarchal norms that assign men authority over women’s bodies, mobility, and decision making. Media analysis of Nigerian newspapers reveals that reporting often perpetuates patriarchal norms, victim blaming and implicit biases that reinforce women’s subordinate status (Ibitoye & Abolarin-Egbebiola, 2025). Cultural and religious practices such as bridewealth and gendered family roles further limit women’s agency and normalize intimate partner violence (Diala, 2024).

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study will be anchored on Feminist Legal Theory to examine why women survivors of gender based violence (GBV) in Rivers State continue to encounter barriers to justice despite legal reforms between 2015 and 2025.

Feminist Legal Theory came into existence as a critical response to the claim that law is neutral, objective, and universally applied. The theory emerged as a collective intellectual movement in the 1970s. Catharine MacKinnon and Carol Smart, posits that law is not neutral or objective but is historically constructed within patriarchal systems that privilege male experiences and interests (MacKinnon & Smart, 1989). According to this perspective, the law reflects and reproduces gendered power relations rather than operating as an impartial arbiter. MacKinnon’s work on dominance feminism highlighted how legal doctrines often mirror male norms and fail to recognize harms specific to women’s lived realities, such as sexual harassment, marital rape, and economic coercion. Smart’s critique focused on the way legal discourse silences women by framing their experiences through male-centered categories and evidentiary rules. It debates the non neutrality of law but reflects patriarchal structures that disadvantage women. The law therefore, often fails to account for the lived realities of women particularly in area such as domestic violence, sexual assault, and economic abuse. The major critique of Feminist Legal Theory is the public and private divide embedded in legal systems. Acts of violence occurring within the home are frequently treated as private family matters rather than public crimes requiring state intervention. This separation limits state responsibility and allows patriarchal control to persist in domestic spaces. It explains why laws like VAPP exist but enforcement remains weak due to male dominated police and judiciary systems that trivialise GBV. This theory critiques the public or private divide in legal systems, where violence occurring in the home is treated as a private family matter

rather than a public crime requiring state intervention. In the context of Rivers State, the theory explains the implementation gap of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act. Although Rivers State domesticated the VAPP Act in 2020, enforcement remains weak because the police, prosecutors, and judiciary are still male dominated institutions socialised within patriarchal norms (Eze-Anaba, 2019). Cases like spousal battery are routinely dismissed by officers as domestic disputes and magistrates may impose minimal fines or encourage reconciliation rather than custodial sentences. The theory further explains why legal processes such as the requirement for corroboration in sexual offences cases or absence of witness protection disadvantage women survivors who often lack independent evidence. Consequently, the theory explains several patterns observed in practice:

1. **Minimization of domestic violence:** Cases of spousal battery are routinely dismissed by officers as “domestic disputes”. Police often classify spousal battery as a private family matter rather than a crime, leading to non-intervention or dismissal of cases (HELDi, 2025). This reflects the view that violence in the home is a private issue.
2. **Lenient judicial responses:** In Nigeria magistrates may impose minimal fines or encourage reconciliation instead of custodial sentences, prioritizing family preservation over survivor protection. Duru (2020) argues that light penalties and out-of-court settlements of sexual abuse cases undermine the deterrent effect of the VAPP Act.
3. **Procedural barriers:** Legal requirements such as corroboration in sexual offense cases and the absence of witness protection disproportionately disadvantage women survivors who often lack independent evidence. Many sexual offence cases in Nigeria still operate with an expectation of corroboration, consequently when survivors report sexual violence, cases are often struck out due to insufficient evidence (Orija,2024).

By focusing on structure, interpretation, and application of law, Feminist Legal Theory interrogates how the legal system itself can function as a barrier to justice. It shifts analysis from asking “why don’t women use the law?” to asking “how does the law fail to accommodate women’s experiences?” This lens is therefore critical for understanding why formal legal reform in Rivers State has not translated into substantive access to justice for GBV survivors.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In responding to the research questions, the study found from field reports, observations, and NGO documentation in Rivers State between 2015 and 2025 that barriers to justice for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) are systemic, intersecting, and persistent despite legislative progress. These barriers are analysed below using the Feminist Legal Theory and Ecological Model of Violence.

