

# Domestic Violence in Rivers State: A Threat to Social and Family Stability

Violence Affecting Women and Girls (VAWG) Quarterly Update  
May 2018

A woman is physically assaulted by her husband, following an argument. She reports the incident to the Gender and Development Action (GADA) office in Rivers state, who invites them both to mediation. The husband signs a declaration that he will never assault her again. A few weeks pass and the woman is back at GADA. Her husband has now cut off her access to money and she cannot maintain the household.

Cases like this are an everyday occurrence for many women in Rivers state – and across Nigeria. Physical violence and sexual assault are often perpetrated against women and children in households, but so too are other forms of abuse, such as financial disempowerment. Some research suggests that over 30 per cent of Nigerian women have experienced physical, sexual or emotional domestic violence during their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> In the context of Rivers state, data on the P4P Peace Map suggests in the first quarter of 2018, the most prevalent forms of domestic violence reported were physical abuse and economic disempowerment of women by spouses/partners (see *graph on pg.2*). This abuse can have lasting effects not only on survivors, but also inter-generational impacts on families and broader society.

Domestic violence remains so prevalent – and underreported – because of the prevailing culture of silence around the issue in Nigeria. This silence around VAWG

“ *The impact of Domestic Violence is not limited to the survivors of the abuse alone, it also has negative impacts on family and society at large.* ”



**About This Brief:** Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND) is committed to breaking the culture of silence around Violence Affecting Women and Girls (VAWG) in Nigeria through data driven approaches. This quarterly brief highlights thematic issues and provides updates on reporting of VAWG incidents in the Niger Delta, to inform prevention efforts by policy makers and practitioners. Data used in this brief is drawn from sources such as Nigeria Watch, ACLED, CIEPD, NSRP formatted on the P4P Peace Map: <http://www.tgpccloud.org/p4p/index.php?m=p4p>



# Drivers of Domestic Violence in Rivers State

reinforces the stigma attached to the survivor, which is often fuelled by societal and religious norms. This includes widely held notions that women should be subordinate to men, and that married women are the property of their husbands. This produces a power dynamic which justifies abusive behaviour perpetrated by a husband, including the use of violence. Sexual violence is also a common theme in domestic abuse, with some male partners believing it is within their rights to demand or deny sexual relations of their spouse or partner, regardless of her choice in the matter.

The impact of domestic violence in Rivers state is not limited to the survivors of the abuse alone, it also has negative impacts on family and society at large. Domestic violence is particularly damaging to youth and children who are exposed to it. According to a report by UNICEF, children who witness domestic violence are more likely to be affected by violence as adults – either as victims or perpetrators.<sup>2</sup> In order to address its manifestations, stakeholders must first understand the context in which it occurs, including prevailing societal and cultural beliefs that may explicitly or implicitly lead to and perpetuate its prevalence.

This report aims to highlight the different forms and drivers of domestic violence in the Niger Delta, with a particular focus on Rivers state. Through greater awareness and engagement on the issue across sectors, community leaders, policy makers and practitioners can work together to address the underlying drivers of domestic violence, as well as strengthen prevention and support efforts for survivors.

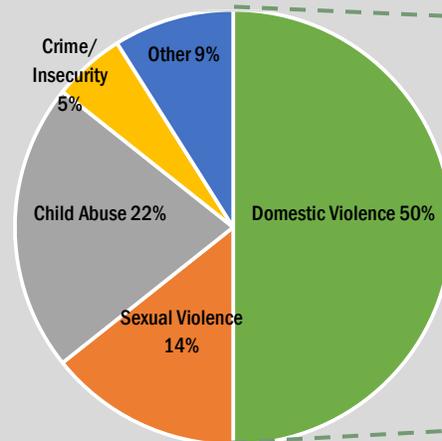
## Cultural Norms

In some Nigerian communities, domestic violence is embedded and condoned within cultural norms. The use of physical abuse as corrective measures for women and