### 1. **Institutional Barriers**

Institutional practices of law enforcement and judicial actors constitute the first major point of attrition. This can be referred to as the failure of duty bearers. Consistent

with Feminist Legal Theory, male-dominated police stations in Rivers State often reproduce patriarchal attitudes that trivialise GBV. Officers routinely dismiss intimate partner violence as a “family matter” and advise reconciliation rather than investigation (Amnesty International, 2021). Survivors interviewed by FIDA Rivers (2023) reported being asked to pay for case files, fuel for police vehicles, or mobilisation fees before arrests could be effected. This marketisation of justice effectively excludes poor women. Within the judiciary, cases suffer from chronic adjournments, missing dockets, and transfer of magistrates mid trial, causing trials to last 2–5 years. Although Rivers State domesticated the VAPP Act in 2020, the Ministry of Justice did not establish specialised Family or GBV courts until 2023, and only one exists in Port Harcourt. Magistrates in LGAs such as Etche and Ahoada-East reported receiving no training on protection orders or trauma-informed adjudication (International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 2024). As predicted by the Ecological Model, these societal-level institutional weaknesses interact with community norms to deny survivors remedies. The absence of forensic laboratories in the state further means that medical evidence in rape cases is often lost or deemed inadmissible.

## **2. Legal and Procedural Barriers**

This has to do with good laws and poor Implementation. While the VAPP Act criminalises a wide range of offenses including spousal battery, economic abuse, and harmful widowhood practices, legal awareness remains low. A 2022 survey by the Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs found that 78% of women in rural communities had not heard of the VAPP Act two years after domestication. This reflects what Feminist Legal Theory describes as the gap between “law in books” and “law in action.” Procedural rules also disadvantage survivors. The requirement for police medical reports, which cost between ₦10,000 and ₦25,000, creates a financial filter. Protection orders, a key innovation of VAPP, are rarely issued because magistrates either lack forms or insist on the physical presence of perpetrators who evade service. Legal aid is concentrated in Port Harcourt through FIDA and the Legal Aid Council, leaving survivors in Ogoni, Khana, and Abua/Odual LGAs without representation. Consequently, many cases collapse at the investigation stage, a trend UNODC (2020) calls “case attrition.”

## **3. Sociocultural Barriers**

Sociocultural norms in Rivers State puts strong pressure toward informal settlement, aligning with the community level of the Ecological Model. Bride price, locally called “ime ego,” is frequently misinterpreted to signify that a wife is the property of her husband and his family. Survivors who report to police are stigmatised as “wayward” or “home breakers” and face ostracism from extended family (Eze Anaba, 2019). Religious leaders and traditional rulers, who command significant moral authority in Ikwerre, Kalabari, and Ogoni communities, often intervene to withdraw cases from police, framing prosecution as contrary to customary reconciliation. This normative environment is reinforced by language. Police and court officials commonly use phrases like “settle this at home” or “for the sake of the children,” reflecting patriarchal ideologies that Feminist Legal Theory identifies as embedded in legal institutions. The result is that

only cases involving extreme physical injury or death typically proceed to trial, while psychological and economic abuses are deprioritised.

#### 4. Economic Barriers

Economic barriers ranging from dependence and more are critical factors that align with feminist legal theory's critique that formal legal rights are undermined by material inequality. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2022) show that 67% of women in Rivers State work in the informal sector as traders, farmers, or fisherwomen. Pursuing justice requires multiple trips to police stations, hospitals, and courts, costing an average of ₦150,000 – ₦300,000 over the life of a case like in one of the cases handled by FIDA in Anambra State (Genderpedia, n.d.). For a woman earning ₦1,500 daily from fish sales in Okrika, this is prohibitive. Moreover, 81% of survivors in a 2021 Mirabel Centre sample were financially dependent on their abusers. Initiating legal action risks immediate loss of shelter, feeding, and school fees for children. The Niger Delta conflict economy adds another layer. In oil producing communities, environmental degradation has destroyed farmland and fishing waters, increasing women's dependence on male partners employed in oil companies or artisanal refining. Reporting a partner may result in loss of that income and retaliation making justice not only costly but dangerous.

These findings align with UNODC (2020), which noted that less than 10% of GBV cases in Nigeria end in conviction due to attrition at reporting, investigation, and prosecution stages. In Rivers State, where cases are reported, long litigation process still persist as a gap which usually make people lose interest in reporting and in some cases after reporting, they either withdraw or abandon their cases. (Invictus Africa, 2024). Viewed through Feminist Legal Theory, the justice system operates as a gendered structure that filters out most women's experiences.

The period 2015–2025 therefore shows that legal reform without institutional, social, and economic transformation has limited impact. The domestication of VAPP in 2020 was a necessary but insufficient condition for justice. Unless interventions simultaneously address patriarchal attitudes in justice institutions, community norms, and survivor's economic vulnerability, the justice gap in Rivers State will persist.