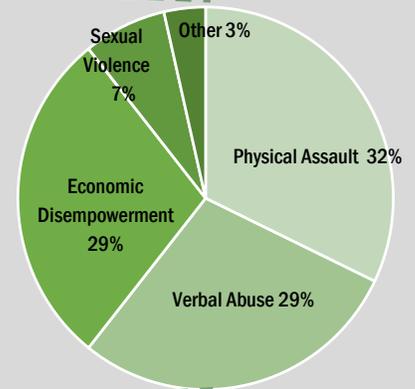
## Domestic Violence Reporting – Rivers State

January-March 2018

VAWG Incidents Reported, by Type



Domestic Violence Incidents Reported, by Type



These pie charts show the break down of reported incidents of VAWG from all sources formatted on the P4P Peace Map in Q1 2018. Of VAWG incidents reported, Domestic Violence was the most prevalent theme; particularly physical violence, verbal abuse and economic disempowerment.

Data source: <http://www.tgpccloud.org/p4p/index.php?m=p4p>

children are often indirectly enhanced by these norms. For example, the practice of paying a bride price has been perceived as giving licence to husbands to physically assault their wives as they are seen to have “paid for” this right. Across the Niger Delta, including Rivers state, strong cultural expectations dictate that women ascribe to certain gender roles; be obedient, faithful, perform household chores, defer to their husbands on decision-making and bear children. When women are seen not to meet these expectations, this can result in the perpetration of violence. In 2016 survey research conducted by *Domestic Violence Nigeria*, 43 per cent of women thought physical abuse could be justified based on domestic mistakes such as burning a meal.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that these gender roles – and the violence enforcing them – can be perpetuated by both women and men. In incidents reported from sources on the P4P Map between January and March 2018 in Rivers, there were widespread reports of physical abuse by

male figures perpetrated against female family members. For example in February 2018 in Obio/Akpor LGA, a woman reported being battered by her husband for not cooking his food on time. Other incidents included beating and threats of violence from husbands and sons against women in the household.

## Religious Beliefs

Religious norms can often be used to justify domestic violence against women. In some settings, the prevalence of the need for “submissiveness” by a woman is often preached in the religious community, cutting across many of the major faiths practiced in Nigeria. As a member of the Indigenous Muslim Women Foundation (RIMWOF) Initiative in Rivers state described during an interview, some Muslim religious leaders have preached that a wife should be submissive to her husbands at all times, and therefore do not see anything wrong with a husband

# Domestic Violence Impacts on Families and Society

forcefully demanding for sex from this wife even if she refuses. Many women do not report domestic violence for fear of being stigmatized or being perceived as going against religious teachings, thus resigning themselves to the abuse being part of marriage. For many women married in the Christian faith, wives feel obliged to remain in matrimony (“for better or for worse”), even if the relationship is abusive.

## Financial Insecurity

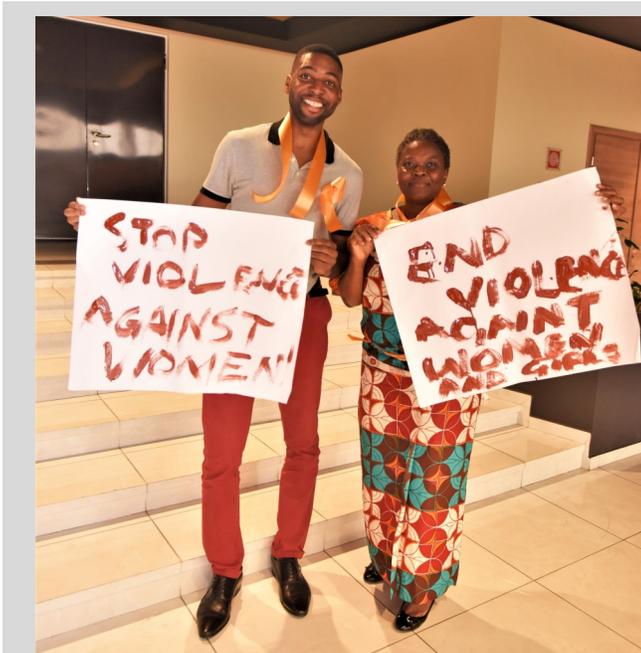
Financial insecurity can also be a contributing factor to domestic violence. During interviews with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working with domestic violence survivors in Rivers state, a common scenario described was when a male head of the household could not achieve a sense of dignity and respect through economic independence, he tends to exert authority over his family through physical dominance to avoid perceptions of weakness. For example in one case given in Port Harcourt, a man physically assaulted his wife to vent his frustration over failing to provide for his family’s financial needs.

## Broader Implications for Family and Society

Domestic violence can have serious impacts on survivors, as well as effects within wider society. Women facing this form of violence often suffer physical and physiological consequences which affect their behaviour and productivity in their homes, communities and places of work. It is a form of violence that degrades womanhood and makes the wife or spouse lose self-confidence and self-worth in the community. This low self-esteem can negatively affect the participation of women in community life and economic development.

Household abuse can also have inter-generational consequences, with negative effects on the psychological development of children. For instance, in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area (LGA), a case was reported where a man was flogging his wife with a cane on her palm in front of their children. Children who grow up in these homes and have witnessed or are victims of abuse may struggle to form relationships

in adult life, or may be prone to perpetrate violence themselves. In research conducted in 2008 by an international medical journal, it found that children or teens who witnessed domestic violence were more likely to use violence at school or in the community in response to perceived threats, and more likely to commit crimes.<sup>4</sup> The study also found that they are likely to become abusers themselves later in life; perpetuating the cycle of domestic violence across generations. Severe cases of domestic violence which leads to divorce or separation between parents, can have negative psychological implications for children. It also threatens the stability of the family as parents tend to fight for the custody of the children. Young children from broken homes tend to feel insecure and often angry and withdrawn for fear of being abused by school mates and friends who are aware of their situation. This can lead such children growing up to distrust people, going into relationships with an aggressive mode or becoming afraid to go into an intimate relationship. In a desperation to fill the gap of a missing parent figure, these children may be



The PIND Team participated in advocacy activities to promote VAWG prevention during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence campaign in 2017, and on International Women’s Day on March 8, 2018.



# Breaking a Pervasive Culture of Silence

vulnerable to exploitation, such as recruitment into gangs and criminal activity. For Rivers state where cult violence and criminality are widespread, and cult group connections often start within the school system, this risk of recruitment of vulnerable youth is even more salient. Children may also be vulnerable to other forms of abuse if their home life is unstable. In one case reported in Eleme LGA in March 2018, a girl was raped by a man as a result of no parental care.

In areas which have been prone to collective violence, this can also exacerbate domestic violence. For example, in a 2010 study undertaken by an NGO in Lebanon after its civil war, it found that there was a clear increase in physical violence perpetrated against women in the post-conflict period.<sup>5</sup> This was due to the desensitization of violence during conflict, with previous barriers around physical abuse eroded following the period of conflict. Domestic violence became more routine and accepted by not only perpetrators but also survivors. In the context of Rivers state, along with other parts of the Niger Delta, the Middle Belt and the North East which have experienced periods of communal conflict and violence, domestic abuse is part of this desensitization of violence. As practitioners, policy makers and community leaders come together to address broader challenges around conflict dynamics in Rivers state – such as cult violence, political tensions, criminality and militancy - there is a need to also address how violence manifests itself within domestic households.

## Reluctance to Report Domestic Violence

Due to the potential publicity and ramifications of going through formal justice mechanisms, survivors of domestic violence often choose to report domestic abuse to non-legal bodies, such as religious and traditional leaders, family members, or CSOs. When incidents are reported to the police, survivors may find officers unwilling to investigate the crime, or even in some reported incidents, officers may themselves perpetrate abuse. In the context of Rivers state, police tend to view domestic violence as a “family matter” and either send women away to “settle it at home” or attempt to mediate the complaint without any meaningful punishment as a future deterrent for the abuser.

One of the ongoing challenges noted by CSO representatives was that most law enforcement officials are not trained on how to handle domestic violence complaints. While laws such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) was passed by the federal government in 2015 which details harsher penalties for abusers, it is yet to be adopted in many Nigerian states – including Rivers.

Additionally, women in rural areas often have difficulties accessing the formal justice system, which is largely urban-based. As a result, rural women frequently rely on traditional justice systems which normally encourage reconciliation rather than prosecution, and offer limited protection for victims of violence.