## CONCLUSION

**Fundamental Finding :** This study examined gender-based violence (GBV) and justice for survivors in Rivers State between 2015 and 2025. It highlights the barriers to justice for survivors of GBV. Findings indicate that despite the domestication of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act in 2020 and increased public awareness, survivors continue to face substantial obstacles across legal, institutional, sociocultural, and economic domains. Institutional weaknesses such as police inaction, demands for unofficial payments, and protracted court adjournments intersect with sociocultural norms that prioritise family reconciliation over accountability. Economic dependence on perpetrators further deters reporting and sustains cycles of violence, particularly in rural and oil producing communities where alternative livelihoods have been eroded by environmental degradation. Viewed through Feminist Legal Theory, the

justice system in Rivers State operates within patriarchal structures that trivialise women's experiences and treat GBV as a private matter rather than a public crime. The Ecological Model of Violence explains why these barriers are multi-layered, individual fear and poverty interact with community stigma and societal-level underinvestment in justice institutions. Consequently, legal reform alone has not translated into justice outcomes. For the period between 2015 to 2025, case attrition remains high, with less than 10% of reported cases resulting in conviction, reinforcing a culture of impunity.

**Implication :** The promise of the VAPP Act will remain symbolic unless structural and normative barriers are dismantled simultaneously. Addressing justice for GBV survivors in Rivers State from 2015 to 2025 requires moving beyond law reform to institutional transformation, norm change, and economic inclusion. As Feminist Legal Theory and the Ecological Model demonstrate, justice is not secured by statutes alone but by the daily practices of institutions and communities. Coordinated action by government, civil society, traditional institutions, and development partners is essential to ensure that the VAPP Act delivers substantive, not symbolic, justice for survivors in Rivers State. To close the justice gap for GBV survivors in Rivers State, coordinated and multi-sectoral interventions are required. The Rivers State Government, through the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Women Affairs, should establish specialized GBV and Family Courts in each senatorial districts to reduce geographic barriers and case backlogs. All police divisions should be mandated to maintain functional Gender Desks staffed by trained female officers. Comprehensive training on trauma informed investigation, evidence collection, and the issuance of protection orders should be institutionalised for police, prosecutors, and magistrates, with compliance monitored by the Judicial Service Commission. The Rivers State Government should fund free legal aid clinics in all 23 Local Government Areas, implemented in partnership with FIDA, the Legal Aid Council, and civil society organisations. Procedures for obtaining protection orders and medical reports should be simplified and made free for survivors. The Ministry of Health should designate GBV response centers in general hospitals across the state to provide integrated medical, psychosocial, and legal services under one roof. Shelter services for high-risk survivors should be scaled up beyond Port Harcourt to cover Ogoni, Etche, Ahoada, and other underserved LGAs. The Ministry of Women Affairs should partner with the Rivers State Council of Traditional Rulers, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), and the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs to implement sustained community dialogues that deconstruct norms of victim blaming and silence. Male engagement programs should target youth, community leaders, and security actors to promote positive masculinity and bystander intervention. School based curricula on consent, human rights, and VAPP provisions should be introduced at secondary level to address intergenerational norms. Media campaigns in Pidgin, Ikwerre, Kalabari, and Ogoni languages should amplify survivor voices. Recognising that economic dependence is a primary reason survivors withdraw cases, the state should integrate economic empowerment into GBV response. The Rivers State Microfinance Agency and Ministry of Women Affairs should prioritise survivors for skills acquisition, startup grants, and micro credit schemes. Cash transfer

programs should be piloted for survivors pursuing legal cases to cover transportation, legal, and medical costs. In oil producing communities, alternative livelihood programs in agriculture, aquaculture, and renewable energy should be targeted at women affected by environmental degradation to reduce dependence on abusive partners. The Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs, in collaboration with the Nigerian Police Force and the Judiciary, should establish a centralised GBV Case Tracking System to monitor cases from reporting to judgment. Annual public reports should be published disaggregating data by local government area, type of violence, and case outcome to improve transparency and policy planning. An independent GBV Observatory comprising civil society, academia, and survivor representatives should be created to audit police and court performance and submit biannual recommendations to the State House of Assembly. Performance indicators on GBV response should be included in the appraisal of Divisional Police Officers and magistrates. **Limitation** : The primary limitation of this study stems from its methodology as a qualitative desk review, which relies strictly on secondary documents, media reports, and existing legislation rather than direct empirical engagement or first-hand interviews with GBV survivors and justice actors in Rivers State. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the undocumented, lived experiences of survivors who suffer in silence or cases that go completely unreported within the formal legal and judicial frameworks during the 2015–2025 timeframe. **Future Research** : Future research should prioritize empirical, field-based studies utilizing mixed-methods approaches, including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with survivors, legal practitioners, and law enforcement officers across all senatorial districts in Rivers State. Additionally, longitudinal tracking of specific GBV cases from the initial police report to final court adjudication is highly recommended to provide a deeper, data-driven assessment of case attrition rates and the real-world efficacy of the VAPP Act.

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