## Conclusion

Domestic violence is an issue that attracts silence; a silence engendered by shame, fear, stigma, and cultural taboos. This culture of silence surrounds cases of domestic violence perpetrated against women and girls in most LGAs in Rivers state, making it difficult to get a true picture of its extent. This has accounted for a limited number of reports of domestic violence incidents received during the review period (65 domestic violence incidents were reported in Rivers from sources on the P4P Map January – March 2018).

Domestic violence can have wide ranging physical and psychological implications for survivors, affecting all areas of their work, relationships and social lives. In some cases, the impact of domestic violence is fatal – for example in Port Harcourt in January 2018, a 19-year-old girl was reportedly killed and dumped in a septic tank by relatives.

The prevalence of domestic violence against women and children has serious implications for the development of the society. It also threatens the stable psychological development and social interaction of children in the Rivers state society as children who are raised in violent homes can become vulnerable to further abuse, recruitment into criminality, or become perpetrators themselves. With social, cultural and religious norms underpinning the culture of silence around domestic violence, as well as barriers for access to justice for survivors, society and government must work together to address both social and structural issues. Preventing domestic violence against women and children requires sustained and systematic efforts at the levels of families, communities, institutions, and societies.

### Article References :

1. Government of the United Kingdom, August 2016 '*Nigeria: Women fearing gender-based harm or violence*'
2. UNICEF, 2006, '*Behind Closed Doors: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children*'
3. The Guardian Nigeria, 4 October 2017 '*Is domestic violence a norm in Nigeria?*'
4. Kaur, R. & Garg, S. Indian Journal of Community Medicine, April 2008 '*Addressing Domestic Violence Against Women: An Unfinished Agenda*'
5. Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, March 2010 '*Links between domestic violence and armed conflict*'

### Recommendations for Policy Makers and Civil Society

**1** Appropriate laws and policies should be made at the state level to address domestic violence. Efforts should also be made to intensify the implementation of existing laws relating to domestic violence. Full implementation of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP), 2015, the Child's Right Act, 2003, as well as the Rivers State 2017 Action Plan (SAP) for United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR 1325) on women, peace and security will go a long way in mitigating domestic violence within the state.

**2** To ensure the effective implementation of appropriate laws relating to domestic violence, there is a need for the judicial system to be strengthened. This will enable specialized units within the judicial system to focus on gender-based violence and ensure timely dispersion of justice. For instance, the existing family courts in Rivers state will go a long way in addressing issues relating to VAWG if they are fully functional.

**3** Sensitization and training of front line service providers on VAWG cases including security agencies, traditional rulers and religious leaders, led by CSOs and government. This will ensure that stakeholders stop addressing reported incidents of domestic violence as minor family affairs, but as an issue of huge societal concern.

**4** Social media can play a greater role in creating awareness and advocacy on issues relating to domestic violence and its impact on the family and the society at large. Social media can serve as an effective platform to change gender stereotypes, and can be led by CSOs, youth and community leaders.

### There For Those in Need: Key Organizations Helping Survivors of Domestic Violence in Rivers State

#### Medical Women Association of Nigeria (MWAN) – Rivers Chapter

*MWAN is comprised of female medical and dental practitioners in the state. They provide health services to survivors of domestic violence, actively take part in mediation of domestic violence cases and link survivors to legal and social assistance where necessary.*

⇒ A: Lane 1, Block 3, Flat 3, Marine Base Estate, Port Harcourt

⇒ P: +234 812 807 5881

⇒ E: [mwanrivers1@gmail.com](mailto:mwanrivers1@gmail.com)

#### Rivers State Indigenous Muslim Women Forum (RIMWOF) Initiative

*RIMWOF is a faith-based organization that advocates for the well-being, rights and education of Muslim women and girls in Rivers state. They work with human rights agencies to help bring justice for survivors.*

⇒ A: Islam House, No, 150 Victoria Street, Aggrey Road, Port Harcourt

⇒ P: +2348055614407

⇒ E: [peptonnie2015@gmail.com](mailto:peptonnie2015@gmail.com)

#### Kabetkache Women Development & Resource Centre

*Kebetkache works on development and social justice issues that affect women and children in Nigeria and abroad. They link survivor of domestic violence to safe homes, medical and legal assistance.*

⇒ A: No. 8 Bolo Street, D-Line, Port Harcourt

⇒ P: +23437540188

⇒ E: [kebetkache@yahoo.com](mailto:kebetkache@yahoo.com)

#### International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), Nigeria – Rivers Branch

*FIDA is made up of female lawyers who promote, protect and preserve the rights, interests and well-being of women and children. They provide legal advice to survivors of domestic violence and can provide trial representation.*

⇒ A: 1<sup>st</sup> Floor, New Magistrate Court Building, High Court Complex, Port Harcourt & 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, NBA, Port Harcourt, Opposite Port Harcourt City Council, Bank Road, Port Harcourt

⇒ P: +234 811 999 9921

⇒ E: [fidarivers@yahoo.com](mailto:fidarivers@yahoo.com)

#### Gender and Development Action (GADA)

*GADA provides safe spaces for survivors of domestic violence and VAWG while mediation is on-going. They also take part in mediation efforts for reported cases of domestic violence.*

⇒ A: Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs, Eastern bye-pass, Marine Base, Port Harcourt

⇒ P: +234 703 505 9664

#### Our Lady of Perpetual Help Initiative (OLPHI)

*OLPHI provides health and social services to survivors of domestic violence. They also work in collaboration with other CSOs to achieve this.*

⇒ A: No. 42 Patterson Street, Emma Estate, Azuabie, Okujiagu, Port Harcourt.

⇒ P: +2347030879963

⇒ E: [operpetualhelp@yahoo.com](mailto:operpetualhelp@yahoo.com)

# Quarterly Updates: VAWG Reporting in the Niger Delta

## VAWG Incident Data: Key Trends for Q1 2018

Key VAWG issues reported during this quarter (January – March 2018) included physical violence, sexual violence, child abuse, kidnaping, killing for ritualistic purposes and other gender based human rights violations. Reported VAWG incidents in the Niger Delta during this period were driven mainly by domestic violence, criminality, herder/farmer clashes and other violence affecting women and girls (VAWG).

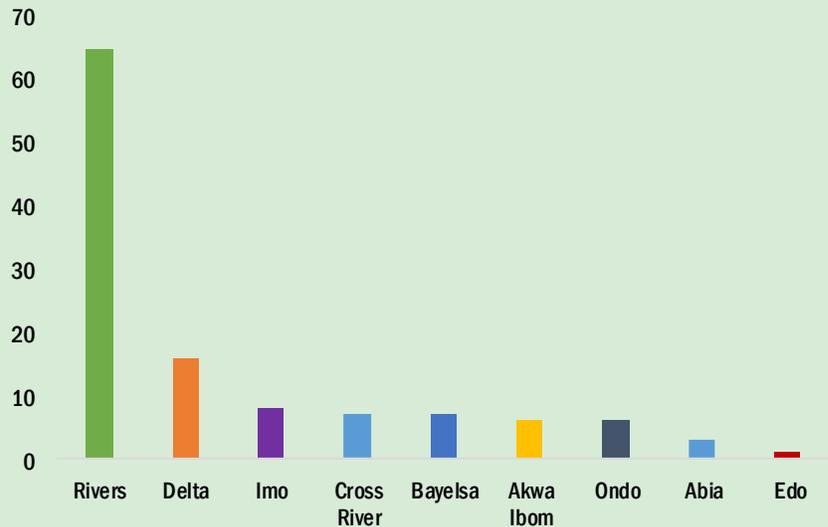
### January 2018

Tensions between farmers and herders was elevated during the period, which included a spate of incidents between communities which involved rape and violence. For example, a woman was reportedly attacked and killed on her farm in Akure South LGA, Ondo state. In another incident in Ughelli North, Delta state, a woman was reportedly raped in Owori community. Several domestic violence fatalities were also reported in January, such as the murder of a 19-year-old girl who was dumped in a septic tank allegedly by family members in Port Harcourt LGA, Rivers state. In another incident, the corpse of a lady in her twenties was found abandoned on the road side in Calabar Municipal, Cross River state. It was alleged that the victim was raped and stabbed to death by her boyfriend. Other key incidents reported in January 2018 included the murder of two pregnant women and an infant by a pastor in Oyigbo LGA, Rivers state. Abductions of women were also reported, including the kidnaping of the wife of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) campaign chairman in Ukanafun LGA, Akwa Ibom state; and a female former State Commissioner for Transport in Yenagoa LGA, Bayelsa state.

## VAWG Levels of Reporting by State

January-March 2018

Number of VAWG Incidents Reported, by State



According to data formatted on the P4P Map, Rivers state had the most reported VAWG incidents during the period, followed by Delta and Imo states. However, the number of reported incidents may not necessarily represent the reality on the ground, but rather a reflection of the level of awareness and reporting of VAWG in the region.

The presence of the VAWG Observatory Steering Committee (OBSTEC) in Rivers state has led to increased levels of awareness and reporting on VAWG in the state. While each month, the data collection and analysis process continues to improve, there are still areas where efforts could be strengthened. This can be achieved by multi-stakeholder collaboration between peace and security actors and through information sharing which will provide a more cohesive platform to spread awareness on VAWG and explore mitigation strategies. There is a need to advocate for greater visibility around VAWG issues and encourage more reporting across other states in the region.

Data source: <http://www.tgpccloud.org/p4p/index.php?m=p4p>

### February 2018

The prevalence of crime, particularly armed criminality, across some states in the Niger Delta in February had impacts on women and girls. For example, in Ekeremor LGA, Bayelsa state, a woman was reportedly attacked while she was asleep at home. In Isoko North LGA, Delta state, a female polytechnic student was found dead with

vital parts of her body removed. Similarly, in Khana LGA, Rivers state, two female polytechnic students were reportedly robbed by gunmen; while in Bende LGA, Abia state, two female students were kidnapped from their secondary school hostel by an armed man. Several incidents of interpersonal violence perpetrated by persons known to the victims were also reported in February. A lady was reportedly

## Quarterly Updates: VAWG Reporting in the Niger Delta

assaulted by her former boss who refused to pay her salary in Obio Akpor LGA, Rivers state. Separately, in Ibiono Ibom LGA, Akwa Ibom state, a woman was hacked to death by her husband.

### March 2018

In March, several incidents related to sexual abuse and violence were perpetrated against children. For example, two men were arrested for reportedly raping an 11-year-old girl in Uyo, Akwa Ibom state, while in Nwangele community, Imo state a 13-year-old girl was beaten to death by her step-mother. In a similar incident in Sapele LGA, Delta state, hot water was reportedly poured on a 12-year-

old girl and her body was mutilated with a razor blade by her male cousin. It was reported that the girl had attempted to hawk firewood upon her uncle's instruction, instead of fetching water for her cousin to bath.

Broader insecurity also affected women and children in March. For example, in Ogbia LGA, Bayelsa state, sea pirates reportedly attacked and sank a boat coming from Kugbo community, which was carrying elderly women en route to purchase goods. A 35-year-old woman was also attacked with a knife during farmer/herder violence while returning from her farm in Yala LGA, Cross River state. Young female students also remain a target of

criminal violence; in Owerri Municipal, Imo state, a female final year student of the Imo State University was shot dead at close range by gunmen as she was celebrating her 23rd birthday. Separately, a male driver reportedly robbed and raped a female undergraduate who was his passenger in a bush in Akure South LGA, Ondo state. In a similar incident in Port Harcourt LGA, Rivers state, a 19-year-old girl was raped by her teacher in her home.

### Questions for Stakeholders

1. What are the gaps in VAWG reporting?
2. What VAWG issues should be prioritized?
3. Are there new data sets that can be included to help us report on VAWG?
4. What are the underlying drivers of VAWG?

### Report Incidents: IPDU Early Warning System

Please report any verified incident of VAWG to the IPDU SMS early warning system:

**Text:** 080 9936 2222

**Incident Details:** Kindly include the State, LGA, Town, Date, and Brief Incident Description.

### Contact Us



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